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What Is Humanism?

Andrew Copson

What we now call a ‘humanist’ attitude has found expression around the world for at least 2,500 years (which is about as long as we have written records from many places) and in civilizations from India, to China, to Europe; but the use of a single English word to unify these instances of a common phenomenon is comparatively recent. Before we consider what ‘humanism’ is, it is therefore worth examining the history of the word itself.

The History of the Word

The first use of the noun ‘humanist’ in English in print appears to be in 1589.¹ It was a borrowing from the recent Italian word *umanista* and it referred for many years not to the subject matter of this volume but narrowly² to a student of ancient languages or more widely to sophisticated academics of any subjects other than theology. There was no use of the word ‘humanism’ to partner this use of ‘humanist’ but, if there had been, it would have denoted simply the study of ancient languages and culture. As the decades passed, and the ‘humanists’ of the sixteenth century receded into history, they were increasingly seen as being not just students of pre-Christian cultures but advocates for those cultures. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, ‘humanist’ denoted not just a student of the humanities – especially the culture of the ancient European world – but a holder of the view that this curriculum was best guaranteed to develop the human being personally, intellectually, culturally, and socially.³

The first appearances of the noun ‘humanism’ in English in print were in the nineteenth century and were both translations of the recent German coinage *humanismus*. In Germany this word had been and was still deployed with a range of meanings in a wide variety of social and intellectual debates. On its

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entry into English it carried two separate and distinct meanings. On the one hand, in historical works like those of Jacob Burckhardt and J. A. Symonds,⁴ it was applied retrospectively to the revival of classical learning in the European Renaissance and the tradition of thought ignited by that revival. Its second meaning referred to a more contemporary attitude of mind. It is ‘humanism’ in this second sense that we are concerned with here. Throughout the nineteenth century the content of this latter ‘humanism’, the holders of which attitude were now also called ‘humanists’, was far from systematized, and the word often referred generically to a range of attitudes to life that were non-religious, non-theistic, or non-Christian. The term was mostly used positively but could also be disparaging. The British prime minister W. E. Gladstone used ‘humanism’ dismissively to denote positivism and the philosophy of Auguste Comte,⁵ and it was not with approval that the *Dublin Review* referred to ‘heathen-minded humanists’.⁶

Within academia the use of ‘humanism’ to refer to the Renaissance movement (often: ‘Renaissance humanism’) persisted and still persists; outside academia, it was the second meaning of ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ that prevailed in the twentieth century. By the start of that century the words were being used primarily to denote approaches to life – and the takers of those approaches – that were distinguished by the valuing of human beings and human culture *in contrast with* valuing gods and religion, and by affirming the effectiveness of human reason applied to evidence *in contrast with* theism, theological speculation, and revelation.⁷ At this time the meaning of ‘humanism’, though clarified as non-theistic and non-religious, was still broad. It was only in the early and mid-twentieth century that men and women began deliberately systematizing and giving form to this ‘humanism’ in books, journals, speeches, and in the publications and agendas of what became humanist organizations.⁸ In doing so, they affirmed that the beliefs and values captured by this use of the noun ‘humanism’ were not merely the novel and particular products of Europe but had antecedents and analogues in cultures all over the world and throughout history,⁹ and they gave ‘humanism’ the meaning it has today.¹⁰

Although now most frequently used unqualified and in the sense outlined above, the use of both ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ has been complicated by a later tendency to prefix them with qualifying adjectives. To some extent these usages are the result of false etymological or historical assumptions (a conflation between the earlier and later usages of the word ‘humanist’ outlined above, for example); but there is often something polemical involved.¹¹ The word ‘secular’ seems first to have been added to ‘humanism’ as an elaborator intended to amplify disapproval, rather than as a qualifier, but it was after it appeared as a phrase in the US Supreme Court’s 1961 judgment in *Torcaso v. Watkins* that it was taken up as a self-description by some (mainly US-based) humanist organizations. However that may be, the usage encouraged a tendency which was already establishing itself of adding religious adjectives to the plain noun. The hybrid term ‘Christian humanism’,¹² which some from a Christian background have

been attempting to put into currency as a way of co-opting the (to them) amenable aspects of humanism for their religion, has led to a raft of claims from those identifying with other religious traditions – whether culturally or in convictions – that they too can claim a ‘humanism’. The suggestion that has followed – that ‘humanism’ is something of which there are two types, ‘religious humanism’ and ‘secular humanism’, has begun to seriously muddy the conceptual water, especially in these days when anyone with a philosophical axe to grind can, with a few quick Wikipedia edits, begin to shift the common understanding of any complicatedly imprecise philosophical term.

Language, of course, is mutable over time, but there are good reasons to try to retain coherence and integrity in the use of the nouns ‘humanist’ and ‘humanism’ unqualified. Subsequent to their earlier usage to describe an academic discipline or curriculum (whose followers, obviously, might well be religious), ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ have been used relatively consistently as describing an attitude that is at least quite separate from religion and that in many respects contrasts and conflicts with religion(s). Of course, many of the values associated with this humanism can be held and are held by people as part of a wider assortment of beliefs and values, some of which beliefs and values may be religious (people are complicated and inconsistent). There may also be people who self-identify as ‘Christian’ (or ‘Sikh’, ‘Muslim’, ‘Jewish’, or whatever) for ethnic or political reasons but who have humanist convictions and no religious beliefs. These vagaries of human behaviour and self-description are a poor reason for dismembering such a useful single conceptual category as ‘humanism’ is in practice, especially when there are words more suitable to combine with the religious qualifiers that would lead to no such verbal confusion. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Karl Popper used ‘humanitarianism’ for this purpose, urging co-operation between ‘humanists’ and religious ‘humanitarians’.¹³ The use of ‘humanistic’ in front of the religious noun in question is also preferable (e.g. ‘humanistic Islam’ or ‘humanistic Judaism’). It performs the necessary modification but also conveys the accurate sense that what is primary is the religion at hand and that the qualification is secondary.¹⁴

There are two further usages of the words ‘religious humanism’ with which to deal before we move on from verbal occupations. Both are uses of the phrase by humanists who *are* humanists in the sense of this volume: holders of the views that constitute a humanist approach to beliefs, values, and meaning – and with no conflicting religious beliefs. By the use of the word ‘religious’ they most commonly wish to convey either (1) that humanism *is* their religion, using the word ‘religion’ somewhat archaically and expansively, in the manner of George Eliot, Julian Huxley, or Albert Einstein, to denote the fundamental worldview of a person, or (2) that they themselves participate in humanist organizations in a congregational manner akin to the manner in which a follower of a religion may participate in such a community. The first of these usages is so obviously metaphorical as to need no further attention; the second is more diverting. In the United States and Europe, including the United

Kingdom, it was the inspiration behind a brief flourishing of humanist ‘churches’ at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.¹⁵ Now this use of the words ‘religious humanism’ is extinct almost everywhere, although the phenomenon of non-theistic ‘congregations’ that the phrase describes is not entirely exhausted.¹⁶ The congregational model was consciously and deliberately abandoned by humanist organizations in most of Europe.¹⁷ It does still have purchase in the United States, where the idea of humanist congregations is actively promoted by some humanist organizations, but it is not widespread anywhere, and it remains to be seen whether present attempts to revive it will bear fruit.

In this volume we use the single words ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ unqualified, to denote a non-religious, non-theistic, and naturalistic approach to life, the essentials of which we shall shortly consider. This is the mainstream and contemporary meaning of the unqualified nouns and the way in which most standard works of reference define them:

a morally concerned style of intellectual atheism openly avowed by only a small minority of individuals ... but tacitly accepted by a wide spectrum of educated people in all parts of the Western world.¹⁸

A philosophy or set of beliefs, that holds that human beings achieve a system of morality through their own reasoning rather than through a belief in any divine being.¹⁹

an appeal to reason in contrast to revelation or religious authority as a means of finding out about the natural world and destiny of man, and also giving a grounding for morality ... Humanist ethics is also distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity rather than in fulfilling the will of God.²⁰

any position which stresses the importance of persons, typically in contrast with something else, such as God, inanimate nature, or totalitarian societies.²¹

a commitment to the perspective, interests and centrality of human persons; a belief in reason and autonomy as foundational aspects of human existence; a belief that reason, scepticism and the scientific method are the only appropriate instruments for discovering truth and structuring the human community; a belief that the foundations for ethics and society are to be found in autonomy and moral equality ...²²

Believing that it is possible to live confidently without metaphysical or religious certainty and that all opinions are open to revision and correction, [humanists] see human flourishing as dependent on open communication, discussion, criticism and unforced consensus.²³

What Sort of Thing Is Humanism?

