



CHAPTER 5  
.....  
Not drowning,  
waving  
Humanism

Rod Thompson

Humanism—the system whereby men and women, beginning absolutely by themselves, having only Man (sic) as their integration point, seek to find all knowledge, meaning and value.<sup>1</sup>

*Francis Schaeffer*

## INTRODUCTION

Luna Park is just for fun.<sup>2</sup> We went there as kids in the 1960s and got lost in the Mirror Maze, a marvellous mix of mirrors that distorted time and space. They also distorted me. In one mirror I was short, squat and bloated, and in another pencil-thin and elongated. There were multiples of me and in other reflections I was fragmented. The mirrors contorted and confused me and, as I recall, I couldn't find my way out of the Mirror Maze.

If we want to see a true reflection of ourselves, where should we look? Humanism says the answer to all the big questions of life can be found unequivocally by humanity looking to itself.

Humanism does not merely promote a distinct *image* of humanness. It does far more than that. *It tells a distinct story.* It constructs a world that seeks to ask fundamental questions of human existence, but at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, looks only at humans to find the answers.

Inevitably then, the humanist story struggles to address deep issues of reality. Moreover, it does not have a happy ending—which is ironic, because the widely adopted humanist symbol is that of the Happy Human, developed in the 1960s to represent the humanist view that 'as we only have one life to live, we should try to create the conditions which enable all to be happy and satisfied'.<sup>3</sup> Like Luna Park, the humanist dream is that life should be full of fun.

## HISTORY

In the broadest sense, humanist thought extends from the very first attempts to understand ourselves without engaging with God, gods, or some reference point greater than humanness itself. In Western nations, such thought draws heavily on the philosophy of the ancient Greeks.<sup>4</sup> However humanism, as that term is commonly understood, flourished most definitively, during the period of so-called cultural Renaissance or 'rebirth' in fourteenth century Europe. Of that era, historian SE Frost writes:

Man dared to assert his ability to control the world, to know its innermost secrets and, by the power of his intellect, to master its ways and turn them

to his desires. Of such was the Renaissance of the human spirit. It was an emphasis upon the human in the universe, and, therefore has been called 'Humanism' ... [The men of the Renaissance] attempted to study and control nature with the knowledge and understanding which they possessed, and as such were the forerunners of modern science.<sup>5</sup>

Humanist thought developed to maturity during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and on into the modern era. Philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), authors including George Eliot (1819–1880) and Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882), socialist revolutionary Karl Marx (1818–1883), and psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), may be counted among its most influential adherents.<sup>6</sup>

'Humanism' is a term with a variety of meanings and flavours. It points to a number of different endeavours related to human development. For our purposes, *secular humanism*, the most influential in the West, is the focus of our discussion. It is a naturalistic philosophy that developed in reaction to theistic and supernatural approaches. It is perhaps the dominant mode of thinking in our society today. From now on, when I say 'humanism', I am referring to *secular humanism*.

The story that humanism tells is mostly about human endeavour: creative, inventive, initiating human endeavour. Humanist heroes are characterised by courage, adventure, imagination, intellect, and most of all, a brave commitment to the here and now with its challenges and promises. The archetypal humanist hero is Prometheus, in Greek mythology the creator of humankind. According to Greek myth, the goddess Athene taught him architecture, astronomy, mathematics, navigation, medicine, and metallurgy, and he passed this knowledge on to humans. Zeus, chief of the gods, was angry with Prometheus for giving humans access to such power. In retaliation, Zeus withheld fire from humanity. 'Let them eat their flesh raw', he declared. However Prometheus dared to ascend Mount Olympus. He lit a torch from the sun, hid a burning piece of charcoal in a hollow stalk, slipped away with it and delivered fire to mankind.<sup>7</sup> Prometheus defied the gods.

The revenge of Zeus was severe.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless Prometheus' heroic actions had liberated humanity. Divine restraint was cast off! Prometheus continues to be heralded as 'the courageous Greek god who gave fire to humans, lighting

the way to reason, intelligence, and independence'.<sup>9</sup> Paul Kurtz, leading humanist author and currently chairman of the *Council for Secular Humanism* and of *Prometheus Books*, has thus written of humanity: 'We are defined as persons by the plans and projects that we initiate and fulfil in the world. The humanist saint is Prometheus, not Christ; the activist, not the passivist; the sceptic, not the believer; the creator, not the conniver.'<sup>10</sup>

