

Why Study Humanism ?

(N.B. This draft describes what some would consider the basic information a course on Humanism should convey. It is largely derived from a “ Syllabus for the Study of Humanism” (2003), proposed by Z. Bailey of the Queensland Humanist Society, Australia. Permission to use her material is hereby gratefully acknowledged. E.P.)

Rationale and Educational Aim:

Humanism is one of the many systems of belief in the world. Most systems are religious but Humanism is non-religious, or secular.

The central feature of religious belief is that it involves faith in a supernatural (or transcendental, spiritual, divine, sacred etc.) dimension. But, for a variety of reasons, not everyone adheres to a religion. Of those who don't, some choose Humanism as their system of belief because they judge it to be a positive and constructive alternative to religion that is both life-enhancing and forward looking.

There are significant educational values in the study of belief systems in general and Humanism in particular. A working definition of a belief system is that it is a web of interrelated ideas, practices, symbols and principles that connects members of a specific group or community. Within this web personal, social and cultural values intersect to form a complex network of relationships and understandings sometimes referred to as world views. Humanism is one of these, but unlike the religious, secular humanists concern themselves only with the natural world.

The beliefs people have constitute an important aspect of their sense of identity, or self, and their place in the world. This sense of identity is particularly evident in the way people interpret their experiences, and in the meanings and purposes they attribute to their lives. A person's identity is closely bound up with their values, attitudes and what they consider to be the most important things in life.

Every belief system is worthy of critical study and evaluation. Students and teachers bring their own beliefs, understandings and values to a course of study. Within the educational approach no assumption is made about the teacher and students sharing a common set of beliefs, understandings or traditions.

Assessment of student performance, therefore, concentrates on students' knowledge and comprehension of the content of the course, not on any profession or acceptance of Humanism as their own belief.

The Nature of Humanist Beliefs:

To humanists, the only reality acceptable is that which is open to critical enquiry and empirical (scientific) examination. For those reasons the secular evaluation of what humanists ought to believe rests on the availability of valid and reliable evidence and consequently is on-going and constantly evolving as knowledge increases.

Being a non-religious system of belief Humanism has no creation myth and since there is no belief in a spiritual or transcendent realm of existence, no code of behavior or set of values can be attributed to it. The process of evolution, which is the secular explanation of how the universe developed and continues to develop, is not a creation story in the religious sense of the word. The secular view of evolution is that it is random, amoral (is without moral susceptibility) and subject to chance. For these reasons it provides no basis for a humanistic ethical system. Humanist values and ethics, therefore are arrived at through a process of discussion, debate and by taking the consequences of actions into consideration. Humanism emphasizes the need for people to take responsibility for themselves and for the effects of their behaviour on others, in the present and into the future.

In the absence of a supernatural realm inhabited by spiritual beings that may punish or reward an 'evil' or 'good' deed, and in the absence of a belief in life after death, Humanism presents the view that it is incumbent on the secular person to do good for the sake of their own and others' well-being alone.

Humanists believe that humankind is but one species among many with no greater entitlement than any other. This secular view is the foundation for the belief that people should take responsibility for the impact they have on the environment and should try to reverse the negative effects they are causing ecologically. This view is all the more salient because of the humanist belief that the physical world is the only realm of existence and that humans have only one life and should live it to the best of their ability.

None of this is to suggest that humanists oppose everything and anything that doesn't fit neatly into their particular framework of rational scientific thought? Quite the contrary is true. They are highly appreciative of artistic creations and the manifestation of beauty in all its forms. They are capable of wonderment and awe at the view from a mountain-peak, the magic sounds of an orchestra or the complexity of the universe – all of which they regard as natural events explicable in physical terms effect that:

Humanism has been defined as a rational philosophy, informed by science, inspired by art and motivated by compassion. Free of supernaturalism it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds humanity responsible for its own destiny.