Even within this single sense of a non-religious, human-centred approach to life and meaning as defined above, there is a spectrum of ways in which the words ‘humanism’ and ‘humanist’ are used in practice, from the denoting of an

implicit attitude to life which its possessor sees as merely common sense, to a fully worked out and personally explicit worldview, recognized by its possessor as 'humanist', which may also be a self-identity. In a Western world where labels are increasingly resisted and identities acknowledged as multiple, those at the latter end of this spectrum are few, but polls and social attitude surveys reveal a large number of people whose humanism may be unnamed and implicit, but whose attitude is identical with that of people for whom humanism is an explicit worldview.²⁴

So, in light of this, what sort of thing can we say humanism is? As we have said, the word was first applied to a certain set of beliefs and values long after those beliefs and values had already emerged. 'Humanism' is a post hoc coinage: a label intended to capture a certain attitude, which the first user of the word did not invent but merely identified. In this sense, 'humanism' and 'humanist' are akin to an analyst's categories. The word 'humanist' applies to people who may not know it but who are humanists no less than a human being is a member of *Homo sapiens* whether he or she knows that this is the technical binomial nomenclature for his or her species or not. Thus, humanism is quite different from religions and a great many non-religious philosophies, which begin at a particular point in time and whose names originate at or soon after the genesis of the ideology itself.

The fact that 'humanist', since the word has been used, has also been, for a growing number of people, a conscious commitment and a self-identifying label does not disrupt this view of 'humanism' as an analytical category. In fact the testimony of many of those who have 'discovered' their humanism buttresses this view of it. Time and again we find this discovery presented as one that arises out of a process of self-examination leading to the self-attribution of the label in a way analogous to the attachment of it by a disinterested analyst.²⁵

So, no one invented humanism or founded it. The word describes a certain set of linked and interrelated beliefs and values that together make up a coherent non-religious worldview, and many people have had these beliefs and values all over the world and for thousands of years. These beliefs and values do not constitute a dogma, since – as we shall see – their basis is in free and open enquiry. But they do recur throughout history in combination as a permanent alternative to belief systems that place the source of value outside humanity and posit supernatural forces and principles. In spite of this recurrence, they do not constitute a tradition in the sense of an unbroken handing on of these ideas down the generations – humanism arises in human societies quite separate from each other in time and space and the basic ideas that comprise humanism can be discerned in China and India from ancient times as much as in the ancient Mediterranean and the modern West.

Humanism has been variously termed a 'worldview', an 'approach to life', a 'lifestance', an 'attitude', a 'way of life', and a 'meaning frame'. All these phrases have aspects that recommend them. At this stage, however, it will be more beneficial to move on to what the content of 'humanism' actually is.

What Is Humanism?

A hundred years of advocates and critics have refined and defined humanism in ways that give it clearer boundaries and greater substance. A ‘minimum definition’ has even been agreed by humanist organizations in over forty countries:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.²⁶

This minimum definition is a good attempt at a short summary of the humanist approach, but no complete worldview can be explained in one paragraph. In the five sections that follow, we will look in greater depth at the related beliefs and values in the overlap of which – like the circles of a Venn diagram²⁷ – we can discern the essence of the humanist approach.

The Humanist Approach 1: Understanding Reality

Starting with the human being

The notion that a man²⁸ shall judge for himself what he is told, sifting the evidence and weighing the conclusions, is of course implicit in the outlook of science. But it begins before that as a positive and active constituent of humanism. For evidently the notion implies not only that man is free to judge, but that he is able to judge. This is an assertion of confidence which goes back to a contemporary of Socrates [Protagoras], and claims (as Plato quotes him) that ‘man is the measure of all things’. In humanism, man is all things: he is both the expression and the master of the creation.²⁹

Humanism begins with the human being and asserts straight away that the active deployment of his or her senses is the way to gain knowledge (albeit provisional). This claim invites the instant objection that it is an unfounded assumption, but humanist philosophers have defended it by pointing out that it is manifestly the functional basis for our daily engagement with reality, the truth of which we have lived with from birth:

What sort of thing is it reasonable to believe without proof? I should reply: the facts of sense-experience and the principles of mathematics and logic – including the inductive logic employed in science. These are things which we can hardly bring ourselves to doubt, and as to which there is a large measure of agreement among mankind.³⁰

Sights, sounds, glimpses, smells and touches all provide reasons for beliefs. If John comes in and gets a good doggy whiff, he acquires a reason to believe that Rover is in the house. If Mary looks in the fridge and sees the butter, she acquires a reason for believing that there is butter in the fridge. If John tries and tries but cannot clear the bar, he learns that he cannot jump six feet. In other words, it is the whole *person's* interaction with the whole *surround* that gives birth to reasons. John and Mary, interacting with the environment as they should, are doing well. If they acquired the same beliefs but in the way that they might hear voices in the head, telling them out of a vacuum that the dog is in the house or the butter in the fridge, or that the bar can or cannot be jumped, they would not be reasonable in the same way; they would be deluded ...³¹

Naturalism

The universe thus discerned by our senses appears a natural phenomenon, behaving according to principles that can be observed, determined, predicted, and described. This is the universe inhabited by the humanist. Its opposite, which humanists reject, was well described by one mid-twentieth-century popularizer of humanism:

Behind the tangible, visible world of Nature there is said to be an intangible, invisible world. Not, of course, in the sense that atomic particles are hidden from sight; they belong to the same world as the grosser objects of everyday experience. They are physical because they obey the laws of physics. But the supersensible world of the dualistic religions is outside nature; it is supernatural, or if you are squeamish about the word, supra-natural.³²

For the one who believes in the intangible realm of this double reality, knowledge can come from building a bridge between this world and the other. We might touch this realm through our own spiritual efforts to commune with it, or beings might come out from it to commune with us, whether ghosts, angels, or deities. For those who accept the universe as a tangible natural phenomenon, knowledge comes through the evidence of our senses.

Science and free inquiry

Of course, we may be misled on occasion by our senses, and so humanists go further than what we have said so far and argue that we should 'not trust the evidence of our senses blindly' but 'use it as a basis to predict future events'³³ or at least to test the theories we have invented. This process gives our sense-experience a greater reliability over time through corroboration. We investigate the world and propose theories to account for our experience; we subject our theories to further experience, in particular under experimental conditions designed to either refute or corroborate theories; this allows us to answer questions about how the world works, and reject erroneous theories. This in outline is the

‘scientific method’, which humanists accept as the way to produce provisional descriptions of reality and hone the body of our knowledge in the direction of truth. It automatically precludes assent to propositions that rely solely on inherited dogma, claims of revelation, or arguments from personal and un-replicable experience. As a way of looking for truth it may still rest on assumptions, but as one humanist scientist pointed out to counter this criticism, these assumptions stand after centuries of sustained and successful growth in our knowledge:

It stands to the everlasting credit of science that by acting on the human mind it has overcome man’s insecurity before himself and before nature ... the Greeks for the first time wrought a system of thought whose conclusions no one could escape. The scientists of the Renaissance then devised the combination of systematic experiment with mathematical method ... there was no longer room for basic differences of opinion in natural science ... Since that time each generation has built up the heritage of knowledge and understanding, without the slightest danger of a crisis that might jeopardize the whole structure ... [we] can register at least one great and important gain: confidence that human thought is dependable and natural law universal.³⁴

As a more important counter, humanists will also point out that, although an assumption, it is itself is up to be questioned and is only to be accepted for as long as it continues to satisfy its own rigorous criteria for acceptance:

nothing is exempt from human question. This means that there is no immemorial tradition, no revelation, no authority, no privileged knowledge (first principles, intuitions, axioms) which is beyond question because beyond experience and which can be used as a standard by which to interpret experience. There is only experience to be interpreted in the light of further experience, the sole source of all standards of reason and value, for ever open to question. This radical assumption is itself, of course, open to question, and stands only in so far as it is upheld by experience.³⁵

So it is frankly admitted by the humanist that the descriptions of reality offered by science are provisional and never entirely and totally certain – at any time evidence may present itself that renders old explanations redundant and new explanations preferable: ‘We must constantly check the results of our reasoning process against the facts, and see if they fit. If they don’t fit, we must respect the facts, and conclude that our reasoning was mistaken.’³⁶ Given that this is so, humanists are committed to open and free enquiry, and have been amongst the most vigorous defenders of the right to freedom of thought and expression in all ages.

