

# 5 minute guide

to

# HUMANISM

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## Introduction

Humanism is a collection of philosophical and ethical perspectives that emphasize the importance of human beings. Importance is given to individual thought or rationalism, and evidence or empiricism rather than on organized and established doctrine or faith.

It is a progressive philosophical thought that values man's ability and responsibility to lead lives of personal fulfillment to the greater good of humanity, even without supernatural beliefs or theism – the belief in the existence of a God.

Francesco Petrarca, an Italian poet and scholar, is regarded as the Father of Humanism, although there were other earlier humanists.

## History and Influences

Humanism has strong religious influences. The first occurrence of humanism was in the Gathas, a sacred text of Zoroastrianism. Man is a rational being with choice and power based on what he acquires from the God, Ahura Mazda. Man is morally responsible and accountable for the choices he makes, and he is judged upon death. The ideas of thought, action, responsibility and a creator who doesn't intervene inspired European Humanist thinkers like Voltaire and Montesquieu.

Lao Tzu of Taoism also gave humanistic views. The Tao, or known as the Way, is the force, path and principle behind all things. Lao Tzu taught people of freedom of thought based on their faith in the Tao. The emphasis on thought is shown on the practice of meditation, which helps in achieving clarity. And this clarity helps in turn in guiding their actions.

The ancient Greek philosophy also placed high importance on thoughts through explaining the world and the mysteries of life using critical thinking and reasoning. The Pre-Socratic philosophers rejected the explanations using mythologies, and supported discourses using reasoning. From his observations of the natural world, Thales of Miletus proposed that all things originated from water. For example, he reasoned out that plants grow when watered, and human beings come from sperm – which contains liquid, - and infants get their nourishment from the mothers' milk.

The early Islamic philosophy also proposed that all the knowledge needed for man's salvation comes from his own reason. Man is capable of reasoning, and knowledge is imperative at all times.

Humanism became a formal intellectual reform and school of thought during the Renaissance period. It was a response to the medieval scholastic education, which prepared men to be doctors, theologians or lawyers – who were taught from regulated textbooks. Humanism advanced their cause in the fields of grammar, history, poetry, rhetoric and moral philosophy by going back to the ancient, classical manuscripts of pre-Christianity.

The early Renaissance humanists had access to these ancient manuscripts. Petrarch worked for the Church, while his follower, Coluccio Salutati, was the Chancellor of Florence and had access to copying books.

The humanist approach to education was accepted in Italy. By the middle of the fifteenth century, many people from the upper classes of society had humanist educations. The Church also had humanists, who had the resources to gather large collections of texts. There were also several humanist Popes like Pope Pius II. Humanism helped in the translation and deeper understanding of the early Christian manuscripts.

Because of large-scale printing, the Renaissance Humanism spread to other parts of Europe like France, Holland, Germany and England. There have been different branches of Humanism that developed since then and influenced the art, literature, medicine, law and other fields of knowledge.

In 1952, the International Humanist and Ethical Union was established in Amsterdam to consolidate humanists, free-thinkers, agnostics, and atheists. A World Humanist Congress is held every three years. Its official symbol is the Happy Human, and is used by many Humanist organizations.

The word *humanist* came from the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian word *umanista*, which describes a scholar of classical Greek and Latin literature and its ethical philosophy.

## Types of Humanism

1. Christian Humanism – this is a philosophy about the nature of God based on Christian beliefs. It is the consolidation of humanist principles and Christian beliefs. It holds that individual freedom and human dignity are components of Christian doctrines and practices. It advocates personal effort as a way to achieve fulfillment.
2. Cultural Humanism – this is the philosophy that knowledge comes from rational thought and experimentation. This branch of humanism came from ancient Greece and Rome. This became the foundation of scientific method.
3. Literary Humanism – this is the branch of humanism that deals with the study of humanities: literature, philosophy, history and languages.
4. Philosophical Humanism – this is the school of thought that centers on the needs and interests of mankind.
5. Renaissance Humanism – this is a cultural and intellectual movement that renewed the interest in classical studies. This promoted the idea that the truth can be discovered by human efforts.
6. Religious Humanism – this is like Secular Humanism, except that it is carried out in a religious setting with rituals and fellowship.
7. Secular Humanism – this is philosophy that promotes the idea that humanity is the measure of all things there are. This is strictly non-religious based, and has its roots from the philosophy of Rationalism and the free thought movement.

