

# SECULAR HUMANISM

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## Secular Humanism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy, Ethics, Cultural Studies, Political Science

### 1. Core Definition

**Secular Humanism** is a comprehensive philosophical life stance that centers on human agency, reason, and ethics as the sole means for understanding the universe and determining moral values. It is distinguished from broader humanism by its explicit rejection of all supernatural beliefs, religious dogma, and divinely revealed truths as the foundation for ethical conduct or decision-making. Adherents posit that human beings are fully capable of leading meaningful, ethical, and functional lives, contributing positively to society and achieving personal fulfillment without recourse to God, scripture, or any transcendent authority. This perspective elevates scientific inquiry and critical thinking as indispensable tools for solving human problems and fostering flourishing, emphasizing the practical application of reason in both private and public spheres. The core tenet is the commitment to humanity's unique capacity for self-determination and moral responsibility in a naturalistic universe.

The definition of Secular Humanism extends beyond simple atheism or agnosticism, which merely address belief in God. Instead, it offers a constructive, positive framework for living, focusing intensely on the cultivation of human potential and the establishment of a just, tolerant society. It asserts that morality is neither innate nor divinely mandated, but rather evolved through social and rational processes, derived from shared human needs, experiences, and the consequential effects of actions on others. Therefore, ethical systems are viewed as dynamic and subject to continuous refinement through reason and empirical evidence. This commitment to ongoing evaluation ensures that Secular Humanism remains adaptive to new knowledge and evolving social realities, contrasting sharply with static, dogma-based moral systems.

At its heart, Secular Humanism is fundamentally concerned with the pursuit of human happiness (often associated with eudaimonia) and well-being in the here and now. The emphasis is placed squarely on the unique responsibility facing humanity: since there is no transcendent guiding force, humans bear the full ethical consequence of their decisions regarding personal conduct, social policy, and the stewardship of the planet. This sense of profound responsibility is seen not as a burden, but as an opportunity for self-authorship and collective improvement. The stance is inherently optimistic about human potential, while remaining realistic about human flaws, necessitating continuous dedication to education, empathy, and rational governance.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The roots of humanism itself trace back to classical antiquity, particularly the Greek philosophers who emphasized human reason and flourishing, such as Protagoras's famous dictum that "Man is

the measure of all things." However, the term **Secular Humanism** gained prominence primarily in the 20th century, emerging as a distinct movement following the Renaissance tradition of focusing on human experience and classical learning--a movement that was not necessarily anti-religious, but shifted focus away from the divine. The secular designation became necessary as modern thought formalized the separation between humanistic ethics based on reason and those ethics derived from religious faith. The term was often used by religious critics in the mid-20th century, attempting to frame the movement as a hostile, non-religious ideology, but humanists eventually adopted the label to clearly delineate their naturalistic philosophy.

The formal codification of Secular Humanism is closely tied to the publication of the **Humanist Manifestos**, beginning with the first in 1933. The Humanist Manifesto I, titled "A Humanist's Religious Declaration," asserted a non-theistic philosophy that stressed scientific method and social reform, marking a decisive break from traditional religion. This was followed by the Humanist Manifesto II in 1973, which was significantly more explicit in its rejection of the supernatural, responding to the challenges of the Cold War era and global ethical crises. These documents served to articulate a common set of principles, transforming humanism from a loose intellectual tradition into an organized, actionable life stance dedicated to social justice, world peace, and global ethics based on human rights.

Further institutional development occurred through organizations such as the American Humanist Association ([AHA](#)) and the Council for Secular Humanism (now part of the Center for Inquiry). These bodies championed the principles of free thought, promoted secular education, and actively engaged in legal and political advocacy to defend the separation of church and state. The late 20th century saw Secular Humanism evolve into a recognizable political and cultural force, seeking to provide a moral alternative to religious fundamentalism while upholding the values of the Enlightenment. This historical trajectory illustrates the movement's continuous effort to mature the philosophical groundwork laid by earlier thinkers into a practical guide for modern life.

### 3. Foundational Pillars: Reason and Empiricism

The epistemological foundation of Secular Humanism rests entirely upon **reason** and **empiricism**, asserting that the most reliable path to knowledge is through observation, experimentation, logical analysis, and the scientific method. This commitment means that truths are provisional and must be continuously tested against reality, rejecting any claims based solely on faith, intuition, or ancient revelation. The adherence to the scientific worldview implies that the universe is governed by natural laws and that consciousness and moral capacity are outcomes of biological and social evolution, not divine creation. This foundational skepticism toward the supernatural ensures that solutions to human problems are sought through verifiable, earthly means, such as technology, education, and political reform.

Central to this rational approach is the rigorous application of critical thinking, which encourages individuals to analyze claims, identify biases, and evaluate evidence before drawing conclusions. Secular Humanism champions intellectual freedom and the right to question all orthodoxies, whether religious, political, or social. This emphasis on free inquiry is crucial for innovation and maintaining an open society, preventing stagnation that can arise from entrenched dogmatism. Consequently, education is highly valued, particularly education that fosters skepticism and rational investigation, enabling citizens to navigate complex information and resist manipulative ideologies.

The rejection of the supernatural is not merely incidental but essential to the ethical framework. By removing the premise of a divine reward system or eternal punishment, Secular Humanism necessitates that humans take full ownership of the morality of their actions. Ethics, therefore, must be justified based on demonstrable consequences for human welfare and flourishing, rather than obedience to an arbitrary external command. This shift from heteronomous morality (ruled by others) to autonomous morality (self-governance through reason) represents a profound philosophical reorientation, placing the onus of ethical construction entirely within human capability.