Valuing truth

To think in this way takes courage and self-discipline and is not easy. Some may ask, in consequence of this cost, why one should value truth at all or bother to seek it out. What have been the humanist responses? Answers have

been presented to do with the practical utility of the truth – that it is the progenitor of so many technologies of benefit to humanity, whether medical or labour-saving or culturally enriching. Other humanists have stressed the social utility of the truth: that it is, in the words of one philosopher and social reformer, ‘one of the most important bases of human society. The due administration of justice absolutely depends upon it; whatever tends to weaken it, saps the foundations of morality, security, and happiness’.³⁷ One humanist social justice campaigner stressed the personally empowering nature of the truth: ‘I appeal to you to be rational, critical, inspired with the spirit of enquiry. Don’t take things simply for granted ... you shall never be able to be free on this earth so long as you remain a voluntary subject to forces unknown and unknowable.’³⁸

These defences of truth all have something in them but they do not seem entirely necessary. Curiosity is inherent in the human being, as anyone on the receiving end of a young child’s questions knows. Almost as prevalent appears to be the desire not just to be told but actually to experience and to know for yourself. Of course, it is not universal but it is very widespread. Most of us do not want to live our lives on the basis of untruths, and this is a sentiment enthusiastically affirmed by humanists: ‘A happiness derived from beliefs not justified on any ground except their pleasantness is not a kind of happiness that can be unreservedly admired.’³⁹ The idea that we have a psychological need for truth is not novel – it is present in humanist thought even two millennia ago: ‘It isn’t possible to get rid of our anxieties about essentials if we do not understand the nature of the universe and are apprehensive about some of the theological accounts. Hence it is impossible to enjoy our pleasures unadulterated without natural science.’⁴⁰ It remains today an important part of the humanist proposition not only that truth can be discovered by human beings working hard to do so, but also that human life individually and collectively is enriched as a result of this enterprise.

The Humanist Approach 2: Understanding Ourselves

Back to the human being again

Taking a naturalistic and scientific view of things has consequences for how the humanist views the human being. To start with, the humanist sees the human being as not distinct from the rest of nature.⁴¹ The human being is a product of purposeless natural processes over the course of billions of years of development and change: we are unambiguously of this world. As one academic writer on humanism points out, even the ‘hum-’ in ‘humanism’ ultimately reflects this earthiness, cognate as it is with the Latin *humus* for ‘soil’ and *homo* meaning ‘earth-being’.⁴²

Such a view of human beings as intrinsically part of this local realm may be uplifting and give a sense of profound wellbeing and security:

The humanist has a feeling of perfect at-homeness in the universe. He is conscious of himself as an earth-child. There is a mystic glow in this sense of belonging ... Rooted in millions of years of planetary history, he has a secure feeling of being at home, and a consciousness of pride and dignity as a bearer of the heritage of the ages and growing creative centre of cosmic life.⁴³

Or it may simply be seen as something to be understood and accepted, in the words of one humanist scientist:

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher answer'— but none exists.⁴⁴

Either way, it is a true description of ourselves as far as humanists are concerned. Equally universally, however, humanists point out that this recognition of our material nature implies no reduction of the human being. The humanist educator James Hemming indicated this with characteristic eloquence:

Our entire bodies and brains are made of a few dollars' worth of common elements: oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, carbon, enough calcium to whitewash a chicken coop, sufficient iron to make a two-inch nail, phosphorous to tip a good number of matches, enough sulphur to dust a flea-plagued dog, together with modest amounts of potassium, chlorine, magnesium and sodium. Assemble them all in the right proportion, build the whole into an intricate interacting system, and the result is our feeling, thinking, striving, imagining, creative selves. Such ordinary elements; such extraordinary results!⁴⁵

Understanding the material composition of the human being is not, for humanists, the end of the story:

We possess forethought and will ... Uniquely among organisms, human beings are both objects of nature and subjects that can shape our own fate. We are biological beings, and under the purview of biological and physical laws. But we are also conscious beings with purpose and agency, traits the possession of which allow us to design ways of breaking the constraints of biological and physical laws. We are, in other words, both inside nature and outside of it.⁴⁶

The ordinary nature of the parts is one thing, but the extraordinary nature of the whole is just as important.⁴⁷ Although we are a tiny part of an enormous

material universe, we are the most sophisticatedly self-conscious part of the universe of which we are aware; as such we are complicated and developing characters as well as physical entities. These are important statements to the humanist. What is it to be human? Many humanists would say that the answer lies in even the ability to ask that question: ‘the core of our humanity is our reflexiveness, our ability and need to take ourselves as the objects of our own inquiry’.⁴⁸ When they begin to answer the question more fully, they do so not just with a biological account of origins but with a psychological account of the individual person and a sociological account of the individual person’s relatedness to others.

Death⁴⁹

Whatever else the human being may be, the humanist conception of the self is of a mind irretrievably wrapped up in a body. The reasons why a humanist thinks this to be so should be fairly clear – the more we learn about the human body, the clearer it becomes that self-consciousness no less than consciousness is a product of our biology like everything else about us, and there is no reason to suppose that there is anything of us that could endure through death and beyond. For the humanist, therefore, physical death brings with it the annihilation of the individual personality:

The mind grows like the body; like the body, it inherits characteristics from both parents; it is affected by diseases of the body and by drugs; it is intimately connected with the brain. There is no scientific reason to suppose that after death the mind or soul acquires an independence of the brain which it never had in life.⁵⁰

There is a widespread acceptance in much humanist thought that this view of death will naturally be a disquieting, if not frightening, view. The general response, from ancient times to the present day, is to urge fortitude and satisfaction in the sense of personal integrity that courage in the face of truth can bring. This is crystallized in a passage from Bertrand Russell much quoted by today’s humanists:⁵¹

I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation ... Many a man has borne himself proudly on the scaffold; surely the same pride should teach us to think truly about our place in the world. Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver ... in the end fresh air brings vigour, and the great spaces have a splendour of their own.⁵²

Of course, the idea of annihilation is not viewed with timidity by all – to some it has been seen as better than the alternative. Among those who think we survive death, there is not a universal expectation of paradise – some fear that the

afterlife exists and is a wretched fate. If this fear of future suffering can be dispelled by the acknowledgement of death as nothingness, than that may have a comforting effect rather than a chilling one. The flames of hell that could terrify the guilt-ridden schoolboy of nineteenth-century Christian England, or the empty, wraithlike character of the dead in mainstream ancient Greek thought (an equally horrifying prospect for any warm-blooded person) were less cheerful prospects than the annihilation promised by an Epicurus or a Bertrand Russell.

So, annihilation may be better than at least some alternatives, and of course it may itself bring release from pain or suffering in life, making it *in extremis* a resolution to be desired.⁵³ Still, it is not in itself a consoling thought to those still vigorous and with no fear of hell. Nonetheless, frightening or not, for humanists this annihilation is a fact of life – and if we are not to simply collapse in horror, we have to face up to it, we have to make the best of it. All the evidence tells us that the human being is a physically complicated product of natural selection and a psychologically complicated product of inheritance and environment, capable of great things – but finite. This is the reality a humanist must deal with and the context in which the humanist must live.

Consequently, humanists have generated a range of responses to death which all seek to place this reality in a consoling context. They may point out that the finite nature of life is actually necessary to give life any shape and meaning at all:

Take the idea that life can only have a meaning if it never ends. It is certainly not the case that in general only endless activities can be meaningful. Indeed, usually the contrary is true: there being some end or completion is often required for an activity to have any meaning.⁵⁴

The humanist knows that he relies on the temporal order for his life, for the power to learn from experience, to draw on the past for standards and means by which to enjoy the present and create the future.⁵⁵

They may go further and say that the boundaries offered by death not only give life meaning but are the very thing that makes any individual personality possible:

The dictator ... can grind down his citizens till they are all alike, but he cannot melt them into a single man ... The memory of birth and the expectation of death always lurk within the human being, making him separate from his fellows and consequently capable of intercourse with them.⁵⁶

They may stress the continuities that death illustrates, perhaps by speaking of the memories of our deeds that live in the minds of those we leave behind, or emphasizing the immortality of the particles that make us up:

A little while and you will be nobody and nowhere nor will anything which you now behold exist, nor one of those who are now alive. Nature's Law is that all things change and turn, and pass away, so that in due order different things may come to be ...⁵⁷

Or the continuity of individuals with future and past generations:

I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance – that is I;
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die.⁵⁸

The most prevalent humanist response of all, however, is to urge getting on with living.⁵⁹

Is it so small a thing
To have enjoy'd the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done;
To have advanced true friends, and beat down baffling foes;

That we must feign a bliss
Of doubtful future date,
And while we dream on this
Lose all our present state,
And relegate to worlds yet distant our repose?

... I say, Fear not! life still
Leaves human effort scope.
But, since life teems with ill,
Nurse no extravagant hope.
Because thou must not dream, thou need'st not then despair.⁶⁰

With the advent of humanism, according to one humanist anthropologist, any 'statement about the Hereafter becomes more than just a piece of descriptive material about another world. It expresses even more strongly a personal attitude about action in this world.'⁶¹ This is intended to be an analytical truth

about all human ideas about the afterlife, but it is certainly also true of humanist statements about death, because what they point to most emphatically is humanist conceptions of the value of the human life.⁶²

The Humanist Approach 3: The Good Life and the Whole Person⁶³

For a humanist, there is no ‘meaning of life’ in the sense of a higher external purpose to our existence, but some have tried to redefine the phrase:

[The phrase ‘the meaning of life’] is sometimes used in the sense of a deeper, hidden meaning – something like the hidden meaning of an epigram, or of a poem ... but the wisdom of some poets and perhaps also of some philosophers has taught us that the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ can be understood in a different way; that the meaning of life may not be something hidden and perhaps discoverable but, rather, something with which we ourselves can endow our lives. We can bestow a meaning upon our lives through our work, through our active conduct, through our whole way of life, and through the attitude we adopt towards our friends and our fellow men and towards the world...⁶⁴

This is a good humanist salvaging of the phrase but in practice, rather than speak of the meaning *of* life, or even of meaning *in* life, humanists tend to talk of how we should live, of living well in the one life we have: they speak of ‘the good life’. The humanist view that this life is our only life – acceptance of the finite nature of the human person in time – has consequences for this important notion. This life is not merely an episode in our existence – it is our entire existence. We will never develop further as persons than we will develop in this life: there is no future time in which completion may occur. In consequence, the development of the whole person in the here and now has always had an added urgency for all thoughtful humanists.