Exactly how the human story actually began is not a primary concern of humanism. Some secular humanists are atheists; others are agnostics. However, all are committed to 'naturalism: that is, to the belief that 'the universe is all that there was, is, or ever will be; that it operates according to natural laws and natural processes; and that all reliable knowledge about it comes through the application of the scientific method, the naturalistic method that relies on logical reasoning and empirical evidence as the sole source of reliable knowledge'.<sup>11</sup>

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## MEDIA

**TRUE DETECTIVE (2014)** | The recent TV series *True Detective* portrays Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey), a homicide detective who has no time for God, religion or faith. Instead, his nihilistic tirades about existence rely on an unswerving belief that humans are all there is. The beginning and end of everything is people—and how they cope with the fact that people are the beginning and end of everything. This example of an argument between Cohle and his partner, Martin Hart, is revealing. It gives voice to a naturalist framework that asserts a humanist logic and trust in the power of human reason over religious 'stories'.

Hart: I mean, can you imagine if people didn't believe, what things they'd get up to?

Cohle: Exact same thing they do now. Just out in the open.

Hart: It'd be a freak show of murder and debauchery and you know it.

Cohle: If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then that person is no good; and I'd like to get as many of them out in the open as possible.

Hart: Well, I guess your judgement is infallible. You think that notebook is a stone tablet?

Cohle: What's it say about life, hmm? You gotta get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe just to get through the god damn day. Nah. What's that say about your reality, Marty?<sup>12</sup>

.....

If God or gods exist, then he, she, it, or they, are unimportant. Thus, Greek philosopher Protagoras (approximately 490–421 BC), an early voice in the history of humanist thought, is reported to have stated: 'About the gods I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist or what they are like to look at; many things prevent my knowing—among others, the fact that they are never seen and the shortness of human life.'<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the essence of the story is what humans do. Paul Kurtz writes:

As I see it, creative achievement is the very heart of the human enterprise. It typifies the human species as it has evolved, particularly over the past forty to fifty thousand years: leaving the life of the hunter and the nomad, developing agriculture and rural society, inventing industry and technology, building urban societies and a world community, breaking out of the earth's gravitational field, exploring the solar system and beyond. The destiny of humankind, of all people and of each person, is that they are condemned to invent what they will be—condemned if they are fearful but blessed if they welcome the great adventure.<sup>14</sup>

## CENTRAL BELIEFS

The abundant life is the goal. The concerns of such a life are outlined in the *Amsterdam Declaration of 2002*—a summary statement of the humanist commitment to social morality; human reason, science and technology; democracy and the protection of human rights; personal liberty and social responsibility; and artistic creativity<sup>16</sup>—admirable goals that Christian believers would also seek to promote.

In the same vein, during the twentieth century, the internationally recognised humanist spokesman, British philosopher and atheist Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)<sup>17</sup> expressed his humanist vision in the following words:

*Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.*

International  
Humanist and  
Ethical Union<sup>15</sup>

“To care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle: to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times and to see in my imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them.”<sup>18</sup> Such sentiments can hardly be faulted.

In keeping with the stated priorities of Russell, the humanist story is necessarily preoccupied with moral issues or so-called *values*.<sup>19</sup> Asserting that God or gods cannot be known, that there is no expectation of life beyond the grave and no ultimate dispensing of justice, the humanist mind is focused on ‘now’ issues. And the most pressing ‘now’ issue, given devastating events of the late twentieth century such as the Vietnam War, and ongoing twenty-first century calamities including the AIDS epidemic, is the issue of how humans ought to behave in relationship with one another.

How should humans behave? What ought to be valued?<sup>20</sup> Schafersman, a humanist author, writes: ‘Human ethics can only be the product of human thought. There is no God or Nature’s God or Providence of Gaia that will give us ethics.’ Rather, he continues: ‘Humanist ethical systems must be based on human needs, human experience and human reason, not on the alleged needs or desires of supernatural deities.’<sup>21</sup>

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**HUMAN NATURE** | At first glance humanism appears to have a very positive view of humanity. Certainly it is optimistic regarding the potential of human progress. Yet, according to the philosophy, humans are to be respected and valued because of their capacity for reason and creative imagination. It is their potential as rational beings that gives humans value.

Christian thinking on the other hand, tells us that humans are valuable because God values them. Created in his image, we humans enjoy a special place in the world as God’s representatives, and God loves us, not because of any potential

usefulness we might possess, but for who we are.<sup>22</sup> This is a more positive and more hopeful vision than the limited and contingent humanist perspective.

