

Humanism: A Worldview Committed to Self- Reflection and Maturity

By Christian Colombo



Over the past decades, consumption has increased dramatically and as individuals we have access to technology and information of which no-one in the past could have dreamed. While this represents potential for distraction, having our basic needs met provides fertile ground for deeper questioning and self-actualisation¹. This is of course positive, but the increased responsibility on the individual is also substantial: from the consumption point of view, we have to decide how much and what to consume against a backdrop of depletion of natural resources and climate change. From the information perspective, given the sheer amount of material, we have to discern what to accept as true and subsequently what to publish and share. If the reality the individual faces is not complex enough to navigate as it is, add to it the lightning speed at which technology evolves. Phenomena such as social media and distributed ledger technologies are fundamentally disrupting our way of life (not necessarily in a negative way) while most of us have little to no understanding of what is happening under the bonnet. Even as a collective, we are still coming to terms with the wider ramifications of such technologies: having so

many data points on so many individuals means that we can be easily targeted and influenced in a tailormade manner towards a particular goal, as happened in the American elections². Equally worrying is that we are still far from understanding the psychological effects such technologies have on society, and in particular, on children³.

Given a fast-changing and complex world, the mainstream worldview naturally evolves. And while the majority in the Western world identify with one of the major religions, what that means has changed dramatically: salvation is much more expected from scientific and technological advancement than from some supernatural being⁴. Just like biological organisms, worldviews evolve within a contest for the survival of the fittest. Fitness in this sense can take on several aspects, including how successful it is to bring harmony in the social order of the day, how helpful it is for people to make sense of and cope with their lives, etc. Elements of a worldview which fail to make sense in the context faced by society at the time, fade away and are replaced by new ones.

¹ Abraham Harold Maslow, 1943. *A Theory of Human Motivation*. *Psychological Review*. 50 (4), pp. 370–396.

² Hal Berghel, 2018, *Malice Domestic: The Cambridge analytica Dystopia*. *Computer*, 51(5), pp. 84-89.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/25/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-calls-for-urgent-external-regulation>

⁴ Mary Midgley, 1994. *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning*, London: Routledge.

While the main religions of the world have their theological traditions, they are also open to scientific discoveries and rational thought. A case in point is that of the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican Council II. And yet, such religious organisations struggle to keep up with the pace of modern developments and are typically perceived as slow to react and adapt to new realities.

It is common knowledge that many religious people (e.g. in Malta⁵) do not follow their religion's teachings on particular aspects. While this could simply be the result of indifference, it might also indicate that more people are acting according to their own personal moral judgements. It would seem that believers start off with a religion as a point of reference but then adapt it according to their rational reasoning.

Such a reason-based stance is at the heart of Humanism which maintains that as human beings we alone are in charge of ourselves. Humanism is a worldview which by definition encourages the person to take responsibility for their own life, for creating their own meaningful lives and for taking ethical decisions based on reason and compassion. Of course, it's not as simple as that in practice; you're rarely free to take moral decisions without considerable constraints, competing priorities, consideration for the rights and freedoms of others, and uncertainty about the results of your decisions.

Humanism is far from new. Although the word 'humanist' may not have been used to describe humanists at the time, similar beliefs and values can be found spontaneously recurring in communities and civilisations around the world as early as the 6th century BCE, especially in ancient Greek philosophy. While undoubtedly it has been heavily influenced by Christianity (with suggestions that its current form evolved from Christianity⁶), Humanism represents a clear distinction from Christianity when it comes to trusting the individual's judgement. In fact, while Humanism is loosely defined in terms of a basic set of principles, it refuses to define anything resembling a creed or a fixed definition of what is morally good or evil. Rather, it is more about agreeing on the tools (broadly speaking: reason, logic and compassion) to be used by the individual when dealing with the ambiguity of life.

Humanism is a work in progress, embracing disagreement and potential for improvement. Not all humanists agree on every issue; people who share the same basic ethical principles and non-ethical values will probably always disagree about exactly how to apply them. For example, many humanists say there's more to our understanding of the world than science and rationality; that our shared tradition of arts and literature, and the experience of love, grief and beauty - our profound interior life - give us a deeper, but non-scientific, understanding of life. Similarly, humanists are not united on animal welfare. Some argue that those giving preference to certain lives simply because they belong to their own species puts them in the same position as racists who give preference to those of their own 'race'; some ask how a higher degree of intelligence can entitle humans to exploit non-humans; other humanists eat meat and use animal products.