#### 4. Principles of Human Responsibility and Fulfillment

Secular Humanism places paramount importance on the concept of human responsibility. Recognizing that life is finite and that there is no external savior or judge, the philosophy argues that the creation of meaning, justice, and order is entirely the project of humanity. This responsibility extends not only to individual conduct but also to collective social and environmental stewardship. The ethics are fundamentally anthropocentric in the sense that human welfare serves as the primary standard of value, yet they are often expanded to include responsibility towards the biosphere, recognizing that human flourishing is inextricably linked to the health of the natural world. This emphasis on consequences means that ethical decisions are rigorously assessed based on their impact on present and future generations.

The pursuit of **human fulfillment** is defined broadly, encompassing intellectual growth, emotional connection, aesthetic appreciation, and contribution to the common good. Fulfillment is inherently secular, achieved through engagement with the natural and social world, rather than through spiritual practices aimed at transcending this reality. Secular Humanism promotes the idea that life, despite its inevitable hardships, is inherently valuable and offers sufficient opportunities for deep, satisfying meaning. This meaning is found in relationships, creative work, the pursuit of knowledge, and the struggle for justice, shifting the focus from salvation in an afterlife to achievement and virtue in this life.

Furthermore, the philosophy encourages radical self-acceptance and the realization of one's full potential. It champions the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. This is operationalized through a commitment to human rights, equality, and democratic processes that empower

individuals to participate fully in determining their collective future. The belief in human potential is tempered by an understanding of human fallibility, necessitating systems of governance and ethical accountability that mitigate bias, power imbalances, and irrational action, ensuring that human aspirations are channeled toward constructive ends.

## 5. Advocacy for Free Inquiry and Tolerance

A cornerstone of the Secular Humanist platform is the unwavering advocacy for **free thought, speech, and inquiry**. These freedoms are regarded not merely as political rights, but as intrinsic elements necessary for realizing human intellectual potential and ensuring social progress. Without the freedom to question, doubt, and express dissenting views--even those that challenge humanist premises--the ability to utilize reason effectively is compromised. Secular Humanism thus defends robust, open debate, viewing intellectual conflict, provided it is conducted rationally and ethically, as the engine of advancement in all fields, from science to moral philosophy.

The commitment to freedom is intrinsically linked to the demand for **tolerance of all types of diversity**. Secular Humanism recognizes that a global, complex society requires the inclusion of diverse perspectives, cultures, and identities to maximize collective wisdom and creativity. Tolerance, in this context, is not mere passive acceptance, but an active commitment to pluralism and mutual respect, provided that differing viewpoints do not infringe upon the fundamental human rights of others. This principle mandates opposition to all forms of discrimination, whether based on religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, or nationality, advocating for universal human rights standards applicable across all boundaries.

Practically, this advocacy translates into a fierce defense of the separation of church and state, ensuring that public policy and education are guided by secular principles of evidence and rationality, rather than religious doctrine. Humanists argue that governmental neutrality toward religion is essential to protect the freedoms of all citizens, both religious and non-religious. By ensuring that public institutions remain secular, the state fosters an environment where free inquiry can thrive, diversity is respected, and human problems are addressed using universally accessible tools of science and reason, rather than sectarian mandates.

## 6. Debates and Criticisms

Secular Humanism often faces intense debate and criticism, particularly from figures within organized religion. One common critique, explicitly mentioned in the source content, is that Secular Humanism is **often derided by religious figures** who view it as a corrosive, amoral philosophy that undermines traditional family values and societal cohesion. Critics frequently allege that by rejecting divine law, Secular Humanism inevitably leads to moral relativism, arguing that if there is no God, there can be no objective moral standard, reducing ethics to mere subjective preference

or situational utility. Humanists counter this by asserting that their moral framework, based on demonstrable consequences, empathy, and the pursuit of mutual human flourishing, is robustly objective in its grounding within shared human experience and universal biological needs.

Another significant line of criticism targets the movement's alleged "scientism" or excessive faith in science and reason. Critics suggest that Secular Humanism neglects the deep emotional, spiritual, and existential needs traditionally met by religion, arguing that reason alone is insufficient to provide ultimate meaning or cope with suffering and death. Humanists respond by distinguishing between the scientific method as an epistemic tool and the capacity of humans to create subjective meaning through art, philosophy, and community. They argue that accepting the natural world and the finality of life actually enhances the appreciation for existential meaning and urgency of ethical action in the present moment, offering profound life meaning without recourse to illusion.

Furthermore, some internal and external critics argue that Secular Humanism, despite its focus on tolerance, sometimes adopts a confrontational or overly zealous stance against religion, particularly in its more activist forms, leading to charges of anti-theism rather than neutrality. While many humanists argue for engagement and dialogue, the movement's strict adherence to naturalism places it in unavoidable philosophical opposition to systems that rely on supernatural claims. This tension continues to fuel public debates regarding the role of religion in the public square, particularly concerning issues like education curricula, medical ethics, and end-of-life decisions, where the secular ethical framework offers fundamentally different answers than those derived from religious dogma.

## Further Reading

[Secular Humanism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Humanist Manifesto I \(American Humanist Association\)](#)

[Council for Secular Humanism / Center for Inquiry](#)