Tragedy

Immediately we must acknowledge that many lives are painful, incomplete, and felt to be worthless by their possessors. The most graphic embodiment of this timeless truth for us today is the travesty of global inequality. At the same time as there are those of us whose lifespan of a century will bring countless opportunities for personal growth and the feeling of completeness, there are those of us new born who through famine or disease will not live out the week or, if we do, will spend short lives absorbed in the struggle of surviving the day. Can we speak of the human being in a universal sense, faced with such tragic diversity? A humanist answer is that we can and must. It is not banal to say with

the famous line of Terence: 'I am a human being, nothing human is foreign to me.' The humanist view acknowledges that:

[T]he human condition is one of vulnerability ... Our fate may be terrible and ... there may be no consolation ... To recognise *fragility* is to accept that we are vulnerable to circumstances. But we are also vulnerable to our own failings. Just as there are no guarantees provided by a divine plan that all will be well in the end, so also there are no guarantees in human nature that we will through our own resources be able to create a perfect world. Just as we have to acknowledge that terrible things can happen to us, so also we have to acknowledge that we could do terrible things ... [Humanism] acknowledges the terrible record of man's inhumanity to man. These are grounds for sober realism, but not for despair. The ideal to which we can aspire is not a remote non-human ideal. It is one which is formed from our experience of what human beings are capable of at their best. It is an ideal that comes from within our own humanity.⁶⁵

Acknowledgement of our universal human tragedy, for humanists, provides the functional basis for compassion. And in the large majority of lives there is more than despair. Happily, in many lives, a great deal more.

The pursuit of happiness

Many may value the challenges they face for the personal development they bring and, in retrospect, many periods of unhappiness may be found to have been fruitful, but very few people would praise the value of actively seeking an unhappy life. Even so there is sometimes resistance to the idea that people should actively seek happiness in life. The idea can be made to seem crass, selfish, base, or sterile, and has always needing defending:

When I say that pleasure is the goal of living I do not mean the pleasures of libertines ... I mean, on the contrary, the pleasure that consists of freedom from bodily pain and mental agitation. Pleasant life is not the product of one drinking party after another or sexual intercourse with women and young men or of the seafood and other delicacies afforded by the serious table. On the contrary, it is the result of sober thinking ...⁶⁶

These words of Epicurus demonstrate how timeless are critiques of the pursuit of pleasure as libertinism and provide a defence of the pursuit of happiness. Humanists of today typically echo Epicurus, if not knowingly. The pleasures of the flesh are an important part of a good life and pointless self-denial is to be avoided; physical sensation is a pleasure in itself and a stimulus to other pleasures, and the enjoyment of food and drink, of sex, of sport all fit into this category. Equally, however, pleasure comes from creativity, from relationships with others, from intellectual endeavour and a plethora of other sources. Balance and moderation in the pursuit of them all are also seen as important.

Personal development

Not believing in any one meaning of life, humanists accept that ideas of happiness and fulfilment vary from person to person. The fact that human life, on this view, ‘becomes richly diverse, creative and adventurous’⁶⁷ is celebrated by humanists as enriching the whole of humanity.

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing ... It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings ... In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass which is composed of them.⁶⁸

The importance of personal development as an essential element of the good life comes across clearly in these words of Mill. Once life is well under way, and two or three decades have gone by, the introspective human being is conscious of him or herself as a complicated personality. Humanists call attention to this truth about the human person, and proceed from this to encourage conscious self-development. Scholars of humanism have defined this as the pursuit of the ‘whole person’:

Achieving one’s full potential in skills, abilities, moral development and psychological wellbeing is to become a ‘whole person’. Finding ways to encourage this fullness of being is an important part of the humanist agenda.⁶⁹

The many ways in which personal development and happiness are pursued on a humanist view would fill volumes. In an introductory chapter like this, we cannot do more than sketch a few emerging categories.

Making connections

In the pursuit of happiness and personal development, the idea of connectedness recurs in humanist thought – connectedness both to other people and to the non-human world. The human person does not exist in isolation but in community with others, and humanists have always placed a high value on these interpersonal relationships: ‘Of all the things that wisdom provides for the happiness of the whole person, by far the most important is

the acquisition of friendship.⁷⁰ Closing the virtuous circle of happiness and personal development, the importance of connecting with others is often coupled with the importance of knowing yourself. The novelist E. M. Forster's famous injunction 'Only connect!'⁷¹ carries this force, referring both to the need to connect with others and the need to have an integrated personality oneself. As a popularizer of humanism, Harold Blackham made this more explicit – 'One has to be friends with oneself before one is fit to be a friend'⁷² – and the same sentiment is found amongst humanists in every time and place. Positive relationships with others are an important feature of the good life; this is Bertrand Russell's 'love' which he elevated almost to iconic status when he urged that the good life must be guided by it entirely,⁷³ a sentiment that shows in his famous injunction, 'Remember your humanity, and forget the rest!'⁷⁴ – a clarion call for a human unity built on the connectedness of individuals.

Beyond our connection with the others who are our immediate living companions in this world, humanists urge us to realize and develop connections with the broader human story. One humanist philosopher points out that we can make use even of inanimate objects in this:

Think of how we value objects that have been in touch with people now dead over indistinguishable tokens of the same type: a pen that belonged to a favourite uncle, or a grandmother's wedding ring. The objects' particular histories do not usually leave their traces on the objects; yet we treat them as if they have done.⁷⁵

Many other humanists stress how it is fulfilling to develop a sense of connectedness with the men and women who stretch out behind our own generation as our ancestors, through a knowledge of their ways, and to feel the same sort of affinity through imagining the chain of our descendants yet to be, stretching forward.⁷⁶

Humanists, conscious of the human being's relatedness to it, also emphasize the importance of our feeling of connectedness with the rest of the natural world. We may encounter it when gazing up at the stars or at a giant redwood; when looking into the face of a pet or other animal; when at peace beside a stream, or exerting ourselves to scale a hill or mountain. These may be among our profoundest experiences. In the words of one humanist scientist:

there are objects and occasions which invoke in me a profound sense of the sacred, and I can cite other humanist scientists of whom this is also true ... Why, when you go to the Grand Canyon and you see the strata of geological time laid out before you, why again is there a feeling that brings you close to tears? Or looking at images from the Hubble telescope. I think it's no different from the feeling of being moved to tears by music, by a Schubert quartet, say, or by poetry. The human mind is big enough, and imaginative enough, to be poetically moved by the whole sweep of geological ages represented by the rocks that you are standing among. That's why you feel in awe.⁷⁷

The scientific knowledge that humanists prize facilitates this wonder by affording a broader context to these vistas that previous generations did not have. This aesthetic satisfaction is of a piece with other sources of the same feeling, as described by one humanist philosopher:

I find a lot of things around the sense of the sacred in me. Works of art or music, sublime grand spectacles in nature, the starry heavens above and the moral law within, the oldest human skulls in Kenya or the newest human baby in a maternity ward can all be fitting objects of different kinds of awe and reverence. They can all take us outside ourselves.⁷⁸

These moments of seemingly standing outside or transcending ourselves can come from within the human world as well as from without. Engagement with the products of human imagination and creativity – either our own or others’ – is another ingredient of the good life repeatedly stressed by humanists. At a time when the role of science and the involvement of scientists have come to play a large part in popular conceptions of humanism, this is worth emphasizing. It may be appreciation of art for its own sake, or it may be that it is valuing the fact that art obliges us, as one humanist puts it,

to grasp human experience in the fullest sense *historically*: as a particular, concrete experience, situated in a particular space at a particular point in time. It invites us to understand ‘being human’ not as a fixed and immutable condition, but as a changing and changeable process – a matter not of being but of becoming ... At its most potent, moreover, art can change your hearts and minds in ways that help to accelerate the process of change. It can do this by exposing the gulf that yawns between what human beings are currently like and what they are capable of becoming.⁷⁹

The author goes on to quote three passages of Shakespeare that make vivid various social and political issues in a way calculated to change hearts and minds. Many humanists make similarly large claims for the arts: ‘they enable us to make sense of our lives, in a way in which nothing else can’⁸⁰ and ‘they are what they are in their extraordinary complexity and beauty and to be enjoyed and explored in their self contained completeness. Art is not an extra – the icing on the cake – it’s an essential part of human existence.’⁸¹

Many other dimensions of human life and experience give scope for fulfilment and personal development and there are as many such occupations as there are human beings.

