

Humanism in Thirukkural

“The most valuable of all talents,” says Thomas Jefferson, “is that of never using two words when one will do.” In just 1330 couplets, each only 7 metrical feet long, Thiruvalluvar embodies that talent exceptionally. He is able to explain the nuances of every single human action and behavior and then explain the solution to every problem conceivable. In fact, one might say that the beauty of the Thirukkural lies in its ability to explain any concept in just a few words, all the while adhering to the strict rules of the metre in which it is composed, namely, the *kural-venpa*.

Upon understanding the *kural-venpa*, one can see that it’s a form of poetry involving strict constraints. The poem has to consist of two lines, the first of which must contain 4 feet, and the second, three. Even beyond these rules, Thiruvalluvar has meticulously curated what John Lazarus refers to as “rhyme and alliteration as well as a careful selection of soft and hard consonants”. Contained within these remarkably well-written concise couplets are prominent humanistic themes.

Humanism is a philosophical viewpoint that emphasizes and prioritizes the value, reasoning, and agency of human beings. While there are many forms of this philosophy, the one most commonly referred to simply as humanism is the secular form, one that focuses on humanity’s capability to form a moral code and attain self fulfillment without believing in a spiritual being. Three main points best summarize secular humanism. Humanists believe that morality is not the product of external constraints such as a divine being; they instead claim that an action’s moral worth is determined by how much it promotes human welfare and fulfillment. The second point is that the scientific method is the only reliable method of gathering

knowledge. The third and final point is that humans must create meaning and purpose in life for themselves. Humanist themes, as they appear in Thirukkural, are secular.

Perhaps the most important aspect of humanism is to reject any influence a supernatural being might have on human morality, as this is the starting point to the other points that follow. Many didactic literatures will point to a supernatural being to preach objective morality. What is unique about Thirukkural is that the text never explicitly references any type of deity in an attempt to create an impartial moral code. While Valluvar might reference some Hindu deities in couplets such as the 167th one on the evils of envy: “Lakshmi envying the prosperity of the envious man will depart and introduce her sister to him”, it is rather obvious that they are referred here more for their metaphorical force than for any real religious significance. So, in the aforementioned Kural, the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi is being used as a medium to represent prosperity and wealth and her sister, Moodevi, represents hardship and failure. In effect, Valluvar is merely pointing out that envy will lead to destruction. Although he often refers to gods in this way, he never based his concept of morality on such casually referred deities. Where does, then, goodness or relative morality come from?

Thirualluvar’s stance is that morality comes from within, that is, from one’s own action and thought alone, and discusses the topic as it relates to the human experience. For example, in the 97th Kural, Valluvar declares that “That speech which, while imparting benefits ceases not to please will yield righteousness (for this world) and merit (for the next world).”, and in the 319th, he says “If a man inflicts sorrow upon others in the morning, sorrow will come upon him in the evening, unsought.”

In these couplets, he mentions not divine punishment, but logical and natural repercussions to actions as they benefit other human beings. What is moral, Valluvar emphasizes, is what benefits humanity.

Thirukkural, in line with its humanist philosophies, also argues that all human beings are born with the same value, which goes against the Vedic social hierarchy founded on birth. The Vedic idea is that all humans are born into one of the four main classes and that some classes have inherently more value and, in turn, deserve more respect than others. Where the Manusmriti details the differences in how the lower and higher classes should be treated differently for the very same offence (“A Brahmana shall be fined fifty panas for defaming a Kshatriya; in the case of a Vaishya the fine shall be twenty-five panas; in the case of a Sudra twelve”), Thirukkural asserts that all human beings are created equal (“All human beings agree as regards their birth but differ as regards their characteristics, because of the different qualities of their actions” (972). Further evidence of this comes in the form of Kural 973 wherein Thiruvalluvar claims, “Though raised above, the base cannot become great; though brought low, the great cannot become base” (973). This is the most logical derivation of the previous two points: if there are no divine beings controlling our fate or our values, all we are is what we *do*. The time and place of one’s birth, death, and anything in between is not a divinely orchestrated play, it’s a game of chance and mostly, the result of action and reaction.

Thirukkural embraces this concept of life being a result of action and reaction and takes it further by declaring that humans create their own reality and meaning, and ultimately, their own self-fulfillment. This kind of existentialism is a core aspect of humanism and is also a running theme throughout the Thirukkural itself. Thiruvalluvar declares: “Perseverance comes from a prosperous fate, and idleness from an adverse fate” (371) and “However great be the enmity men

have incurred, they may live. The enmity of sin will incessantly pursue and kill” (207). From this, the reader can assume Valluvar’s meaning was that it’s only one’s own actions and thoughts that determine their fate. In other words, man exists first, then defines himself. This sentiment is echoed in many Western Humanist literatures as well: Sartre contends that “existence precedes essence”; that is, human beings’ existence is more immutable than their nature. Therefore human beings must create their values and fate due to the lack of any inherent meaning. Valluvar’s Kurals are similar to Jonathon Webber’s interpretation of the term “essence”: humans are free to choose their own purpose and shape their essence because they are not “made” for any particular purpose.

Thirukkural also seeks to emphasize the importance of gathering knowledge through careful investigation. One of the core tenets of humanism is the notion that any understanding of the world must be derived from what can be perceived by the senses and with the mind. On the importance of truth and wisdom, Valluvar says, “To discern the truth in everything, by whomsoever spoken, this is wisdom” (423) and “No terrifying calamity will happen to the wise, who foresee and guard against coming evils” (429). These couplets parallel the famous Humanist thinker and author David Hume’s declaration that a wise man “apportions his beliefs to the evidence”. Because of the objective and logical nature of his couplets, it is easy to see that Valluvar’s rules for life are based only on observable phenomena. Thirukkural isn’t Valluvar playing God and establishing arbitrary laws, it’s Valluvar discovering truths and relaying them directly to the reader, as a true Humanist would.

The reason Thirukkural applies so well to daily life thousands of years after its conception is because the text is entirely humanistic. As time goes on, cultures and religions will rise and fall, but the only consistent intelligent force on the planet will be humanity.

Thiruvalluvar, being aware of this, embraces humanism, takes timeless and universal concepts such as virtue, material wealth, and love, and he paints. He paints a vivid portrait of not just human nature, but of humanity itself, because he knew that when the last person on Earth asks, “Is there anyone still with me?”, his humanity will answer, “I am still alive.”