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The humanist commitment is vividly portrayed in many advertisements, where billboards and YouTube clips are filled with young, attractive people obviously having the time of their lives at a party. Slogans contain sentiments along the lines of 'Find yourself', or 'Make the most of now'.<sup>23</sup>

Advertisers are telling the humanist story dressed in their brand of consumerist garb. The message being promoted here is the 'humanist commitment to spontaneity, to a full life, and to making the most of every moment! This is a speedier pathway to happiness, and the happy life lived in the here and now is all there is.

Happiness. This is the ultimate humanist value. Happiness, indeed happiness 'now', is the defining purpose of the humanist lifestyle. And using traditional religious language, Paul Kurtz labels as sinners, 'the lazy ones who cannot, or do not, have the creative impulse' to work for happiness in their own lives and the lives of others.<sup>24</sup>

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## MEDIA

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE (2008) | Directed by Danny Boyle, the 2008 cinema hit *Slumdog Millionaire* tells the story of two brothers growing up in the slums of Mumbai. The brothers face different fates, based on their different approaches to life.

Jamal is an orphan on the verge of winning 20 million rupees on the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* until he is arrested and accused of cheating. Through the explanation of his innocence, we see how Jamal has come to this point in his life.

Without parents or money, Jamal and his brother Salim are left to fend for themselves on the streets of Mumbai. However, the two brothers have differing approaches to survival. Jamal believes in fate and destiny and decides to put his trust in his beliefs. Salim, on the other hand, only trusts in a fate that he has

created with his own hands. Salim gets involved with criminals and situations that increasingly spiral out of control, but does his best to forge his own destiny regardless of the cost.

The decisions the two brothers make influence not only how their lives end up, but also their state of mind throughout. Jamal's faith in a greater power at work gives him a sense of peace. As the credits roll, destiny has worked in Jamal's favour and his hands are relatively clean. In contrast, Salim is constantly plagued by the effects his pragmatic compromises have caused and, at the end of the movie, is a victim of his own decisions.

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There is no anticipation of life after death. Beliefs concerning immortality, heaven, hell, or judgement are scientifically unverifiable. And so, when death comes, it must be accepted with calm resolve. 'In the face of death the only thing that really counts is what has been the quality of life, and what has been given to or left for others.'<sup>25</sup> The achievements of the full, free, spontaneous life are the humanist legacy. In this way, each individual and each society forges its own destiny. 'The meaning of life is what we choose to give it. Meaning grows out of human purposes alone. Nature provides us with an infinite range of opportunities, but it is only our vision and our action that select and realise those that we desire.'<sup>26</sup>

And so the humanist story begins and ends with humankind. In the words of *Humanist Manifesto 11*,<sup>27</sup> published in 1973: 'As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity.' Subsequently the authors write: 'We can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. While there is much that we do not know, humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.'<sup>28</sup> For each individual salvation can only be understood in terms of the here and now. It does not transcend the grave. There is no eternity. And for the evolving cosmos of which we are part, salvation depends on the autonomous wisdom of each subsequent generation of happiness-seeking humans.



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## TWENTIETH CENTURY REALITIES—EXPOSING HUMANISM'S FATAL FLAW

| At one level a scan of the events of the twentieth century might give humanists considerable confidence in their beliefs. Yes, we witnessed astonishing progress in humanity's use of science and technology. People went to the moon, international air travel became commonplace, computers revolutionised the way we live, a global economy developed, unfathomable medical advances took place, and entertainment became a way of life. Even going to the dentist is now a relatively pain-free experience!

Yet twentieth century history also brings sharply into focus humanism's greatest weaknesses and ultimately its failure. The innovative flair that has given rise to much progress has also produced unimaginable destruction through the high tech weapons of war. The threat of nuclear catastrophe casts a dark shadow over our lives, environmental degradation looms as a major threat. AIDS has devastated Africa, poverty grips two-thirds of the globe while the West wallows in excess. Terrorism, genocide and hatred punch conspicuous holes in humanist optimism. Big questions must be asked of the foundation of humanist belief and theory along with its basis for hope.

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## CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

*World views* may be understood as belief systems embedded in widely held stories that claim to be, and come to function as, true accounts of reality. As explained in the introduction to the book, a world view is 'never merely a vision of life. It is always a vision *for* life as well.'<sup>29</sup> Why should anyone believe the humanist vision *of* and *for* life? Why embrace the network of beliefs embedded in this account of humanness and reality? What makes the story credible? Is it true to reality? Is it internally coherent? Is it life enhancing? Does it open up life, in all its richness and diversity, offering a truly hope-filled vision?<sup>31</sup>

*We do not believe in God. But we believe in the supremacy of hum-an-ity. We do not believe in life after death. But we believe in immortality—through—good—deeds.*

