

Humanism: What it Was, Is, and Could Become

- I. **Definitions** Humanists rely on reason and compassion, rather than supernatural revelation, to guide their quest to become more fully human as individuals and to cooperatively improve society and sustain the planet (UUHA). According to the American Humanist Association, humanism is "a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead meaningful, ethical lives capable of adding to the greater good of humanity."

Thus, humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that promotes critical thinking and evidence over acceptance of dogma or superstition, and values reason, empathy, and the arts and sciences as means to understand and improve the human condition. Secular humanism, a modern form, explicitly rejects religious beliefs and focuses on human-based morality and ethics.

II. What Humanism is NOT

There are several misconceptions about humanism:

1. **Humanism is not anti-religion:** While secular humanism is nontheistic, it does not inherently oppose religion. It critiques dogma and authoritarianism, not individual faith.
2. **Humanism is not nihilism:** Contrary to the belief that it denies meaning, humanism asserts that humans create meaning through relationships, creativity, and contribution to society.
3. **Humanism is not hedonism:** Though it values human happiness and well-being, it promotes balanced, ethical lives, not mere pleasure-seeking.
4. **Humanism is not anthropocentrism:** Humanism extends moral concern to animals and the environment, promoting sustainability and compassion beyond humanity.

III. History of Humanism

A. Classical Origins Humanism can trace its roots to ancient Greece and Rome. Thinkers like Protagoras emphasized human reasoning with statements like, "Man is the measure of all things" (*Plato, Theaetetus*). Socrates emphasized the examined life: "The unexamined life is not worth living" (*Plato, Apology*). Aristotle explored the role of reason in human flourishing (eudaimonia) and argued, "Man is by nature a political animal" (*Politics*). These ideas reflect a worldview that places human beings and their capacities at the center of moral and philosophical reflection.

B. The Dark Ages (roughly the 5th to the 13th centuries CE) marked a period of cultural and intellectual decline in Western Europe. Much of classical literature and philosophical inquiry was preserved only in monasteries, where it was often filtered through a theological lens.

Humanism, which had flourished in ancient Greece and Rome, became nearly extinct in the West. Instead, theocentrism—the belief that God is the central aspect of existence—dominated intellectual thought. Philosophical inquiry was subordinated to religious orthodoxy, particularly that of the Christian Church. “There is no knowledge of the arts, no philosophy, no letters, no eloquence,” lamented Isidore of Seville in *Etymologiae* (c. 600 CE)

Fortunately, Jewish and Islamic philosophers played a crucial role in preserving and advancing humanist ideals during the European Dark Ages, when classical knowledge was at risk of being lost in the West. The Islamic world and Jewish scholars became the custodians and transmitters of classical knowledge, especially Greek philosophy and science.

C. Renaissance Humanism During the 14th to 17th centuries, Renaissance humanism revived classical learning with a focus on human dignity, moral philosophy, art, literature, and the study of languages. Petrarch, often called the “father of humanism,” wrote, “It is better to will the good than to know the truth” (*De Remediis Utriusque Fortunae*), suggesting a focus on moral will and virtue. Erasmus wrote, “Give light, and the darkness will disappear of itself” (*The Education of a Christian Prince*), emphasizing education and enlightenment over coercion. These humanists stressed individual potential and the importance of personal virtue and intellectual development.

A pivotal rediscovery during this era was the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius’ work *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), a sweeping vision of an atomistic, non-supernatural universe. The 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt explores how this ancient manuscript, nearly lost to history, was recovered by humanist scholars and helped ignite a worldview based on empirical inquiry, beauty, and human flourishing. This rediscovery was emblematic of the humanist challenge to medieval dogma and the revival of naturalistic perspectives that emphasized human reason and the physical world.

D. Enlightenment Humanism The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries was marked by a commitment to reason, scientific inquiry, and individual liberty. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza proposed a pantheistic view of God: “God is not a transcendent creator, but Nature itself.” (“God or Nature” — *Ethics*, Part I). He rejected miracles, divine intervention, and anthropomorphic views of God. In *Theological-Political Treatise*, he called for freedom of thought and separation of philosophy from theology, foundational to Enlightenment thinking.

Voltaire declared, “Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities” (*Questions sur les miracles*), challenging religious and political dogma. Rousseau wrote, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (*The Social Contract*), championing individual liberty and social reform. Kant offered a guiding humanist principle: “Have the courage to use your own reason!” (*What is Enlightenment?*). These thinkers helped shift the moral and political center from divine authority to human autonomy.

E. Modern and Contemporary Humanism In the 19th and 20th centuries, humanism developed through liberal political theory, science, and existentialist philosophy. John Stuart Mill wrote, "A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction" (*On Liberty*), underscoring ethical responsibility. Bertrand Russell observed, "The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge" (*The Conquest of Happiness*). Carl Sagan, a modern champion of scientific humanism, stated, "We are a way for the cosmos to know itself" (*Cosmos*), framing human consciousness as a central marvel of existence. These voices emphasized ethical autonomy, empirical inquiry, and the human role in shaping meaning.

