

Chapter 1 : Humanism: A Very Short Introduction : Stephen Law :

In this Very Short Introduction, philosopher Stephen Law explains why these claims are false and why humanism--though a rejection of religion--nevertheless provides both a moral basis and a meaning for our lives. Indeed, Law shows that humanism is a quite positive alternative to religion.

History of humanism Stephen Law Published in print: Modern humanism draws on a rich and long intellectual legacy. In many countries, humanism became part of the mainstream during the second half of the 20th century. In Europe, religious belief declined. Many prominent 20th-century thinkers were humanists. Religion may have declined but fundamental religion increased in strength. The roots of modern humanism run at least as far back as the Ancient world. In many times and places, both the approach taken to answering such questions and the non-religious answers given have been similar to the approach taken and answers given by humanists today. As we are about to discover, modern humanism is able to draw on a rich and long intellectual legacy. Ancient Indian thought A sceptical attitude towards religious teaching is a feature of some early Indian writing. One of the Upanishads even questions whether the god Brahman exists. Later, a 6th-century BC Indian school of thought – the Carvaka system – did not merely question whether there was a deity, it positively asserted that there was not. The Carvaka school of philosophy is essentially atheistic and materialistic, insisting the natural, material world is all that there is, priests are useless, and religion a false human invention. Rather than lead an ascetic existence, we should live life to the full, seeking out pleasure and happiness. The Carvaka school p. Confucius Confucius – bc is the father of Confucianism, a system of thought that came to dominate China and other parts of Asia for millennia. Although Confucius took the existence of both heaven and gods for granted, the system of ethical and political philosophy he developed stood in large part independently of any commitment to gods and supernaturalism. Confucius is particularly associated with the Golden Rule. Do not unto another that you would not have him do unto you. Thou needest this law alone. It is the foundation of all the rest. The Golden Rule is embraced not only by many religious people it is, of course, also associated with later religious figures, including Jesus , but also by many humanists. Ancient Greece Ancient Greece witnessed an extraordinary flowering of human culture, and the systematic application of reason to various fundamental social, moral, and political questions. This questioning, critical attitude led some to reject belief in gods. Ancient Greece is also significant to contemporary humanists because it exhibits political developments important to humanism – most notably a limited form of democracy though forms of democracy may have existed earlier, for example in 6th-century BC India. Some Greek states – especially Athens – were also comparatively open, largely tolerating the questioning of orthodoxy and the promotion of a wide variety of philosophical views. The manner in which these Milesian philosophers thought critically and independently, largely putting aside mythological and religious explanations and instead attempting to develop their own ideas and theories grounded in observation and reason, obviously makes them particularly important from a humanist point of view. They collectively exhibit several of the key ideas and values of humanism. Many consider Anaximander the father of astronomy. He developed an essentially mechanical model of how the heavens operate, in contrast to the largely mythological explanations previously offered. Anaximander also developed a theory, based partly on fossils, that man developed from creatures that lived in the sea. Another significant philosopher, from a humanist perspective, is Protagoras – bc. His reasoning about morality and virtue was pursued without any reliance on theistic or religious doctrine or belief. Protagoras was a self-declared agnostic. Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life. The doctrine with which Protagoras is now most closely associated is, Man is the measure of all things, of the reality of those which are, and the unreality of those which are not. The Greek philosopher Plato interpreted Protagoras to mean that what is true and what is false is relative to individuals and what they believe. If I believe that Paris is the capital of France, then that is true for me; if you believe Berlin is the capital of France, than that is true for you. Want to be able to fly? You need only believe that you can. Plato famously attacks this form of relativism in his dialogue Theaetetus,