Optimism and realism

Reasonably, scholars of humanism have characterized humanist views on the good life as optimistic:

It is a positive view of humanity even if, at times, it is idealist. You are what you make of yourselves. Aim high, aim for the stars, and you may yet clear the

rooftops. You will need courage, tenacity, motivation and a good sense of humour on the route. Quality of character, happiness, fulfilment of potential and of human needs can be improved through changed values, through redirection of individual life, by a process of personal change, and personal evolution.⁸²

If it is an optimistic view, however, it is not naively so. Ultimately we will come to nothing and so will everything we do and create: humanists know this as well if not better than others. From this perspective, everything we do in life is the proverbial rearranging of deckchairs on the *Titanic*. But the humanist asks if it really makes sense to speak of ‘ultimately’ in the situation we find ourselves in. Our perspective can stretch that far only with an extreme effort, and although such thinking is necessary for the physicist who wants to push at the boundaries of our knowledge of the universe, it is not a suitable mode for the majority of us who live in the more domestic confines of this Earth and our smaller societies within it. In practice, it is in the here and now and with other human beings that we must live:

Humanism covers my main belief ... my belief in the individual, and in his duty to create, and to understand and to contact other individuals. A duty that may be and ought to be a delight. The human race, to which he belongs, may not survive, but that should not deter him ... wherever our race comes from, Wherever it is going to, whatever his own fissures and weaknesses, he himself is here, is now, he must understand, create, contact.⁸³

The Humanist Approach 4: Morality

The origins of morality

Many traditional accounts of the origin of human morality have it that morality came to us from outside ourselves. At a particular point in human history, the normal flow of events was interrupted and humanity, which had been tearing itself apart, was gifted new rules for living. An obvious example from religious traditions is the giving of the ‘Ten Commandments’ to Moses, but other more humanistic cultures have not been above giving their customs the mystique of legend, as a range of revered lawgiver characters in ancient Greek traditions testifies. By the threat of sanctions, the promise of rewards, and the enforcement of both, these origin stories hold that human societies were dragged up to a civilized state.

A different view of the origin of morality has always been possible. Over two millennia ago in China, the teacher Meng Tzu saw pro-social behaviour as natural to humanity, if only the social conditions could be created that would draw it out:

All men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others ... to be without this distress is not human ... Since we all have [this principle and others]

in ourselves, let us know to give them all their development and completion, and the issue will be like that of a fire which has begun to burn, or of a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their full development, and they will suffice to love and protect all within the four seas ...⁸⁴

On the source of morality, Meng Tzu was basically correct, as a humanist and psychologist on the other side of the world and 2,300 years later affirmed:

I have never yet met the child – and I have met very few adults – to whom it has ever occurred to raise the question: ‘Why should I consider others?’ Most people are prepared to accept as a completely self-evident moral axiom that we must not be completely selfish, and if we base our moral training on that we shall, I suggest, be building on firm enough foundations.⁸⁵

If we look at our close relatives in the animal world (elephants, dolphins, other primates, etc.), we can discern in them all the social instincts that our own ancestors – the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* – would have had. What our conscious selves now call ‘morality’ has its roots firmly in that biology. Of course, social instincts are not the end of the story; we have elaborated on them with our own cultural hard work. Charles Darwin put it well, and is often quoted with approval by humanists, as in this example, from the work of the same psychologist:

In the fourth chapter of *The Descent of Man* Darwin accumulated examples of co-operative behaviour among social animals, and remarked very reasonably, ‘It can hardly be disputed that the social feelings are instinctive or innate in the lower animals; and why should they not be so in man?’ He concluded the chapter with what may be regarded as the classical statement of the humanist view on the social basis of morals: ‘The social instincts – the prime principle of man’s moral constitution – with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise”; and this lies at the foundation of morality.’⁸⁶

This account of the origin of morality owes nothing to outside interference and has its genesis solely in our character as social animals, a point understood by a Greek humanist of two millennia ago no less than a Chinese one, when he wrote, ‘Justice was never an entity in itself. It is a kind of agreement not to harm or be harmed, made when men associate with each other at any time and in communities of any size whatsoever.’⁸⁷

Individual humanists trying to think about right and wrong do so in this context, without any single moral authority to which they can turn for absolute answers. But humanists assert that, in reality, they are in no different a position from any other human being in this respect:

each one of us has to decide what ends he thinks it right to pursue and what principles he is prepared to stand by ... there is no escaping this responsibility.

Even those who surrender their independence of judgement, or those who merely go by current fashion, are tacitly making a fundamental moral choice.⁸⁸

Still, humanists are certainly different in that they acknowledge this fact explicitly and admit individual responsibility for their ethics. This admission of individual responsibility does not mean that a humanist has no resources outside their own individual self to work with:

In determining the ultimate aims of his ethical system, the humanist ... is on his own: but 'he' is here a collective noun, implying that the whole of mankind insofar as knowledge and experience and wisdom are placed in a common pool. This pool, for the humanist, takes the place of revealed morality ...⁸⁹

As a consequence of this general approach to morality, humanists see the active moral development of the individual as an ongoing process through life, especially in early life through education as children, and as vital:

While it is possible that humans may have a genetic potential to develop morality, there is little doubt that our moral sense must be nurtured during childhood through the family, the school, and the need to live in community ... A humanist education offers young people the opportunity to explore their feelings for others, to appreciate that they would not like being treated in certain ways by other people.⁹⁰

The aim of morality

For many cultures the end of morality has been expressed in non-human terms. The rightness or wrongness of an action has been measured in the extent to which the action accords with some greater purpose: the extent to which it conforms with what some non-human entity wants for us, for example. The humanist idea that, instead, we should judge the morality of actions based on their effect on persons' welfare and fulfilment and, further, that in these considerations we must consider every person (and, more recently, every sentient being), has rarely been articulated. Even cultures that have been humanistic in their conception of where morals come from have not necessarily seen morality as something that should prioritize the welfare of human beings at large. It is a distinctive idea that, as Hector Hawton phrased it, describing the English Utilitarians: 'all human beings, not a favoured few, have an equal claim to happiness'.⁹¹ The humanist claim is that this principle should form the basis of our morality:

once one starts to think about it, the idea that one's fellow human beings should be accorded a fundamental degree of respect becomes very hard to resist. Disputes about value have in practice tended to focus on what precisely that respect entails

and also (less defensibly) on whether human beings different from ourselves are really human beings in the full sense ...⁹²

We may categorize this view generally as ‘utilitarian’ or at least ‘consequentialist’, but to depict humanism as wholly driven by moral theory would be wrong. In fact, many humanists have declared themselves sceptical of such theorizing and are far more likely to say that moral decisions are highly contextual and always distinctive and not amenable to overly rigid frameworks. E. M. Forster exemplifies this suspicion of rigid theory, ideology, and political creeds with his classic phrase ‘I do not believe in Belief’.⁹³ Being moral is not something that needs too many theories, humanists will say – it is something that we learn and experience through the doing of it, driven by our own feelings and sympathies, as another humanist novelist pointed out:

Love does not say, ‘I ought to love’ – it loves. Pity does not say, ‘It is right to be pitiful’ – it pities. Justice does not say, ‘I am bound to be just’ – it feels justly. It is only where moral emotion is comparatively weak that the contemplation of a rule or theory habitually mingles with its action.⁹⁴

In this spirit, humanists often want to integrate different ethical theories and to assess and select from the many values and virtues generated by human reflection on these matters in order to find their own way of living. Jim Herrick exemplifies this in his own attempt to combine consequentialist and virtue ethics in his popularization of humanism:

The utilitarian aim of creating ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’ is often invoked by humanists ... [but] the calculation of the greatest happiness of the greatest number misses out the individual qualities, such as passion for justice, courage, artistic brilliance, and generosity ... [Humanists] have principles to guide them and ideals to aspire to.⁹⁵

By whatever they think it is driven, and whether they find theorizing around it helpful or not, certainly humanists all agree that rightness is to be measured in terms of welfare. This sounds like such an obvious and widely accepted claim that humanists are sometimes driven to be defensive in relation to it. They point out that one of the reasons it now seems so commonsensical is because it has triumphed so comprehensively over the now widely forgotten alternatives – not because there are no alternatives. The almost total defeat of Marxism in the twentieth century, and the progressive defeat of other quasi-religious political approaches like the many varieties of fascism, is just the most recent phase in the elimination in large parts of the world of numerous competitors to the humanist claim that the welfare of all human beings should be the end of our morality. One humanist observed in the early 1970s that even ‘many liberal Christians would now accept the humanist view, up to a point. They would

agree that right and wrong are to be defined in terms of human well-being'.⁹⁶ The number of Christians we may define as 'liberal' in this sense has undoubtedly increased in the forty years since these words were written, and although relapses into tribal and nationalistic thinking are always possible, they are generally in decline.⁹⁷