## Beliefs

Humanism does not have an institutionalized set of beliefs. Prime importance is given on rational thinking to arrive at the truth. Here are the non-religious beliefs of humanism.

1. The belief that man is the measure of all things. Man is the highest entity. Thus, humanists do not believe in the existence of God.
2. The material world is all that exists – there is no God, no supernatural beings like angels and demons, no after life, and no spiritual dimension.
3. The dualism of the mind and body should not be accepted because there is no separation of the mind and body.
4. The universe is self-existent and not created by any God or goddess.
5. The evolution is a scientific fact and the only explanation for the existence of life. Man evolved through natural ways and not created by God.
6. Man is the only one responsible for the actualization of his dreams and aspirations.
7. Man has the full responsibility for the world – the political systems, environment, living conditions, etc – and that there is no God who will intervene and save man from disaster or unfortunate circumstances.
8. Man can build a better world for himself and his children by using reason, freedom of speech and expression, tolerance, and respect for individual rights.
9. There are no ethical and moral codes that are inspired by God or other supernatural beings. The codes are created by man based on his own critical reasoning, needs, interests, and experiences.
10. The promise of salvation or eternal damnation is harmful and only an illusion.
11. They believe in democracy and individual freedom of expression, inquiry and action. Thus, discrimination, bigotry, hatred and censorship should be rejected.
12. Man is a social being, and finds his purpose and meaning through relationships.
13. Man's purpose in life is not pre-determined. He creates his own purpose and finds the meaning of his own life.
14. Working and acting for the benefit of society increases individual happiness and fulfillment.
15. Knowledge comes from observation, analysis, and experimentation. Convictions and beliefs should be tested by the individual, and not accepted simply based on faith. There should be a continuous search for knowledge and truth because new knowledge and experience can change perceptions.
16. They believe in cultivating moral excellence through common moral ethics of integrity, honesty, altruism, responsibility, and truthfulness. These moral principles are tested through experiences and consequences.
17. They take a skeptical stance on untested new knowledge, but are open to new ideas and knowledge.
18. They believe in the separation of the state and the church.

## Practices

Over the years, humanists came up with creeds to follow. Some humanists developed alternatives to the biblical 10 Commandments. Here are the alternative 10 Commandments and their proponents.

A. From Richard Dawkins, in the book *'The God Delusion'*:

1. Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.
2. In all things, strive to cause no harm.
3. Treat your fellow human beings, your fellow living things, and the world in general with love, honesty, faithfulness and respect.
4. Do not overlook evil or shrink from administering justice, but always be ready to forgive wrongdoing freely admitted and honestly regretted.
5. Live life with a sense of joy and wonder.
6. Always seek to be learning something new.
7. Test all things; always check your ideas against the facts, and be ready to discard even a cherished belief if it does not conform to them.
8. Never seek to censor or cut yourself off from dissent; always respect the right of others to disagree with you.
9. Form independent opinions on the basis of your own reason and experience; do not allow yourself to be led blindly by others.
10. Question everything.

B. From A.C. Grayling, in the book *'The Good Book'*:

1. Love well
2. Seek the good in all things
3. Harm no others
4. Think for yourself
5. Take responsibility
6. Respect nature
7. Do your utmost
8. Be informed
9. Be kind
10. Be courageous

## Views on Contemporary Issues

### 1. Abortion

Humanists take the stance of pro-choice. They live good lives without subscribing to organized religious beliefs, but rather use reason and experience when deciding about moral and ethical issues. Humanists would consider the evidence, the possible consequences, and the wishes and rights of everyone involved, before making a decision that would be the kindest and least harmful to everyone. The most important considerations here are happiness and suffering.