Philosophically, there are several flavours of humanism but I focus here on the existential kind⁷ which maintains that human beings have no predetermined essence or status when coming into being. Using Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*⁸ as a signpost, there are three key ingredients towards becoming a free person, the prerequisite of any moral decision: (i) acknowledging ambiguity, i.e. that there are no absolute ethical values because everything is meaningless outside of the human sphere; (ii) deciding to take action anyway in the face of ambiguity; and (iii) ensuring that such action is ethical by maintaining the freedom of self and others at the centre of all moral decisions.

Interestingly, the existential position resonates with the idea of Anatheism⁹ put forward by the Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney who acknowledges the usefulness of losing the strict ideas about "God" and religion (which we can equate to the acknowledgement of ambiguity) in order to discover more authentic action which embraces the "stranger", concerned with justice (which can be equated with working towards the freedom of others). Viewed from this perspective, the human experience shares a commonality which goes beyond religions and worldviews. And although the existentialist worldview should encourage its subscribers to embrace the absurdity of life and keep an open mind, this is not to say that all Humanists adhere to

⁵ https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/data_and_surveys/63463/a_la_carte_catholics#.Ycin133MJGo

⁶ Theo Hobson, 2017, *God Created Humanism, The Christian Basis Of Secular Values*, London: SPCK Publishing.

⁷ Jean Paul Sartre, 2007, *Existentialism is a humanism*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ Simone Beauvoir, 1948, *The ethics of ambiguity*, New York: Philosophical Library.

⁹ Richard Kearney 2011, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, New York: Columbia University Press.



the same position. The temptation to “explain” as Camus puts it, frequently means that “the abstract philosopher and the religious philosopher [...] support each other in the same anxiety” and lead to “extreme rationalisation of reality which tends to break up that thought into standard reasons and its extreme irrationalization which tends to deify it.”¹⁰ Steering away from both extremes, I see Humanism more as a commitment to “critical questioning of one’s own truths”, “ethical norms and meaningful narrations”, rather than “a secular doctrine of salvation: the ‘naive optimism’ claiming that superstition (may it be religious or not) can be eliminated and replaced by ‘the triumph of happiness and virtue’”¹¹.

Humanism is far from being static, and the emphasis and direction the Humanist movement takes (nationally and

beyond) is very much a response to its environment¹²: In countries where there is still a serious lack of freedom of thought, Humanist societies tend to focus on enlightenment-era philosophy, promoting science and reason - sometimes in a ‘militant’ way as the situation demands. In other cases where secularism is assumed and people no longer need to fight for rights, the focus is more on supporting individuals in living meaningful ethical lives inspired by ideas such as existentialism. Following this trend, one might expect that in a future where there is no religion, Humanist societies (influenced by post-structuralist thought) will focus more on the ways in which human freedoms can be subtly eroded through modern power structures, and how cultural biases can lead societies to have blind spots to moral nuances. This development is especially interesting in the context of the increasingly strong presence of Humanism across wide ranging countries and cultures. With Humanist International now spanning 62 countries, it is only a matter of time until Western thought will lose the monopoly it has had on the Humanist international movement.

From this perspective, the common theme across Humanist organisations is not so much the precise philosophy espoused, but rather a pointer towards more maturity as a response to the context within which they happen to be. Judging by the global philosophical direction, one would expect a Humanism which is less sure of itself, putting more emphasis on dialogue, and above all committed to the philosophical call towards wisdom and its implications to humanity and the rest of the universe.

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¹⁰ Albert Camus, 2000, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (J. O’Brien, Trans.), London: Penguin Classics, p. 48.

¹¹ Florian Baab, 2021, Secular Humanism in Europe, A Comparison of two Current Approaches. *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* p. 29.

¹² Julian Huxley, 1952, *Evolutionary Humanism - Part I. The Humanist*.