Two consequences of a humanist approach

The short account of what is distinctive about humanist morality here could be extended to book length, but before we leave it we should observe briefly two historically recent consequences of the growth and spread of a humanist morality. The first is the extension of our sympathies not just to other people but to some other animals. The same progressive outward extension of our moral boundaries which allows us to embrace not just our tribe but all people has allowed us to feel kinship with animals that seem to suffer or feel joy as we do. Some may see it as ironic that an approach whose very name foregrounds the 'human' should have precipitated an unprecedented concern for non-human animals but nonetheless it is so. Humanist views of what is moral prioritize welfare and suffering as a result of cultivating our empathy; it is only because we can see that in other animals that we are able to consider them in moral terms.⁹⁸

The second consequence is in the notion of our moral responsibility for large numbers of people. Beyond our daily individual morality, as expressed in our interactions with other individuals, whether neighbours or the far-away recipients of our charity, we are now aware of morality in another sense. This is social morality: the principles that govern our common life at the community level, whether presented as politics – a worldly enterprise, perfectly suited to the humanist approach⁹⁹ – or in some other way. Humanist thinking provides a moral basis for democracy, important intellectual underpinnings of social justice, the rule of law, and human rights, and support for any social or political project that will progressively liberate humanity from its heritage of disease, ignorance, and want. Humanists have often been accused of utopianism for imagining that a better world is possible, and it is true that humanism sets high standards:

Humanism seeks to underpin political theories with a focus on what is right for individuals and society, but it is not allied with specific political theories. The humanist vision of society is one in which the 'good life' is available for all individuals and therefore for society as a whole. This is a society that will create the kind of conditions to promote the freedom, prosperity, creativity and fulfilment of all individuals within it, democratically, whatever class, colour, race, sex or status a person has. It has a vision of high standards of living, world democracy, peace, and a flourishing economy. Sound health, satisfying work, economic security, educational opportunity, cultural enjoyment, sufficient recreation, and

the freedom to express one's life so that it is satisfying and fulfilled, are all aspects of what the humanist sees as the best kind of societal living.¹⁰⁰

This vision of society, however, is increasingly shared – just as the concern for other animals is increasingly prevalent, and it is the increase of humanism that set us on this path.

The Humanist Approach 5: Practical Action

I think it is morally incumbent upon humanists to do everything in their power to bring about the material and social conditions in which the great majority of people will have a fair opportunity of finding satisfaction in their lives, and I think that, so far as possible, their concern should extend beyond the national or professional groups of which they happen to be members, to mankind as a whole.¹⁰¹

The implication of the humanist approach to morality is that we have significant responsibilities as individuals and collectively. So far we have discussed humanism purely in terms of beliefs and values, but the final element of humanism to engage with here is a behavioural one. A person who believed all we have outlined here but sat in their palace avoiding company, isolating themselves from obligations and encounters – could such a person be described as fully a humanist? A. J. Ayer, quoted above, arguably thinks not. Harold Blackham agreed: 'Faith without works is not Christianity, and unbelief without any effort to help shoulder the consequences for mankind is not humanism.'¹⁰²

So the final element of our definition of humanism is to do with practical action. Certain behaviours do flow from certain convictions, whether their bearer explicitly acknowledges these convictions or not. A liberality in dealings with others, a psychological resilience, the making of a personal contribution through one's actions to the increase of human happiness: these are the behaviours that would indicate a humanist in deed. In British history, the increase in the prevalence of humanism helped to bring about the creation of a welfare state and a system of national health and social security. Whether these are negative or positive consequences will depend on your political and social prejudices, but they are hallmarks of humanism in practice.

Humanism and Religion

In our account of humanism itself, we have barely mentioned religion or gods. This is because, in a simple account of humanism, there is really no need to do so. Gods, in the universe described by science, are unnecessary

hypotheses and ones for which there is no evidence. As far as a humanist is concerned, all religions and all ideas about gods are outmoded attempts by human beings to make sense of the universe and give meaning and purpose to human life. Humanists would wholly endorse that famous sentiment of Xenophanes: 'If cattle and horses and lions had hands and could paint and make works of art with their hands just as people can, horses would depict the gods as horses and cattle as cattle.'¹⁰³ Gods and religions are human inventions. As such, they are clearly of historical, anthropological, sociological, and aesthetic interest,¹⁰⁴ but they offer a flawed and inaccurate account of external reality and of the human person, an unsatisfying meaning-frame for life, and an implausible basis for ethics. In spite of this, some do ask whether the humanist outlook is not perhaps compatible with at least some sorts of religion.

Is humanism compatible with religion?

In asking this question, we run quickly into the knotty problem of what 'religion' is and what it is about a person that allows us to describe them as 'religious'. Let us take the example of saying that someone is 'Jewish'. We may mean one of at least four things:

- 1 that they believe in the God of Moses, God's special regard for the Jewish people, and the wrongness of certain actions because of the prohibition against them by God – i.e. we mean that they have religious beliefs;
- 2 that they attend a synagogue, and engage in Jewish rituals there and in the home – i.e. we mean that they participate in religious practices;
- 3 that when asked if they are religious, they say they are, and they say that their religion is the Jewish religion – i.e. we mean they have a religious identity;
- 4 that they say they are Jewish, but do not mean by this that they are in any way 'religious' – i.e. we mean they have a cultural identity associated with a particular religious heritage.

These four dimensions – belief, practice, religious identity, and cultural heritage – apply to almost all religions in real life. Some people are 'religious' in all four dimensions, others in one or more.

Immediately we can see that those in category 2 or 4, if they are not also 'religious' in one or more of the other senses, could easily be humanists.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, if we think of the various aspects of humanism that were laid out above as circles in a Venn diagram, as we earlier recommended, then we see at once that many people whose whole worldview could not be described as humanist, nonetheless might share one or more of the attitudes detailed above. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, many people's worldviews are composite affairs and all our worldviews are liable to contain internal contradictions

and inconsistencies. Without a doubt, it is a mark of the humanist approach to be self-critical and iron these out, but equally doubtless is that this is always an unfinished task.

A place for deism?

Plainly, belief in theistic religions like Christianity or Islam is incompatible with a humanist view: the ability of the god to interfere at will with nature fatally disrupts the assumptions of naturalism, to take just one example. That is clear-cut, but might not some sort of ‘deism’ be admissible? Deism is the idea that there may be a god and it may have created the universe but, having done so, it withdrew from the scene, is an amoral entity with no interest in what you or I do with our lives, and no more interferes with its creation. Many people over the millennia, the rest of whose worldview we would certainly recognize as humanist, have espoused a deistic view, and to deny the full humanism of Mary Wollstonecraft, Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Epicurus, or Confucius on account of such minimal unreason has seemed odd to some.

In fact, the view of humanists very often is that deist sympathies do not place a worldview outside the humanist boundary. As one said, ‘That God exists and does not interfere is a proposition we can leave philosophers to debate, but obviously it is of no practical importance.’¹⁰⁶ Humanism is above all a practical approach to life and contemporary humanists, therefore, have often admitted deists, especially those of past times, as humanists for all practical purposes.

Even if we uphold the claim that the deists of the past are incomplete humanists on account of their deism, there is another reason for admitting them nonetheless – so long as reason and science were unquestionably a core part of their worldview. There may be grounds to believe that, had Paine and Wollstonecraft known what J. S. Mill and George Eliot knew, and what we now are as certain of as we can be – namely, that there is no remaining requirement for belief in god to understand nature – then they may have given up even their deism. The *deus* of deism was an essential feature of an otherwise unfathomable universe to a thinker like Voltaire. Had he been able to draw on evolutionary theory and modern cosmology, we have no reason to believe that he – or many of our historic humanistic deists – would have seen good reason to sustain his attenuated commitment to a creator-designer. Such speculation is not totally secure, but it illustrates a truth about humanism, which is that as an approach, as we have seen, it is concerned more with how it is you decide what is true than what it is you currently believe to be true.

How important is the non-religiousness of humanism?

The atheistic (or at least agnostic) nature of the humanist approach is obsessively foregrounded by religious critics of humanism. It suits many such critics to define humanism negatively as against religions with all the connotations of

shrillness and antipathy that such a characterization represents, and this is encouraged by a media industry driven by polar antagonisms. To be fair, it is also often foregrounded by humanist organizations, seeking to use what they see as a better-known word as a hook for their educational mission to increase public understanding of humanism. One way or another, the idea of humanism as a response to religion is often emphasized, and with it the non-religiousness of humanism.