F. Humanism and Existentialism Existentialism, a 20th-century philosophical movement, shares significant common ground with humanism—particularly in its focus on individual freedom, responsibility, and the creation of meaning in a seemingly indifferent or absurd universe. Sartre, a leading existentialist, explicitly connected his philosophy to humanist ideals in his essay *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946), stating: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself," emphasizing that humans must take full responsibility for their actions and identity. Sartre also declared, "We are condemned to be free," capturing the burden and potential of human autonomy. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), argued, "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision," linking personal freedom with ethical action and social responsibility. Her work highlighted how existential freedom must be exercised with concern for others' liberation and dignity. Thus, existentialism complements humanism by emphasizing lived experience, personal agency, and the ethical implications of human freedom in a world without predetermined meaning.

G. Modern Humanist Concerns In today's rapidly changing world, the intersection of existentialism and humanism provides profound insight into some of the most pressing human concerns:

1. **Mental Health and Meaning:** The existential humanist framework helps address the growing mental health crisis by advocating that individuals can shape their own purpose and well-being. Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how.'"
2. **Global Crises and Personal Responsibility:** From climate change to political unrest, existential humanism insists that individual and collective action matter. As Sartre emphasized, our freedom makes us responsible not only for ourselves but for the world we shape through our choices.
3. **Identity and Authenticity:** In a time of cultural fluidity and shifting social norms, the existential-humanist emphasis on authenticity and self-creation empowers people to live genuinely and ethically, guided by reason and empathy.
4. **Secular Ethics and Community:** Modern secular humanists adopt existential principles to ground morality in shared human needs, fostering inclusive communities based on solidarity rather than dogma.

By connecting humanist values to existential insights, we gain a richer understanding of personal agency, moral responsibility, and the possibility of meaningful life in a secular, interconnected, and often uncertain world.

IV. Humanism Today

A. Core Principles Today, humanism is defined by several key values:

- Ethical living without supernatural beliefs
- Promotion of human rights and social justice
- Reliance on reason and science
- Compassion, empathy, and community

B. Global Influence Humanism influences education, politics, and global development. Humanist organizations advocate for secular governance, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and climate action.

C. Contemporary Humanist Movements

- **American Humanist Association** (<https://americanhumanist.org/>)
- **The Humanist Society** (<https://thehumanistsociety.org>)
- **Humanists International** (<https://humanists.international/>)
- **British Humanist Association (Humanists UK)** (<https://humanists.uk/>)
- **Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association** (<https://huhumanists.org>)
- **Freethinkers Forum** (<https://www.meetup.com/freethinkersforum/>)
- **Society for Humanistic Judaism** (<https://shj.org>)
- **Association of Black Humanists** (<https://www.meetup.com/association-of-black-humanists/>)
- **Americans United for Separation of Church and State** (<https://www.au.org/>)
- **Freedom From Religion Foundation** (<https://ffrf.org>)
- **American Atheists** (<https://www.atheists.org/>)

V. Challenges and Opportunities In a world grappling with religious extremism, political polarization, and environmental crises, humanism provides a framework for ethical dialogue and action. However, it faces challenges from authoritarian regimes and the persistence of anti-scientific worldviews.

White Christian Nationalistic Evangelicals have a strong influence on America's political situation, despite the fact that, according to research by AU, only 13.5% of the population are members of these groups, although nearly 30% of the population support their stance. According to the Pew 2023-24 study, about 20% of US adults are Catholic by religion, and another 9% are

“cultural Catholics,” who don’t identify as Catholic religiously, but consider themselves Catholic in an ethnic, family, or cultural sense,

On the other hand, according to Pew’s 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study, **29%** of U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated (“nones”), including 5% atheist, 6% agnostic, and 19% describing themselves as “nothing in particular.” Thus, there are more “nones” than either Christian Nationalists or Catholics! Unfortunately, according to research by FFRF, The majority of these “nones” tend to be non-affiliated with any group, and have a lower voting record than people with Religious Nationalism or Catholic groups. Humanist groups could reach out to liberal-leaning people within traditional religious groups and these “nones,” welcoming them into a nurturing space for personal growth, discussions of critical issues, collaborative social action, and social support.

There are already humanist chaplains serving in universities and hospitals, working in partnership with Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, and chaplains from other faith communities, to assure that all patients and students have access to people who can support them in their times of need and support their learning goals. Humanists are working to support the addition of humanist chaplains in the military, as well, so that people of various faiths or no theistic faith have support by a chaplain who supports their worldview.

VI. Conclusion Humanism, rooted in a rich intellectual tradition, remains a dynamic and vital worldview. It champions human dignity, reason, and ethical responsibility, offering a hopeful and principled approach to personal and collective flourishing.

VII. References and Further Reading

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24. Humanist Manifesto 2 <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/>
25. Humanist Manifesto 3 <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto3/>
26. The Ten Commitments <https://americanhumanistcenterforeducation.org/ten-commitments/>

(Paper speedily prepared by Mim Chapman with the help of her AI assistants...
Forgive the formatting, as we didn't have time to go back and synchronize it!)