

What is humanism?

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A more in-depth definition comes from the BHA (British Humanist Association): the word humanist has come to mean someone who

- trusts the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works, and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same

If this sounds like you, congratulations, you're a humanist.



"Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it."

—Christopher Hitchens

"If lightning is the anger of the gods, the gods are concerned mostly with trees."

—Lao Tse, sixth century BCE



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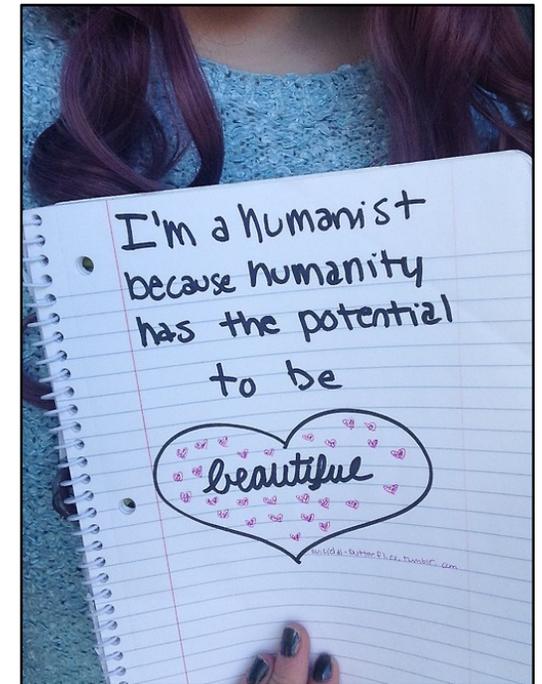


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The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.

— Bertrand Russell

History of humanism

Humanism is a fairly new name for a very old philosophy. The basic principles of humanism – skepticism of supernatural claims and an emphasis on living a fulfilling and ethical life without religion – have been embraced by a wide variety of thinkers in different cultures for thousands of years. But not until the twentieth century did the word “humanism” become the common term for this worldview.

Throughout history public expressions of humanist ideas have often been suppressed and destroyed, and, at other times, such ideas have probably been voiced only in private. Sometimes the strongest remaining indications of humanist thinking in a society are seen in the work of artists or in the arguments of apologists who are defending religious orthodoxy against the skeptics of the day. (An interesting example still quoted today is the Old Testament statement that “The fool hath said in his heart that there is no god” [Psalm 14]. This insult suggests that even in Bronze-age Jewish society, atheist thinking was prevalent enough to motivate religious teachers to attack it!)

Humanistic philosophy has a long history. Important humanist traditions include the great teachers and philosophical movements of Ancient China and India between two and three thousand years ago; the philosophies of classical Greece and Rome, which survived in the Muslim world during the European Dark Ages and Medieval period, finally returning to Europe in the Renaissance; and the flowering of scientific and humanist thought in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It is important to note humanism has no country or culture of origin, nor did it spring from any political view. Humanism is simply a product of us, the human animal, and our willingness to be honest with ourselves.

Evolving views

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The humanist reliance on science and common sense often means many people are humanists without realizing it! Hundreds of millions of people around the world agree with the humanist philosophy of living a happy and productive life based on reason and compassion. These tacit humanists reach similar conclusions without meeting like-minded people or reading particular texts. They work out their humanist life stance independently by learning what science has discovered, by examining supernatural claims, and by sharing in our universal human values.



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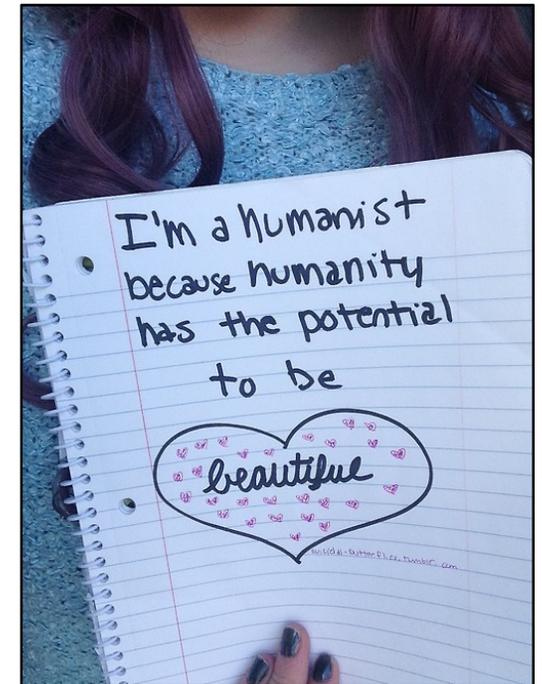


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