Throughout what I have written about humanism above, there is, if you want to see it, the omnipresent shadow of the alternative. In contrast to the notion of meaning as an act of human creation, there is meaning as an objective fact in a purposeful universe; in contrast with nature we have super-nature; in contrast with morality as the product of human nature and culture, we have the sanction-driven morality of extra-human origin. It would be foolish to deny that in many contexts – whether our own present day, the Britain of Hume, or the India of the Charvakas – humanist ideas have arisen in deliberate opposition to religious ideas and religious establishments that advanced these alternative views.

So is it fair to characterize humanism as merely a response to religion, parasitic on religion for its context? It is true that many (though not all) instances of humanism in the historical record lend themselves to being interpreted as reactions to religion. But the key ideas characterized as humanist have developed at different times and in different places not only in reaction to anti-humanist religious or political ideas but also out of observation and experience, not as reactions but as independent and positive affirmations or commitments. This is especially important to emphasize in the West, where advocates of a living Christian tradition tend to exaggerate the role of their own tradition in the formulation of shared ideas (and even alternative ideas too).

Moving from the social to the personal, a negative reaction to religion is not an essential part of any individual humanist's beliefs and attitudes; and total indifference may be the attitude. Most humanists, if they have any interest in it at all, have no more than an anthropological interest in religion and rarely think about it, evincing a tolerance of religious people akin to the tolerance of another's political views. Others deplore the effects of religions on morality, society, politics, and human intellectual life, and dedicate a significant portion of their lives to campaigning to mitigate these effects. Still others – perhaps formerly religious themselves – experience envy of or a mild nostalgia for the comfort of ritual or the package of community and conviction offered by organized religion. Only a few are regularly outraged by other people's false beliefs *per se*. All these responses are varied and complex culturally dependent phenomena. They are under-researched and deserve the further attention of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians.

Meanwhile, in writing about humanism by humanists, religion still looms large. It is not a criticism but merely an observation that almost all of the single-volume works on humanism recommended in the Further Reading

section of this chapter dedicate nearly half their length to debunking religion. They, of course, were written by people raised in Christian societies and often in Christian families, as were many of the humanists of previous generations we have quoted. As humanists become more distant from religion with passing generations, I think they will be less concerned with it.

Notes

- 1 Publius Virgilius Maro, *The Georgiks [sic] of Publius Virgilius Maro*, trans. A.F. (Abraham Fleming) (London, 1589).
- 2 In Samuel Johnson's dictionary of 1755, for example, 'humanist' was defined narrowly as, 'a philologer; a grammarian'. (Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* [London, 1755]).
- 3 Some notion of all this is now carried by the words 'humanist' and 'humanism' in US English, where they can be used denoting an academic of the humanities and the exercise of his or her discipline. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also has it as legitimate English usage but this is a rare occurrence.
- 4 *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) and *Renaissance in Italy* (1875) respectively.
- 5 William Ewart Gladstone, 'The Courses of Religious Thought', *Contemporary Review* (June 1876).
- 6 *Dublin Review* (October 1895).
- 7 For example F. C. S. Schiller, *Humanism* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1903), Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).
- 8 In the United Kingdom, H. J. Blackham (1903–2009) was by far the most productive and influential such person, active from the 1930s onwards (and, incidentally, still publishing in the 1990s). *The Plain View*, a humanist journal published from 1944 until the early 1960s, which Blackham edited, counted Julian Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Murray, and E. M. Forster amongst its most engaged contributors and associates – a stellar cast by any standards. The *Rationalist Annual* in the following decade performed a similar function and was on the desk of Albert Einstein at the time of his death.
- 9 Three proponents of humanism at this time in particular – Harold Blackham, Hector Hawton, and Margaret Knight – dwelled at length in their works on humanism in China and India as well as ancient Europe.
- 10 This is very much a history of the development of the use of the word 'humanism' and 'humanist' in English in general and in UK English in particular. Every country in which 'humanism' or an equivalent word has come to have the meaning assigned to it in this volume has its own distinctive history. The development of self-defined 'humanist' organizations in the United States, for example, owes much more to liberal religious groups than it did in the United Kingdom, and in Belgium it owes more to left-wing political movements than in either the UK or the US.
- 11 By 'qualifying adjectives' in what follows I mean those that seek to qualify the *content* of humanism. I am not intended to criticize adjectives that seek to qualify the cultural *context* of a particular example of humanism, such as 'Chinese humanism', 'British humanism in the eighteenth century', 'contemporary African

- American humanism' and so on. Indeed – as I am grateful to Professor Anthony Pinn for pointing out to me – such qualifying adjectives as these may actually be crucially important in allowing us to recognize and analyse the diverse manifestations of humanism in different societies.
- 12 The first instance I know of is J. H. Oldham in a BBC Radio talk of 1944, republished by Watts & Company in the same year.
 - 13 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).
 - 14 For example, in the US-based Society for Humanistic Judaism.
 - 15 See Ian MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) for a historical account of this movement in the United Kingdom.
 - 16 A significant initiative to revive this model outside the United States has occurred in the form of so-called 'Sunday Assemblies', which started in London in 2013, but for the moment remain small-scale enterprises and few in number. This may change, of course.
 - 17 The provision of 'community' in the sense of fellowship and connection with like-minded people, however, is still a purpose of most humanist organizations.
 - 18 In Richard L. Gregory, *Oxford Companion to the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
 - 19 In John Andrews, *The Economist Book of -isms: From Abolitionism to Zoroastrianism* (London: Wiley, 2010)
 - 20 In Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
 - 21 In David Crystal (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)
 - 22 In Edward Craig and Edward Craig (eds.), *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000)
 - 23 In Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 1st edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
 - 24 A good example is an Ipsos Mori poll of 2006, which found that about 36 per cent of UK residents had humanist beliefs in relation to science and morality (<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/190/Humanist-Beliefs.aspx>, accessed 28 October 2014).
 - 25 For example, the testimony of one humanist, interviewed in 2014: 'I first encountered religion at the age of five with prayers in school assembly, which I knew from the start had nothing to do with me but which remained a marginal mystery for years until I came across the humanist society at university and immediately recognized the label as referring to my own beliefs.'
 - 26 Byelaw 5.1 of the International Humanist and Ethical Union.
 - 27 I am grateful to David Pollock, a humanist and student of humanism for over fifty years, for the device of the Venn diagram in this context.
 - 28 Throughout this chapter I quote many men and women who were writing many decades ago. Although I am pleased to say that recent humanist authors mostly eschew the use of 'man', 'he', 'mankind', etc. to refer to humanity as a whole, these past writers do not.
 - 29 Jacob Bronowski, 'Science as a Humanistic Discipline', in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, 24/8 (1968).
 - 30 Bertrand Russell in *What I Believe: Broadcast Talks* (London: Porcupine Press, 1948), p. 17. (This is a published transcript of a BBC broadcast, not to be confused with the 1925 essay of the same name.)

- 31 Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 168.
- 32 Hector Hawton, *The Humanist Revolution* (London: Pemberton, 1963), p. 18.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 34 Albert Einstein, 'Science and Society' (originally 1935), repr. in *Einstein on Humanism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1993), p. 13.
- 35 H. J. Blackham, in id. (ed.), *Objections to Humanism* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 11.
- 36 J. B. S. Haldane in *What I Believe*, p. 50.
- 37 Jeremy Bentham quoted in Margaret Knight (ed.), *The Humanist Anthology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1961), p. 62.
- 38 M. N. Roy quoted in Margaret Knight (ed.), *The Humanist Anthology*, rev. edn. (London: Rationalist Press Association, 1995), p. 62
- 39 Bertrand Russell in *What I Believe*, p. 18.
- 40 Epicurus, 'Leading Doctrines', in *The Art of Happiness*, trans. George K. Strodach (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 174.
- 41 This worldliness of humanism is reflected in many of its cognates. In French *laïcité* is the 'lay' view – the view of one engaged in worldly existence; in India, *Lokayata* comes from the same root.
- 42 Jeaneane Fowler, *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 43 Eustace Haydon quoted in Fowler, *Humanism*, p. 108.
- 44 Stephen J. Gould, quoted in Warren Allen Smith (ed.), *Who's Who in Hell* (New York: Barricade Books, 2000), p. 450.
- 45 James Hemming, *Instead of God: A Pragmatic Reconsideration of Beliefs and Values* (London: Marion Boyers, 1986), p. 91.
- 46 Kenan Malik, 'What Is It To Be Human?', in Tony Gilland (ed.), *What Is It To Be Human?* (London: Academy of Ideas, 2001), p. 14.
- 47 To be sure, there are humanists who would not be happy with the phrasing here and would fight shy of human exceptionalism, preferring to stress that *Homo sapiens* is entirely of a piece with the rest of biology and a full account can be given of human beings in the register of natural science. Matt Ridley and Peter Atkins are two such whose work makes these points powerfully.
- 48 Norman Levitt, 'The Proper Study of Mankind', in Gilland (ed.), *What Is It To Be Human?*, p. 41.
- 49 For a broader and slightly different view of the attitudes to death that constitute a humanist approach, see Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 50 Bertrand Russell in *What I Believe*, p. 21.
- 51 Christopher Hitchens often quoted it towards the end of his life.
- 52 Bertrand Russell quoted in Knight (ed.), *The Humanist Anthology* (1961), p. 142.
- 53 One of the unintended consequences of modern medicine's ability to prolong our lives is that ever more of us will find ourselves in this position.
- 54 Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 69.
- 55 Blackham (ed.), *Objections to Humanism*, p. 122.
- 56 E. M. Forster, 'What I Believe' (from 1939), in id., *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1959), p. 84.
- 57 Marcus Aurelius quoted in Knight (ed.), *The Humanist Anthology* (1961), p. 21.
- 58 'Hereditry' by Thomas Hardy, in Bet Cherrington (ed.), *Facing the World: An Anthology of Poetry for Humanists* (London: Pemberton, 1989), p. 8.

