

# Quandaries in Humanism: A Comparative Review of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

*The term “humanism” is widely used in, especially, the liberal arts and social sciences. Yet, it does not carry the same meaning in all contexts. The problem with the term is that sometimes it is used so confusingly or even contradictorily, that one finds it difficult determining the actual meaning of humanism. It is for this reason that a research that clarifies the meaning of humanism becomes very important. This article attempts such a clarification. It traces the origin and development of humanism (particularly, in Western philosophy where humanism as a philosophical movement originated), and shows why the implications of some definitions or conceptions of humanism are not only mistaken but also run counter to the true import of humanism. It argues, for instance, in support of the view that “religious humanism” is an oxymoron.*

**Keywords:** *Humanism, Quandaries, liberal arts, social sciences*

## INTRODUCTION

Humanism could be defined as any philosophy that aims at the promotion of human well-being in *this* life. This definition is what this article seeks to maintain as the core definition of humanism, even as it endorses Paul Kurtz’s (1973) statement that the term “humanism” is now used in scientific, atheistic, religious and ethical senses. For the order that it would bring to this article, the numerous definitions that are identified in this research are grouped under the four senses mentioned by Kurtz (1973). What appears to account for the varied conceptions of humanism is that different people emphasize different aspects of the promotion of human well-being and, thus, employ what they each consider to be the best approach to promote the well-being of the human being in their activities.

In this regard, advocates of each category claim to uphold the central humanistic tenet that “they are *for man*, that they wish to actualize human potentialities, enhance human experience and contribute to happiness, social justice, democracy and peaceful world... that they are opposed to authoritarian or totalitarian forces that dehumanize man ... profess compassion for human suffering and commitment to the unity of mankind (Kurtz, 1973). Indeed, these

are some of the major concerns of humanists. It needs to be stressed, however, that from the above, humanists are also philosophers who must be concerned about the freedom of man. The element of freedom is drawn from the idea that humanists are “opposed to” authoritarian and totalitarian forces, whose habit it is to deny humans their basic freedom. It would, however, not be correct for anybody to suppose that my emphasis on freedom here is an attempt to suggest that freedom is the determinant of what is humanistic. What is rather the case is that, since it will be quite difficult, if not impossible, for a human being to personally protect and promote his or her interest without being free, anything that infringes on the freedom of humans is totally rejected by humanists. In this respect, freedom is a means to an end, so far as humanism is concerned. It may, nevertheless, be objected that freedom could be an end for humanists who, for instance, are striving for the “release” of some people from any form of domination, especially from the “claws” of totalitarian or authoritarian forces, in order that happiness is brought to the victims.

To this, it could be responded that even though it cannot be denied that some degree of happiness is brought to these victims, in order to make their “world” a more happier one – which, is strongly believed, would be the wish of humanists in this situation – it would require that the victims make efforts after their “emancipation” to achieve progress in their general conditions of living. But, it is quite impossible for them to succeed in this, even if they have the will to succeed, without their continual living in freedom. This implies that it is not for the mere sake of being free that humanists are concerned about human freedom, but rather it has got to do more with what free men can and must do with their freedom. Therefore, the concept of freedom is also crucial in the philosophy of humanism.

### **Types of Humanism**

This article has identified a number of definitions of humanism, but has discussed them under the four broad categories mentioned by Paul Kurtz. In his opinion, humanists could profess any of the following:

*a) Atheistic Humanism:* There are some philosophers who think that humanism is strictly an atheistic philosophy. Since humanists in general advance among other things, that a person’s right to be free springs absolutely from his human beingness, but not by the decree of any supernatural being, it has become quite easy for some philosophers to describe humanism and all humanists as anti-religion, anti-God and, thus, as atheistic. Humanists are seen, especially in the West, as revolutionists who would do anything from merely disagreeing with religious views, to being violent toward men of God, in order to weaken

the authority of religion. No wonder they were quite recently described as “people who met in scout halls and sang hymns about not believing in God (Herick, 2001). And, even when some humanists insist that their faith is religious, they are still considered “a militant minority whose righteous indignation and confessed reasonableness prompt them to confront organized religious bodies that cherish theistic beliefs and supernatural devotions (H.W. Schneider in Kurtz, 1973). Moreover, it is a real wonder to Miriam Allen deFord how a humanist could claim to be a true religionist; she says “Religious Humanism (pace the ‘liberal religionists’) is to me merely a contradiction in terms” for, religion, in all matters, gives consideration to the supernatural while humanism gives precedence to man.