where he points out that if relativism is true, then it is only relatively true. Plato can make it false just by believing it to be so. The same brand of relativism is supposedly widespread today. The American academic Harold Bloom once wrote: Indeed, relativism is widely supposed to be something like an sickness infecting contemporary society and undermining its morality. This reflects a breakdown in society. The current pontiff has expressed similar concerns: The extent to which relativism really is widespread is controversial. Contemporary humanists are often caricatured by their opponents as subscribing to relativism, particularly moral relativism – the view that the truth about what is morally right or wrong is whatever the individual or community believes it to be. However, as I explain in Chapter 4, humanists are opposed to relativism generally, and to moral relativism in particular. Aristotle – bc is also significant to humanists, not least because he attempts to develop a rational, ethical theory rooted in a close study of the nature of human beings, and because the focus of his ethics is on how to achieve a particular kind of happiness or wellbeing in this life rather than in some life to come. But perhaps the most important Ancient Greek philosopher, from the point of view of humanism, is Epicurus – bc. Epicurus was a materialist who believed, like the philosopher Democritus, that matter was made up of invisible parts or atoms existing in empty space and governed by laws. Human beings too are essentially corporeal, according to Epicurus, possessing no immaterial or immortal soul. According to Epicurus, justice consists in our abiding by the contracts and agreements we make between us not to harm each other. For Epicurus, philosophy is essentially therapeutic. His aim was the development of a philosophy of life that would allow us to enjoy a happy and tranquil existence free from fear. They neither rewarded nor punished us, so there was no need to fear them. Nor should death be feared, thought Epicurus, because once we are dead, we no longer exist to experience anything. But then there is nothing in death – no pain or suffering – for us to fear. I was not; I have been; I am not; I do not mind was often inscribed on the gravestones of his followers, particularly throughout the Roman Empire. It can often be heard recited at humanist funerals today. Epicurus placed particular emphasis on friendship and living well. He also believed that pleasure and pain were the only measures of good and bad. As a result, Epicurus has often been misunderstood as recommending a life of unbridled hedonism – of gluttony and orgies. In fact, Epicurus warns against overindulgence and excess. He is significant to humanists because he develops an approach to leading a good life entirely independently of any concerns about gods or the supernatural. The Roman Empire The Ancient Roman Empire also produced a number of thinkers who, to varying degrees, expressed a broadly humanist outlook. Cicero –43 bc, for example, was a sceptic, believing that knowledge about the gods was impossible. He believed ethical values are independent of institutionalized religion, and are amenable to rational, philosophical enquiry. The Roman philosopher Seneca 2 bc – ad 65 believed that: Religion is recognized by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful. Almost all artistic and intellectual endeavour was theologically orientated. The questioning of religious orthodoxy was rarely tolerated, and was often met with violence and persecution. Within the Arab world, however, could be found more liberal intellectual trends. This comparatively radical and liberal approach to religious texts, in effect giving science and reason the authority to challenge scripture as literally understood, was snuffed out within the Arab world. The movement was partly brought about by a renewed p. The ideas and arguments of Ancient Greek and Roman thinkers were sought out, and gave enormous impetus to intellectual inquiry, which now broadened out far beyond the boundaries of Christian theology. The visual arts, which had been largely focused on religious subject matter, now broadened in their scope, becoming much more naturalistically orientated, as well as drawing on Classical mythologies in addition to Jewish and Christian ones. Drawing in perspective was developed. There were important religious upheavals too. There was growing criticism of the Catholic Church, which was increasingly perceived to be corrupt, especially in its sale of indulgences, which granted heaven-bound purchasers remission of punishment in purgatory. The development of the printing press allowed such new and radical ideas to be distributed widely. During the Renaissance, the modern scientific method was developed, perhaps most notably by Francis Bacon – And of course, the Renaissance also saw some famous scientific challenges to religious thought. Giordano Bruno – was a polymath Dominican who defended the Copernican view that the Earth moved around the Sun. Bruno was interrogated by the Inquisition about both his cosmological and also other unorthodox religious views, and was eventually

burned at the stake. One of the most dramatic incidents illustrating growing tensions between scientific and religious thought involved the p. Galileo nevertheless did so, and in a rather provocative way. As a result, Galileo was arrested and threatened with torture and execution by the Holy Inquisition. After Galileo recanted, he was merely imprisoned, a sentence later commuted to house arrest. A number of modern Catholic commentators insist it would be unfair to characterize the Catholic Church as being anti-science at this time. Some commentators also maintain Galileo was arrested, not for his scientific views, but merely for his views concerning the interpretation of scripture. But this is disingenuous. Because Galileo maintained the Earth moved around the Sun, he had no choice but to say either that scriptural claims to the contrary were simply mistaken which would, of course, have been suicidal, or that those parts of scripture that appeared to claim the Earth did not move would need to be reinterpreted. In fact, some Catholic theologians, such as Cardinal Bellarmine, who was charged with investigating Galileo, conceded that, were it conclusively proved that the Earth moved, then scripture might have to be reinterpreted. The problem was, Galileo possessed no conclusive proof. Nevertheless, it appears the Church was willing to torture and kill any scientist prepared publicly to contradict its Earth-centred cosmology without possessing conclusive scientific proof. At the time of Galileo the Church remained much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself.

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In this Very Short Introduction, philosopher Stephen Law explains why these claims are false and why humanism--though a rejection of religion--nevertheless provides both a moral basis and a meaning. Indeed, without religion, our lives are left without meaning and are likely to degenerate into moral chaos.

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Religion is currently gaining a much higher profile. The number of faith schools is increasingly, and religious points of view are being aired more frequently in the media.

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Humanism: A Very Short Introduction by Stephen Law, Oxford University Press, , ff. As might be expected the author, who is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Heythrop College of the University of London, begins by explaining the term 'humanism' in the context of this book.