- 59 Many volumes have been written on this theme but, for me, this sentiment was expressed with the greatest economy by my own humanist grandmother. At her 84-year-old husband's hospital bedside we were surrounded by old and dying men; she locked eyes with me and said simply, 'Enjoy your life – that's all I can say.'
- 60 'From the Hymn of Empedocles' by Matthew Arnold, in Cherrington (ed.), *Facing the World*, pp. 192–193.
- 61 Raymond Firth, *The Fate of the Soul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).
- 62 This is well illustrated by the form and content of humanist funerals, examined in this volume by Matthew Engelke (Chapter 12).
- 63 Chapters in this volume by Richard Norman (17), A. C. Grayling (5), Jeaneane Fowler (6 and 18), and others are all relevant to this aspect of humanism.
- 64 Karl Popper, 'Emancipation through Knowledge', in A. J. Ayer (ed.), *The Humanist Outlook* (London: Pemberton Publishing, 1968), p. 282.
- 65 Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 162–163.
- 66 Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus', in *The Art of Happiness*, trans. Strodach, p. 159.
- 67 Fowler, *Humanism*, p. 179.
- 68 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longman, 1859), p. 81.
- 69 Fowler, *Humanism*, p. 178.
- 70 Epicurus, 'Leading Doctrines' in *The Art of Happiness*, trans. Strodach, p. 177.
- 71 In E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), a great humanist novel of its time.
- 72 H. J. Blackham, *Humanism* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 69.
- 73 In Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948).
- 74 In the Russell–Einstein Manifesto, which was issued in London on 9 July 1955.
- 75 Nigel Warburton, 'Is Art Sacred?', in Ben Rogers (ed.), *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 46.
- 76 Norman, *On Humanism*, p. 154.
- 77 Richard Dawkins, 'The Sacred and the Scientist', in Rogers (ed.), *Is Nothing Sacred?*, pp. 135–137.
- 78 Simon Blackburn, 'Salvaging the Sacred', *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.
- 79 Kiernan Ryan, 'Homo Aestheticus', in Gilland (ed.), *What Is It To Be Human?*, p. 33.
- 80 Norman, *On Humanism*, p. 148.
- 81 Jim Herrick, *Humanism: An Introduction* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 2009), p. 92.
- 82 Fowler, *Humanism*, p. 60.
- 83 E. M. Forster quoted in Knight (ed.), *The Humanist Anthology* (1961), p. 154.
- 84 Mencius, *Kung-sun Ch'au*, book 2, pt. 1, ch. 6, trans. James Legge at <http://nothingistic.org/library/mencius/> (accessed 11 October 2014).
- 85 Margaret Knight, *Morals Without Religion and Other Essays* (London: Denis Dobson, 1955), pp. 49–50.
- 86 Margaret Knight, *Honest to Man* (London: Pemberton, 1974), p. 19.
- 87 Epicurus, 'Leading Doctrines', in *The Art of Happiness*, trans. Strodach, p. 178.
- 88 Ayer, 'Introduction', in *id.* (ed.), *The Humanist Outlook*, p. 7
- 89 Cyril Bibby, 'Towards a Scientific Humanist Culture', in Ayer (ed.), *The Humanist Outlook*, p. 16.
- 90 Herrick, *Humanism*, p. 32.

- 91 Hawton, *The Humanist Revolution*, p. 14.
- 92 Anthony O’Hear, ‘Yet More about Humanity’, in Gilland (ed.), *What Is It To Be Human?*, p. 46.
- 93 The paradox is that these words come at the start of his famous essay ‘What I Believe’, but his insistence that the humanist approach is not a ‘belief’ as such is typical of humanists, as we have already seen.
- 94 George Eliot in Thomas Pinney (ed.), *Essays of George Eliot* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 379.
- 95 Herrick, *Humanism*, p. 39.
- 96 Knight, *Honest to Man*, p. 9.
- 97 The whole of Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2012) is relevant here.
- 98 Jeremy Bentham is a good example of a humanist whose sympathies for other animals were counter-cultural in a society informed by religious ideas of human exceptionalism.
- 99 Chapter 14 in the present volume, by Alan Haworth, engages in a more in-depth way with the implications of humanism for politics. Here I merely observe that, concerned as it most frequently is with the regulation of human relationships on this Earth, politics is almost invariably a humanist enterprise. Theocracies, where they exist, are very much an exception to this general rule.
- 100 Fowler, *Humanism*, p. 175.
- 101 Ayer, ‘Introduction’, in id. (ed.), *The Humanist Outlook*, p. 8.
- 102 Blackham, *Objections to Humanism*, p. 26.
- 103 Quoted in Peter Cave, *Humanism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p. 22.
- 104 Chapter 5 of Jim Herrick’s *Humanism: An Introduction* is a good brief humanist account of religion; for the more serious scholar, any works by the great humanist anthropologist Raymond Firth repay attention.
- 105 And indeed, there is – to continue this particular example – a rich literature dealing with humanistic Jewishness.
- 106 Hawton, *The Humanist Revolution*, pp. 35–36.

Further Reading

In the last fifteen years there has been a growing number of excellent single-volume introductions to humanism in English. Chief among these are Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004; 2nd edn. 2012), Stephen Law, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), Peter Cave, *Humanism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), and A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Julian Baggini’s *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) should be included here in spite of its title: as the author himself says on p. 110, ‘the atheism which has been described in this book really is a form of humanism’. Jim Herrick’s *Humanism: An Introduction* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 2003; 2nd edn. 2009), like all the volumes just mentioned, is a book on humanism written by a humanist, but is different in that it is a book published from within the organized humanist movement. At the other end of the spectrum, Jeaneane Fowler’s

Humanism: Beliefs and Practices (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) is almost the only good academic book on humanism published in these years: an excellent volume, rich and dense with further references, which deserves a wider audience.

In the United Kingdom at least, the last thirty years of the twentieth century were ones of drought for good works about humanism. Many of the works on humanism published in the mid-twentieth century are still relevant. Harold Blackham's *Humanism* (London: Penguin, 1968), *The Human Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1953), and the volume *Objections to Humanism* (London: Penguin, 1965) that he edited are now classics of humanist thought. So too is Hector Hawton's *The Humanist Revolution* (London: Pemberton, 1963). Any works of Margaret Knight and James Hemming on morality (they were both active in the mid-twentieth century) are still relevant, and a number have been cited in the notes above. Two multi-contributor volumes from this period still repay attention: Julian Huxley (ed.), *The Humanist Frame* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961) and A. J. Ayer (ed.), *The Humanist Outlook* (London: Pemberton, 1968).

More recent edited collections include Anthony B. Pinn (ed.), *What Is Humanism and Why Does It Matter?* (Durham: Acumen, 2013); Dolan Cummings (ed.), *Debating Humanism* (London: Societas, 2006); Annemie Halsema and Douwe van Houten (eds.), *Empowering Humanity* (Utrecht: de Tijdstroom, 2002); and Ben Rogers (ed.), *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

Many humanist organizations, as part of their educational remit, also publish works on humanism, from pamphlets to substantial works, and their websites and the websites of their publishing arms will contain details. The four principal relevant websites in English are humanism.org.uk, newhumanist.org.uk, thehumanist.com, and american-humanist.org. The website of the International Humanist Ethical Union (IHEU) at iheu.org contains the details of many further humanist organizations globally.

There are books about humanism, and then there are humanist books. It is tempting to include a few here, but it would be invidious to name just a few. One of the consequences of the enormous cultural influence of humanism has been that so many books would fall into this category. To read the novels of E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, John Fowles, or Maureen Duffy; the philosophy of Meng Tzu, Bertrand Russell, David Hume, Epicurus, Mill, Wollstonecraft, or the Charvakas; the poetry of Matthew Arnold, Stevie Smith, Lucretius, or Omar Khayyam – one might mention thousands more storytellers, historians, orators, psychologists, scientists, dramatists, songwriters, sociologists, without even beginning to consider the paintings of the Dutch realists, the sculpture of classical Athens, the music of Delius, Britten, Tippett, or Brahms – all this is to encounter humanism and learn something of it.