Bertrand Russell's  
Atheist's Creed<sup>30</sup>

It is important to recognise that in an ultimate sense the story of humanism is vastly different to the vision of reality presented in the Bible, the compilation of texts in which Christian world view beliefs are embedded. The biblical word from God is:

An account of an initially good creation, in which humans are made in the image of God, to represent him in the world, and to understand the meaning of their lives only with reference to God and his Word as starting points external to themselves.<sup>32</sup>

An account in which humans disobeyed God and were corrupted by that disobedience.<sup>33</sup>

An account of a good creation distorted and damaged by human disobedience, that concludes with the vision of an entirely renewed world, an eternal home of all that is true, good, and beautiful, not the result of autonomous human achievement, rather God's gift to those who have trusted in the work of Jesus Christ.

And finally, an account in which humans can be brought into right relationship with God, other humans, and the rest of the created order, only by God's undeserved kindness or grace received as a gift through Jesus Christ.

Why be critical of the alternative humanist story? Is it so wrong to want happiness? Can one condemn the humanist commitment to spontaneity, endeavour, creativity, and the pursuit of a good life? Certainly not. In many ways, humanism stirs one to stand up and cheer. On the surface, the story the humanists tell is full of the stuff of *abundant* life: courage, optimism, playfulness, adventure, and humour. Without thinking about it too much, the humanist vision offers the sort of joy one feels on a summer's day, playing volleyball on the beach with friends. It envisions rollercoaster thrills for the rest of life.

Plainly, secular humanists share with Christians some weighty ethical concerns: for world peace, for the environment and scarce resources, for civil liberty and tolerance of diversity, for economic development and the elimination of hunger, for international cooperation and the development of a world community that transcends the limitations of national self-interest.

They both lament irresponsible drug use and sexual behaviour. Secular humanists are strongly opposed to what they see as the anti-intellectual gullibility of narrow-minded believers, and this is something that thoughtful Christians also resist. *AF Holmes*<sup>34</sup>

The *Humanist Manifesto 2000* is filled with unbridled optimism. As it commences the author affirms, 'for the first time in human history we possess the means—provided by science and technology—to ameliorate the human condition, advance happiness and freedom and enhance human life for all people on the planet.'<sup>35</sup> This is ironic given that previous humanist documents (*Humanist Manifesto II*, 1973) admitted the flaws of such optimistic statements and referred to the brutality of Nazism, the limitations of science or the use of science for evil purposes, corruption and the abuse of human rights and continued racism, poverty, injustice and hatred.<sup>36</sup> The writer of *Humanist Manifesto II* nonetheless asserts, 'humanism formulates courageous new images of the future and generates confidence in the ability of the human species to solve its own problems by rational means and a positive outlook.'<sup>37</sup> We are left to wonder on what basis such confidence rests.

Ultimately, it is not that humanism is too optimistic. It is not optimistic enough. It does not promise too much. Finally, it promises very little at all and secures nothing.

What makes such humanist confidence finally hollow? Why is this positive humanist outlook unable to address the deepest needs of the human condition?

Mainly because for all the humanist talk about ethics, there are *no foundations* within the humanist story for values. For all their ethical affirmations and moral discussions, humanists cannot answer questions such as, 'Whose morals?', 'Which ethical norms?', 'What truth?', and most urgently, 'What constitutes a truly good life?' Indeed, having declared happiness to be the ultimate meaning of human life, all other issues of truth come to be evaluated in the light of one's response to the question, 'Does it make me happy?'

For example, in his discussion of the contours of the good life, Paul Kurtz affirms, 'sin' is refusing to embrace the full range of self-seeking pleasures available to humans. In this context, sin is falling short of the mark of pansexuality. It is being closed to sexual multiplicities.<sup>38</sup> Within the humanist

story, faithfulness to a husband or wife, or the choice of celibacy, are portrayed as reductions or even betrayals of human freedom.

Having eliminated God from the story and elevated humankind to the heights of evolutionary status, there are no greater ethical foundations within the humanist story other than those that humans themselves make up. And in an evolving world, with new knowledge constantly gained through new science and technology, ethical norms are always up for grabs. Humanist ethics *must* be relative and situational—that is, they are necessarily always under revision. They cannot be fixed. They must remain subject to changing situations and competing views concerning right and wrong.

In the humanist story, human beings assume the responsibilities of divinity—merely an evolved divinity—nevertheless the fittest of a multitude of random species that find themselves in a world that is at best, uncaring, and at worst, hostile. And for humanists, the world itself is necessarily conceived of as cold and mute, an unfeeling Nature governed by impersonal laws without design or purpose.