So, she concludes that “bluntly and undiplomatically, Humanism ...must be atheistic or it is not Humanism (Kurtz, 1973). This view is closely shared by Marvin Zimmerman who contends that “although their intellectual convictions about God are identical with, and constitute the very foundations of, the convictions of those who call themselves atheists,” humanists are reluctant to call themselves atheists, and he thinks, this in the long run will only warrant their “being described as confused, ambiguous, evasive, hypocritical and dishonest” (Kurtz, 1973). On this showing, credit must be given to the bravery of Sartre, who identifies himself as a proponent of what he calls “existential atheism,” by which term he emphasizes human freedom by describing the human being or “human reality” (in Heideggerian terms) as “a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept,” since God does not exist let alone determine a human being’s nature or life in advance (Sartre, 1957). However, it is my view that, unless otherwise stated like in Sartre’s case, it is technically not difficult to suppose that all philosophies about human action, including humanism, whose basis deviate from the thesis of the supremacy of the will of a supreme being is atheistic. An example is deFord’s characterization of humanism as atheistic because “a philosophy founded on the agreement that ‘man is the measure of all things’ can have no room for belief in the intervention of non-material postulates” (Kurtz, 1973).

However, the shortcoming of such a supposition is that to say that there is a subject-matter in the world of humans, such as human freedom or, generally, the enhancement of human well-being, that should not require the involvement of any supreme being but humans alone, is not to necessarily assert that no supreme being exists; only that divine will or involvement does not matter. One can make sense of her comments in this and the above paragraphs in only one way: what she seems to be thinking is that religion does not deny that what is good for humankind should be whatever God requires. And, since in humanism the concern is humankind alone, she seems to assume,

just like Zimmerman, that the will and “authority” of God, which, she thinks, are indicative of or implicit in His existence, are denied simultaneously with His existence.

**b) *Scientific Humanism:*** This humanism wants humans to focus on the natural world. With respect to the pursuit of good actions, it attempts to avoid being dead to human interests, by advocating the use of the evaluative method that one “accepts as ultimate in all matters of fact and real experience the appeal to the evidence of experience alone (Anthony Flew in Kurtz, 1973). For this reason, a behaviourist, for instance, would mean by humanist anyone “concerned for the future of mankind” as a result of his environmental influences, while humanistic psychologists maintain that “a person can transcend his environment ...that he determines what environmental forces will act upon him – in a word, that he has free choice (B. F. Skinner, in Kurtz, 1973). Also in this category is naturalistic humanism which, in the words of Corliss Lamont (1957), regards humanism as “a world-view in which nature is everything, in which there is no supernatural...”

**c) *Ethical Humanism:*** Reason as a natural endowment is exclusively to be used by humans to search and identify, on their own, what choices they ought to make in order to satisfy their needs or promote their interest. No other justification for human freedom or impediment to this freedom is good news. Ethical humanism, which is largely founded on this feature of humans, urges the human being to “learn to exercise a high ethical policy toward the earth on which he lives, toward the multitudinous plants and animals inhabiting it with him, toward his fellow humans – yes, and toward himself as well – or cease to survive (M. deFord, in Kurtz, 1973). One can thus mention socialist humanism, which springs from the ideology of communism – that is, the socio-economic philosophy that says that state control of the means of production ensures that the human being works not above his or her abilities and needs. Socialist humanism considers the making of god of private property, and the resultant pursuit of it by humans as anti-human because it makes them “slaves” of private capital, and alienates them from themselves. In other words, it makes humans concentrate on private property instead of on themselves. Finally, Gyekye (1995) observes that the basis of Akan morality is humanism.

**d) *Religious Humanism:*** Attempts have been made to suggest that humanism is applicable to religion, or that religion is a form of humanism. In the opinion of, for example, Western religious scholars and theologians who share this view, religion is an important part of the life of the human being and of humanism.

