

Modern Rational Humanism

Rational Humanism, the modern manifestation of the humanist school of thought, rejects belief in God altogether. This is largely because Rational Humanism emerged from a background of profound scientific advancement, including the discoveries of the Enlightenment (seventeenth–eighteenth centuries) and the Industrial Revolution (nineteenth century). In particular, Rational Humanism is founded upon Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which went a long way towards undermining the traditional creation tenet of the Judeo-Christian religions. Rational Humanism, therefore, explicitly rejects notions of truth being found via religious revelation and instead makes an optimistic appeal to human reason and science as the most reliable means of investigating our world and our destiny.

The earliest document (Humanist Manifesto I) contains 15 affirmations, including the explicit denial of a creator; a belief in evolution; the denial of the immortality of the soul and the belief that humanistic education will eventually dispel harmful ignorance from society. The 34 signatories to Humanist Manifesto I included John Dewey and R. Lester Mondale. Forty years later it was revised and updated, with the Humanist Manifesto II containing 17 affirmations that are more strongly worded and more detailed, though rather less optimistic in tone than the original. These include a statement of no confidence in religious traditions; the basing of ethics and morals upon human experience; the elevation of human reason and intelligence; a commitment to democracy and the need for global cooperation. This later document, in particular, completely encapsulates the position of Rational Humanism. The signatories included Isaac Asimov, Julian Huxley and BF Skinner. A further update in 2003, which included 21 Nobel Laureates as signatories, revised the earlier documents down to six affirmations, reiterating the original concepts. page 266

Can I outline the position of Scientific Humanism?

Modern Rational Humanism ←
born in Age of Enlightenment
Industrial Revolution and
influenced by Theory of Evolution.

Humanist Manifesto = important document.

Science over reason

ideas behind humanism

forced sterilisation, so as to help create a new, perfected type of human being. The International Humanist Ethical Union upheld Huxley's theory in spite of a public outcry, although it has never been officially implemented. A less controversial example of the ideological framework of Scientific Humanism in practice is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). A specialist body of the United Nations, UNESCO's role is to facilitate the development of third world countries through educational and scientific assistance. page 266

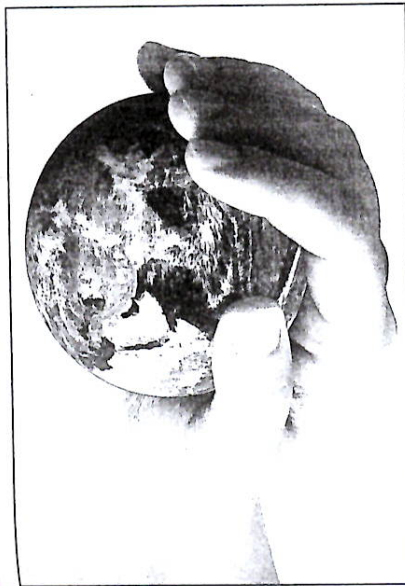


Figure 8.9 Many followers of Humanism believe that the creation of an earthly 'paradise' is achievable.

8.3.4 Scientific Humanism

Background to Scientific Humanism

Scientific Humanism is closely connected in origin and thought to Rational Humanism but is based on the over-riding view that science, rather than human reason, is the ultimate authority. The American researcher and scientist Edward Osborne Wilson coined the term 'Scientific Humanism' as '... the only worldview compatible with science's growing knowledge of the real world and the laws of nature'. This view was echoed by the famous humanist, Corliss Lamont, who called Scientific Humanism '... a naturalistic philosophy that rejects all supernaturalism and relies primarily upon science and reason, democracy and human compassion'. The so-called founder of Scientific Humanism, Edward Osborne Wilson, also espoused the view that only science would be able to find the solutions that would ultimately improve the human condition.

'Paradise on Earth'

Indeed, many adherents of the Scientific Humanist worldview maintain that it is only through science that utopia will ever be achieved. They believe that the attainment of human mastery over the natural world through physics, chemistry and biology allied with other factors such as politics and education will eventually bring about this 'paradise on Earth'. A leading proponent of this view is the eugenics scientist and signatory to the Humanist Manifesto II, Julian Huxley. Huxley controversially advocated for the encouraged breeding of people with 'desirable' qualities and the discouragement from breeding of 'defective' people, even via

Can I discuss how agnosticism determines the aspirations and behaviour of individuals?

8.3.5 Aspirations and behaviour—agnosticism

Attitudes towards agnosticism

Agnosticism tends to be viewed with a degree of suspicion, by many members of the public, who may find it hard to understand that some individuals can have a firm sense of morality without also believing in God. However, also like atheism, agnosticism believes that God is not required in order for human beings to be moral. To defend this position, they tend to adopt the same arguments as atheists i.e. that the human race is inherently mostly moral and ethical, in the same way that some animal societies are, especially primates. How do chimpanzees or gorillas, for example, who share 98–99 percent of DNA with humans, understand about acts of self-sacrificing love when they have not received revelations directly from God? In defending their worldview, agnostics may also cite instances where faith-based morality has inspired behaviours and deeds that are anything but moral and ethical, such as suicide bombings and terrorism, witch hunts, the Crusades etc.

Rather than conform to religious codes of morality, therefore, which tend to be absolute, or 'black and white' in tone, agnostics often subscribe to the theory of moral relativism (although it is important to note that approaches to morality are as diverse as the individuals themselves). Moral relativism means that there is no one answer to ethical questions such as abortion, euthanasia or war, for example, but a 'sliding scale' of answers dependent upon such variables as the individual(s) in question, the time, place, situation and so on. Agnostics may also adopt the view