

Key features of the humanist approach

- Naturalistic
- Science and reason
- Atheism/agnosticism
- One life
- Personal autonomy
- Ethical concern for human well being and flourishing
- Equality and social justice
- Human potential and responsibility



Humanist thought in history

The Ancient World: Charvaka, Mencius, Epicurus

The Enlightenment: Hume, Baron d'Holbach

19th Century freethought: Charles Bradlaugh

- Charles Darwin
- Bertrand Russell
- The Amsterdam Declaration
- Carl Sagan's Pale Blue Dot

About humanism

Humanism in the UK today

- 52% non-religious
- 5% self-identified humanists
- 22% share humanist beliefs & values

The Happy Human (logo, left)

Humanist organisations

- Humanists UK
- Humanists International

Influence of humanism

- The rise of the non-religious
- Secularism and the stand against religious privilege
- Human rights and freedoms
- Non-religious ethics (e.g. J S Mill, Margaret Knight, Peter Singer)
- The scientific endeavour
- Humanist ceremonies

Morality

- The evolution of morality
- Shared human values
- Empathy and the Golden Rule
- Considering the consequences
- Taking responsibility

Making life meaningful

- Connections
- Wonder
- Flourishing
- Practical action

Diverse global goals of humanists (the little fights and great fights)

- The non-religious right to exist
- Secularism and challenging religious privilege
- Service provision
- Promoting flourishing and meaningful lives

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How to teach about humanism

When teaching about humanism, present students with the things humanists **do** believe in (e.g. freedom, reason, empathy, human rights, making the most of the one life we have), not just the things they don't (e.g. gods, an afterlife). Try not to present humanism as a worldview that defines itself in opposition to religion, or to focus on non-religious responses to religious questions about the existence and nature of a god. Try to avoid viewing humanism through a religious lens and see it as a worldview in its own right.

Humanist beliefs and values are not a doctrine or creed that humanists sign up to or a set of instructions on how a humanist must behave. It is perhaps more appropriate to understand 'humanist' as a descriptive label that can be applied to those who adopt such an approach to life. In that sense, the word operates differently from many religious labels. A humanist will typically discover the label after (sometimes long after) they have already formed the associated beliefs. There is no compulsion to self-identify.

Access practical, classroom-focused teaching materials for all age groups here: understandinghumanism.org.uk

SOME DEFINITIONS

Naturalistic: naturalism is a view of the world. This is a philosophical term. A naturalistic view is best defined as an earth-based view. Explanations for why things happen are found in the laws and processes of nature, rather than attributed to a supernatural source.

Atheism: *a* = 'without', *theos* = 'God' in Greek. The view that there is no God, gods, or any supernatural force.

Agnosticism: *a* = 'without', *gnosis* = 'knowledge' in Greek. A position of not knowing whether there is a God or not.

Autonomy: *auto* = 'self', *nomos* = 'rule' or 'law' in Greek. Control of oneself, control of one's own life, able to make independent choices.

Reason: the process of the mind making decisions or drawing conclusions through logical thought or analysis.

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Charvaka: an ancient school of Indian philosophy from the 6th Century BCE. Rejected religious authority, the supernatural, and the soul; believed perception is the means of establishing truth

Mencius (Mengzi): Chinese philosopher, disciple of Confucius, 4th Century BCE. Humans are naturally inclined towards goodness; this is cultivated through education and a benevolent society.

Epicurus: Greek philosopher, 4th to 3rd C. BCE. An empiricist; only physical evidence is reliable information. There is no afterlife and death is the end of existence. Happiness is found in friendship, peace, and the search for knowledge

David Hume: 1711- 1776, Scottish philosopher. An empiricist- all knowledge comes from experience. Held a sceptical approach to knowledge. We are controlled by our emotions; we are not as rational as we think. Hume possibly first coined the 'is-ought' fallacy.

Baron d'Holbach: d. 1789 in Paris. An atheist and materialist who argued that religion hampers human moral progress. Published many anti-religious books outside France under a pseudonym.

Materialism= the view that everything is ultimately matter, or material. The rejection of any spiritual state, such as a soul.

Charles Bradlaugh: 1833- 1891, English activist and atheist. Campaigned for secularism and free speech. Founded the National Secular society in 1866.

Charles Darwin: 1809- 1882. the English naturalist who proposed the theory of evolution. Although Darwin did not set out to challenge faith in God, his theory proposed an alternative explanation for the existence of complex and diverse life on earth.

Bertrand Russell: 1872- 1970. British philosopher, one of the founders of analytic philosophy. Held religion to be unreliable superstition. Campaigner for social and intellectual freedom, and peace.

The Amsterdam Declaration: statement setting out the principles of humanism by the General Assembly of Humanists International at the World Humanist Congress in 1952 and again in 2002.

Humanist principles: ethics, rationality, democracy, human rights, freedom, care.

Carl Sagan's Pale Blue Dot: a photograph of Earth taken by a Voyager 1 space probe from distance of 6 billion kilometers, February 1990. this photo shows Earth as a pale blue dot in an unimaginable vastness of space. Carl Sagan uses this image to reflect on our insignificance, the preciousness of life, and our responsibility.

Diverse global goals of humanists

(the little fights and great fights)

- The non-religious right to exist
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The activity of individual humanists and the work of international humanist organisations lie along a spectrum. At one end there are those humanists living in countries in which admitting their non-religious beliefs would put their liberty, and sometimes lives, at risk. Then there are the humanist organisations fighting for the right to exist or to be recognised by the state. In the middle of the spectrum are organisations in countries who are working for secularism in countries where the lines between church and state are blurred. Their campaigns will often include attempts to remove religious privilege, to allow freedom of belief, and to have humanism recognised as a legitimate part of society. Finally there are the humanist organisations, such as those in Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands, who have been recognised (and sometimes financed) by the state on the same level as religious groups. These organisations are able to openly and freely promote humanism as an approach to life. They will often offer humanist ceremonies (for weddings, namings, and funerals) and other services in education or pastoral support in prisons and hospitals.

Jaap van Praag, former chair of the Dutch Humanist Association, described a distinction between ‘the little fight’ and ‘the great fight’. The little fight described the legitimate but limited interests of humanists themselves: the campaigns against religious privilege in society and hostility towards the non-religious. The great fight represented the more universal challenges that must be overcome for the good of humanity and the world. This was the work that needed to be done to build a society in which every citizen had the freedom and opportunity to lead a happy and meaningful life. It is a world in which we have minimised the restrictions placed on human beings through poverty, war, authoritarianism, disease, injustice, and environmental destruction. Which fight is the priority often depends on where humanists find themselves. In many parts of the world, the little fight is still a necessity. However, in much of the West, humanists have turned their attention to the great fight. Many humanist organisations will focus on more specific goals connected with freedom and equality of religion and belief, where they can often make a unique contribution. Individual humanists goals can be much wider.

Secularism: Separation of church and state, freedom of religion and belief, equal treatment of all.