In the words of Pope Paul VI, “true humanism must be Christian (See Pope Paul VI's Christmas Message 25th Dec., 1969; as also mentioned in Kurtz, 1973 p. 173 - 174). Indeed, what the Pope is suggesting now is quite contrary to the impression created earlier in this article that humanism is anti-religious. Talking about good life for humankind, humanistic theism requires that humans be “as God-like as possible” because in the words of Gardner Williams “...God is the principle or essence of the highest good. Man’s first duty is to God . . . To repudiate it in practice is moral depravity. To deny it is atheism. But it is neither (Aristotle, 1992). The idea behind humanistic theism is that with this attitude toward God, humans would be promoting their well-being. Also in this category is theistic existentialism which aims at getting humans over the hurdles established by organized religion in order to, in effect, free them from all intermediaries that stand between them and their object of worship: God, to be precise.

Humanism is undeniably applied in the senses discussed above. We can infer from our earlier discussions that atheistic humanism, scientific humanism and ethical humanism make the issue of God irrelevant in humanism. In the West, for example, religion, as practised in that culture, is perceived to be where the idea of God is encouraged, so, religion is treated likewise by these non-religious humanists. However, since the goals of humanism are extremely cherishable and attractive, some Western theologians and religious-minded scholars have advanced various arguments to bring God and religion, into the sphere of humanism. But, do the views of these theologians and scholars meet the true, philosophical standard of humanism? Can their views be incorporated into the philosophical sense of humanism? These issues will be examined in some detail shortly.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that humanism is practically a very broad or multi-faceted concept. But this synoptic account of the casts of humanism does not mean that the choice of the definition in the first paragraph of the introduction is inappropriate. The reason is that the definition appears for what gives the true meaning of humanism, that is, humanism in the philosophical sense. The evidence for this is embedded in history such as in the origin or development of the philosophy of humanism, in Western thought, as essentially a rationality-related one.

### **The Philosophy of Humanism in Western History**

The development of the concept of humanism has a lot to do with the question of rationality which is deemed by some philosophers to be the most distinguishing feature of the human being. Major Western philosophers who identify humans

with rationality include Aristotle (1992). Reason is portrayed by such philosophers not just as the sole preserve of humans but that humans are mostly guided by it in all they do. The argument, it appears, is that since humanism places the human being at the centre of everything, for anything to be humanistic, that thing should be capable of being justified by his or her naturally endowed faculty of reason or should be a product of a rational deliberation – a means through which the human being mainly and “reliably” promotes his or her interest.

This way, rationality is presented as not having an opposing relation with humanism, or as a concept readily acceptable in humanism, while anything irrational – such as religious beliefs – has no place in humanism. That this is the correct interpretation of the conviction of humanists on the relation between rationality and humanism is quite evident in the way humanism as a philosophy is thought to have begun, in the way this philosophy has progressed over the ages, and in what objective the pioneer humanists and their most loyal followers sought, and have been seeking, to achieve. The fact that humanism has now come to denote several other things in Western thought does not change these facts.

From the moment when the fifth Century Athenian Sophist, Protagoras, said that “man is the measure of all things,” he has been regarded as a true humanist (Paul Edwards, 1967). Paul Edwards (1967) statement is discussed as a humanistic philosophy. Socrates substantially changes the focus of thinkers in Ancient Greece from cosmology and, in some sense, the gods to man. This can, for example, be seen in his famous saying: "Know Thyself". Although different interpretations have been given to this assertion of his. “Man is the measure”, because the goodness or rightness or value of everything is to be measured by how well it affects the human being, or by the extent of concentration the issue under consideration gives to the human being, and to human interests. The full statement “man is the measure of all things” also requires that the human being be made the centre of being and knowledge.

Some philosophers have tended to interpret Protagoras differently. For instance, John Burnet in his *Greek Philosophy* (1950) indicates his support for Plato and Demokritos in doubting the view that in his statement "man, the measure," Protagoras meant by man, "the concept of man," instead, he seems to think that by the statement above Protagoras might have meant the relativity of human points of view. It is disagreed because the intellectual revolution against supernaturalism which the Sophists were actively involved in points more to the likelihood of Protagoras' humanity and not relativistic concerns. In addition, this philosophy of Protagoras could mean that humans, being rational creatures, should be left free to “measure” or, in actual fact, decide what things are good for them and what are not. It does not really matter that his statement

is necessarily about the relativity of human points of view, but rather, it could be seen as an attempt to distinguish the human being as one who can pursue his interests through intelligent procedure. This is also an indication of the idea that reason occupies a prominent position in his humanism. Not only this, it is also to be noted that since the Sophists in fifth Century Athens were, among other issues, concerned with staging a revolution against religion, seeking to make humans, their interests and their world paramount, while, at the same time, making religious beliefs about the will of the gods and beliefs about the spiritual world of the gods doubtful and irrelevant, his humanism had much to do with using reason to eliminate religion from the human-oriented.