The humanist story envisions no dignified origins and no eternal hopes. It offers no power to change the human heart. It hopes for no creational renewal. It expects no grace and allows for no miracles. There is no God of love and finally nothing in which to believe—apart from oneself. And so Bertrand Russell, philosophising out of the humanist story, envisioned the plight of humanity in the following terms:

Mankind ... is like a group of shipwrecked sailors on a raft in a vast sea at night. There is darkness all around. One by one they fall off the raft into the waters and disappear. When the last man has fallen off, the sea will roll on and the holes made in the water by their bodies will be covered over. Nature cares not for man.<sup>39</sup>

The image is without hope. And finally, so is the humanist story.

Nevertheless, the humanist search for the good life is understandable and fundamental to human existence. In the Bible, the writer of the Psalms sought to determine what it meant to love life and 'see many good days'.<sup>40</sup> His quest led him to the righteous God who was the source of the good life. Subsequently, Jesus Christ asserted: 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full',<sup>41</sup> promising true life to those who followed him.

In the second century, Irenaeus (130–202), bishop of Lyons, wrote, ‘the glory of God is a man fully alive’.<sup>42</sup> In the Christian account of a created, distorted and being-redeemed reality, the vision of a full life is grounded in the gracious gift of God through the death and resurrection of Christ. The pursuit of personal satisfaction is subsumed by a deeper comprehension of genuine joy. Spontaneity is expressed through wisdom. Adventure is shaped by faith and love. Moreover, true blessing flows out of the Christian understanding of new life in Christ by the power of his Spirit—indeed, of being part of an entire new creation that will culminate in the renewal of the universe. Here is something more than the selfish pursuit of pleasure; something far greater than individual happiness.

Merely gazing at oneself, particularly through a distorted mirror, does not help in coming to grips with the most fundamental issues of human existence. Such a gaze may bring temporary relief but finally it can only mask reality and heighten human despair, reflecting a deceitful illusion of real happiness. Such is ultimately the case with the story of life as told by humanism.

## RESPONSE

### Question

- 1 | What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of humanism?
- 2 | The author claims that the humanist story is not optimistic enough and does not promise enough (page 89 and following). Do you agree with him?

### Discussion

- A | What appear to be the major differences between humanism and Christianity? How significant are these differences?
- B | Where are the strongest points of contact between humanism and Christianity?

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**AYN RAND AND OBJECTIVISM | ATLAS SHRUGGED** | First published in 1957, the novel *Atlas Shrugged* clearly articulates Ayn Rand's philosophy, known as Objectivism. Objectivism would sit loosely under the banner of humanist thought, although it has its own particular understanding of reality that not all humanists would agree with.

Massively popular in the 1950s and 1960s, *Atlas Shrugged* was 'the' book and was studied at universities across the world. The novel has had a resurgence of interest in recent years according to a report in USA today. A large survey conducted in the USA on the top books that made a difference in people's lives, voted the novel second only to the Bible in terms of its influence.<sup>44</sup>

The novel explores the premise of 'real life achievers', the innovators and leaders in technology, medicine, art, the inventors, the researchers, and productive people, becoming so fed up with those who feed off their good work that they go on strike. What follows is a massive collapse of civilisation, kept alive by a few heroic individuals who usher in a return of culture.

Many business leaders speak of the novel as having a direct and shaping influence in their lives.<sup>45</sup> Others see it as naïvely optimistic and delusional when it comes to testing ideas against the reality of human nature and the imperfections of the capitalist system.

A leading character in *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt, gives voice to Rand's philosophy:

Man cannot survive except by gaining knowledge, and reason is his only means to gain it. Reason is the faculty that perceives, identifies, and integrates the material provided by his sense. The task of his senses is to give him the evidence of existence, but the task of identifying it belongs to his reason, his senses tell him only that something is, but what it is must be learned by his mind.<sup>46</sup>

In the name of the best within you, do not sacrifice this world to those who are its worst. In the name of the values that keep you alive, do not let your vision of man be distorted by the ugly, the cowardly, the mindless in those who have never achieved his title. Do not lose your knowledge that man's proper estate is an upright

*My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.*

Ayn Rand,  
Appendix To  
*Atlas Shrugged*<sup>43</sup>

posture, an intransigent mind and a step that travels unlimited roads. Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the approximate, the not quite, the not-yet, the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's yours.<sup>47</sup>

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## Discussion

C | What elements of humanist philosophy can you detect in Ayn Rand's ideas and from the passages of *Atlas Shrugged*?

## Perception

- 1 | What do you find to be the most appealing aspects of humanism as a way of viewing the world?
- 2 | What are its most identifiable weaknesses?