### 2. Homosexuality

Humanists are liberal thinkers and reject the religious creed about sexual orientation. They believe in the freedom of expression and work for equality and respect of the sexes. For example, the British Humanist Association campaigns for equality in marriage, regardless of sexual orientation. The American Humanist Organization also fights for the basic and fundamental rights of gays and lesbians, including the right to marry.

### 3. Capital Punishment

Humanists do not support capital punishment. They value all lives and support individual human rights. They believe that the rights of the accused or found guilty are as important as the rights of the victim. They believe in elevating human dignity and protection for everyone. Also taking into consideration the possibility of a wrong verdict or mistrial, humanists reject capital punishment.

## Books

There are many books on Humanism, written since the Renaissance Humanism. Here are the important books on the subject of Humanism throughout history.

1. Existentialism and Humanism – written by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1946, this book talks about the movement of existentialism that has its roots in humanism. He asserted the key thought of existentialism, which is existence precedes essence. This means that only man can dictate his essence and should be responsible for his actions and its consequences.
2. Humanism: An Introduction – written by Jim Herrick in 2005, this book is about the history, principles, and practice of humanism.
3. The Good Book – written by A. C. Grayling in 2011, this book serves as the Humanist or Secular Bible. This is an alternative to religious texts and contains summaries of philosophies from different periods of the history of civilization.

## Famous Humanists

1. Albert Einstein – physicist and developed the Theory of Relativity
2. Bertrand Russell – philosopher and mathematician
3. Jonas Salk – medical researcher and developed the polio vaccine
4. Abraham Maslow – psychologist and developed Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which lead to self-actualization
5. Carl Rogers – psychologist and one of the founders of humanistic approach to psychology
6. Gloria Steinem – feminist and socio-political activist
7. Isaac Asimov – author, biochemistry professor and served as president of the American Humanist Association
8. Julian Huxley – philosopher and first UNESCO Director General
9. Brock Chisholm – physician and first WHO (World Health Organization) Director General
10. A. Philip Randolph – human rights activist

## Timeline

1304	Petrarch was born. He was the founder of Renaissance Humanism and was regarded as the greatest scholar of his time.
1360-1375	Humanism was developed and had flourished in Italy.
1420-1527	Humanism spread to other parts of Italy.
1480-1520	Humanism spread to other parts of Europe like France, England, and Germany.
1516	Sir Thomas More wrote the book <i>Utopia</i> , which offered a model society based on man’s nature and reason. He proposed that the beginning and the end of politics is humanity.
1517	The large-scale printing was developed, which resulted to the spread of Humanism.
1570	Roger Ascham wrote the book <i>The Schoolmaster</i> , which outlined a comprehensive program about humanistic education.
1677	The book <i>Ethics</i> was published. It was written by Baruch Spinoza and a criticism of Rene Descartes’ theory of the dualism of the mind and the body. He argued that the mind and the body are just one thing.
Early 17 <sup>th</sup> century	Francis Bacon asserted that passions should be objects of investigations.
June 1776	Thomas Jefferson drafted the US Declaration of Independence, and he credited two humanists – Aristotle and Cicero – as his sources.
1853	The British Humanist Religious Association was established in London.
1929	Charles Francis Potter established the First Humanist Society of New York. Among its advisors are Julian Huxley, Albert Einstein, John Dewey and Thomas Mann.
1933	The <i>Humanist Manifesto</i> was published and became the groundwork for secular Humanism.
1941	The American Humanist Association was established.
1952	The International Humanist and Ethical Union was established in Amsterdam. It is the umbrella organization of humanist, free-thinkers, agnostics, and atheists.



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