The prominence of reason in humanism, and reason as an effectual tool for curtailing the influence of religion on humans, was also maintained in medieval humanism. For instance, the Renaissance movement was regarded as a humanist one because it made the rational human being the determinant of his or her own destiny. The movement came into being because humans, in the Middle Ages, was observed to have in diverse ways lost their natural freedom to take control of their lives, particularly under the authority of the church and the Pope. And, the movement's attempts to reverse the then unappealing situation wrought the need for what, in ancient Greece, was referred to as "*paideia*: the education favoured by those who considered the liberal arts to be instruments, that is, disciplines proper to man which differentiate him from the other animals (Edwards, 1967).

In other words, the humanists thought it prudent to employ the study of the liberal arts as a means of equipping man to revolt against religion, and its other-worldly inclinations. This was indeed the case because, as confirmed elsewhere, "European humanists during the Renaissance had sought to shift intellectual authority from the church and the Papacy and toward ancient humanistic sources (Eze, 1997). However, that the struggle was, in a sense, also against the authority of the empire and feudalism. The shift toward *paideia* was also due to the belief that this form of education had a smashing success rate at filling humans with the "spirit of freedom," which they needed (at that time, apparently, to promote his well-being) in both society and nature.

However, the ideas of the inborn rationality of humans and the subsequent resort to *paideia* for the restoration of the spirit of freedom in humans initially sound a bit confusing. For, one would like to ask: is it not mainly by reason that humans know? And, is it not because of their intelligence that they are deemed to know what is good for them and what is not? Since either question can be answered yes, the final possible question that demands a careful answer could be this: if humans are rational by nature – and for that matter know where, when and by what their welfare is enhanced – and is thus

not expected to accept what they know is not in their interest, then, why again did they have to resort to or require *paideia* to fill them with the spirit to free himself from an anti-human situation? By this question in mind, a situation where the place involved time and the impact of the anti-human activities in question are directly experienced by humans.

Is it possible for the human being who would naturally like to be free not to want to be a free being, or not to “be freedom”? – to borrow Sartre’s phrase. To start with, it is a feature of the human being not to want freedom, unless it can be affirmed that freedom is not one of the goods of (the rational) human being. In spite of this, the case for *paideia* as something which the human being needed in order to be filled with the spirit to free himself or herself from the authority of the church should not lead one to erroneously doubt or deny the innate rationality of the human being. This is because in the practical life of man where *paideia* was seen as useful, the way he or she behaves – whether rationally, irrationally, be decided for, or even be influenced through *paideia* – does not alter the fact that the human being has a rational disposition. If the human being could be said to have indeed required the influence of *paideia* to make some right choices, then, this, at most, can only lead one to raise questions about whether the human being does always act in accordance with his or her rational nature (since *paideia* would not have been required if the human being could always act rationally) and not, rather, whether he or she is indeed rational by nature.

However, one can question whether man really ever lost his unquenchable quest for freedom? Since when did he lose that spirit to warrant the Renaissance humanists’ proclaimed need for *paideia*? *Paideia* really did the trick in filling man with the spirit of freedom as such. A more appropriate way to describe the situation is that *paideia* was a method of education that encouraged the manifestation of the spirit of freedom that man is naturally filled with. Even so, historical records bring to the fore the achievements of the Renaissance humanists, and credit them with the liberation of man from the authority of religion, something they achieved, generally, through “joining the revolution against the other worldliness of the medieval church (Janaro, 1975).

It is this same idea of avoiding religion and its other-worldly doctrines and prescriptions that appears to have motivated some modern Western humanist philosophers to argue that a true discussion of humanism must be the one that necessarily includes the rejection of religion. To effectively achieve this, they would also place reason at the base of humanism. A case in point is Guthrie’s view that the intellectual revolution in the fifth Century Athens, that is, at the time of Socrates, which was partly led by the Sophists, was “one of conscious reaction against religion, of humanism in the full sense (Guthrie, 1965).

Due to these reasons, it is always difficult for Western philosophers to define humanism without telling what it cannot be or what it does not include – that is, religion and the supernatural orientation or issues that religion presents or represents. Evidence of this can also be found in the naturalistic definition of Lamont, which states that “...Humanism, in its most accurate philosophical sense, implies a world-view in which Nature is everything, in which there is no supernatural (Lamont, 1957). The issue of religion or its supernatural orientation is understandably brought into the definition of humanism because it is true that sometimes, as it is in this instance, one can describe a thing more accurately when one spells out what that thing is not. A definition of this kind, just to clarify my argument, can be seen in the Dictionary’s definition of the word “species” in its biological sense. One can consider the value of the underlined portion of the definition of the afore-mentioned word, given as:

*The major subdivision of a genus or subgenus, regarded as a basic category of biological classification, composed of related individuals that resemble one another, are able to breed among themselves, but are not able to breed with members of another species (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary 1996).*

We see that, that which is not true of “species”, the underlined, is so crucial that without it, or if it is negated, we will either make “species” vague, or will not be talking about “species”. To deal with the underlined, then, is logically to deal with what is part of the definition of “species.” Similarly, what humanism cannot include – that is, religion – being so crucial, thus becomes an indispensable part of the definition of Western humanism. We can infer from the discussions so far that humanism, as evident in all ages, is a philosophy that was essentially developed to oppose religion, because of the latter’s perceived supernatural or other-worldly inclination and doctrines. This is the sense in which humanism can be given its true philosophical meaning.

And, the concerns of these mainstream humanists, adequately summarized become nothing different from the definition of humanism which is the most appropriate; that it is a philosophy that promotes the well-being of the human being in this life. And, by ‘this life’, it is meant life in the physical or natural world. One objection that comes up is why there is what is today referred to as “religious humanism” in the West. For, the fact that this “humanism” is contrary to the true sense of humanism is well captured in the following observation of Kurtz:

*Originally Humanism was a revolutionary weapon in the hands of free thinkers who demanded freedom from authoritarian ecclesiastical control. Subsequently,*

*Humanism was refined and expanded to express a this-worldly concern for human happiness and for a just and humane society. Today its bitter critics are apparently reconciled with it, for they express agreement with its moral excellencies. Humanism has reached its nadir in that almost everyone pays a lip service to its ideals and few will dare admit that they do not have a humanistic concern. A graphic illustration of this was the message from Pope Paul VI wherein he proclaims that... 'People today talk of Humanism...without Christ there is no true Humanism... True Humanism must be Christian' (Kurtz, 1973 p. 173 - 174).*

In the opinion of Kurtz and other Western philosophers who share his view, the Pope's position would be correct only if he can deny the statement that *human beings will best serve their interests if they obey God and do only things that can send them to Heaven other than Hell*. But it is these ideas of God's will, Heaven and Hell, and other other-worldly prescriptions of religion (which the Pope cannot reject) that mainstream Humanists outlaw or forbid in humanism. Indeed, to associate with Kurtz's position and to insist that in its original philosophical sense, Western humanism is anti-religious.

From the discussion above, it can also be seen that humanism is not only a conceptual problem. It has practical dimension and relevance. Humanism provides some guidelines with which humans can act and can be assessed. The concept of humanism has its own means of deciding or making some actions of humans acceptable and others inappropriate, thereby providing a general framework for a human being to know what, in relation to the promotion of his or her interest (or the interests of others), is required of him or her and that which is not. And, in telling how man can pursue that which is in his interest, humanists resort to the rational method.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown different definitions of humanism. It has also argued that the proper understanding of humanism can only be attained by considering the historical background of humanism. From the historical perspective, therefore, the aim of humanists and their optimism about the human potential is brought to light. This can, for instance, be seen in their position that with a naturally endowed faculty of reason, humans should be able to improve upon their lives, make their only world (the natural world) better, or generally, promote their well-being. The point is that there is no need for humans to go through any difficulties in life with the hope of receiving some benefits in a next life. This original sense of humanism encourages humans to concentrate on this world

alone against the teaching of religion (particularly, of Christianity which Western humanists largely rose against in the past). This article has, indeed, confirmed the view that humanism, in its core Western sense, is a this-worldly philosophy that necessarily excludes religion.

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