

Epicurean Philosophy Vs. Humanism

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2019 at 3:48 PM



I have never considered Epicurean philosophy to be a form of "Humanist" philosophy any more than it is a form of Stoicism or Platonism. I haven't written extensively on this, in part

because many Humanists are allies on certain important points, such as rejection of Supernatural Religion.

But I was reminded of this point today and I think it is time to start a thread on it. My position is that "Humanism" is just another "-ism" that has a goal at its center which is very different from Epicurean philosophy. It will take much citation and explanation to explain this, but let's start in this post with the frequent Humanist slogan:

"GOOD WITHOUT GOD"

That should be an immediate tipoff that feeling - pleasure and pain - are not at the center of Humanism. What's at the center is "being good." And advocacy of being a good person is always a tipoff that the person advocating that position has his or her own definition of "What a Good Person Is." And therein is the slippery slope of all Idealist philosophies and religions: In the atomistic universe recognized by Epicurus, in which there is no center point of observation, no supernatural creating god, and nothing eternal except elements and void - there IS no single definition of "good."

I will come back to this as time allows, because I know my criticism of "Humanism" is not unique, nor is it rooted only in Epicurus or even in Nietzsche. I don't consider this issue to be a word game, and I consider it important not to unnecessarily offend the many good people who embrace the term "humanism" for reasons that are compatible with Epicurus.

But Epicurean philosophy is about being precise with words, and keeping Nature - not idealism - at its center, so this is an issue which needs to be developed and understood.

I fully agree with this reference to Nietzsche as recorded at Wikipedia: "For Friedrich Nietzsche, humanism was nothing more than an empty figure of speech – a secular version of theism."

[Here is a useful Wikipedia article as a starting point for reference.](#)

[Here is an article at Academia.com:](#) Nietzsche's Overcoming of Humanism ["In this section, I will discuss the transition from Platonic-Christian values to the values of secular humanism and attempt to show how these values, from a Nietzschean perspective, constitute another instantiation of the nihilistic paradigm"]

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2019 at 4:10 PM

"Nietzsche's Overcoming of Humanism" [REHA KULDAŞLI](#)

Above I said that with the death of God, the function of a central agency that orders beings is assumed by human being. To be more precise, this function is granted to an evaluation of human being understood to a great extent in rationalistic terms. The transmigration of this function from God to human being raises the value of human being to a degree in which it is conceived as above other beings due to this ordering power. That is, an evaluation of human being begins to occupy the seat vacated by God without a fundamental change in the structure. In Nietzsche's terminology, God is replaced by its shadow, i.e., the rationalistic, more precisely, the subjectivistic (see 2.5, below) conception of human being. With this, human being's search for security in the world from the perspective of self-preservation undergoes a modification. The previous ideal of spiritual salvation turns into a scientific-rationalistic conception of salvation, although the underlying tendencies and their unconscious desire for the overcoming of suffering remain operative. With respect to these tendencies, Nietzsche says:

What they would like to strive for with all their powers is the universal, green, pasture-happiness of the herd, with security, absence of danger, comfort, an easing of life for everyone. The two songs and doctrines they sing most frequently are called 'Equality of Rights' and 'pity for all things that suffer' – and they assume that suffering itself is something we must do away with."

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2019 at 4:29 PM

Reference: (Not that I agree with it) Wikipedia: Criticism of Humanism:

Polemics about humanism have sometimes assumed paradoxical twists and turns. Early-20th-century critics such as [Ezra Pound](#), [T. E. Hulme](#), and [T. S. Eliot](#) considered humanism to be sentimental "slop" (Hulme)^{[[citation needed](#)]} or "an old bitch gone in the teeth" (Pound). [Postmodern](#) critics who are self-described [anti-humanists](#), such as [Jean-François Lyotard](#) and [Michel Foucault](#), have asserted that humanism posits an overarching and excessively abstract notion of humanity or universal [human nature](#), which can then be used as a pretext for imperialism and domination of those deemed somehow less than human. "Humanism fabricates the human as much as it fabricates the nonhuman animal", suggests Timothy Laurie, turning the human into what he calls "a placeholder for a range of attributes that have been considered most virtuous among humans (e.g. rationality, altruism), rather than most commonplace (e.g. hunger, anger)". [Nevertheless, philosopher Kate Soper notes that by faulting humanism for falling short of its own benevolent ideals, anti-humanism thus frequently "secretes a humanist rhetoric".](#)

[In his book, *Humanism* \(1997\), Tony Davies calls these critics "humanist anti-humanists". Critics of antihumanism, most notably \[Jürgen Habermas\]\(#\), counter that while antihumanists may highlight humanism's failure to fulfil its emancipatory ideal, they do not offer an alternative emancipatory project of their own. \[Others, like the German philosopher Heidegger\]\(#\), considered themselves humanists on the model of the ancient Greeks but thought humanism applied only to the German "race" and specifically to the Nazis and thus, in Davies' words, were anti-humanist humanists. \[Such a reading of Heidegger's thought is itself deeply controversial; Heidegger includes his own views and critique of Humanism in Letter On Humanism\]\(#\). Davies acknowledges that, after the horrific experiences of the wars of the 20th century, "it should no longer be possible to formulate phrases like 'the destiny of man' or the 'triumph of human reason' without an instant consciousness of the folly and brutality they drag behind them". For "it is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of human reason". Yet, he continues, "it would be unwise to simply abandon the ground occupied by the historical humanisms. For one thing humanism remains on many occasions the only available alternative to bigotry and persecution. The freedom to speak and write, to organise and campaign in defence of individual or collective interests, to protest and disobey: all these can only be articulated in humanist terms."](#)

[Modern humanists, such as Corliss Lamont](#) or [Carl Sagan](#), hold that humanity must seek for truth through reason and the best observable evidence and endorse [scientific skepticism](#) and the [scientific method](#). However, they stipulate that decisions about right and wrong must be based on the individual and common good, with no consideration given to metaphysical or supernatural beings. The idea is to engage with what is human. [The ultimate goal is human flourishing; making life better for all humans, and as the most conscious species, also](#)

[promoting concern for the welfare of other sentient beings and the planet as a whole. The focus is on doing good and living well in the here and now, and leaving the world a better place for those who come after. In 1925, the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead](#) cautioned: "The prophecy of [Francis Bacon](#) has now been fulfilled; and man, who at times dreamt of himself as a little lower than the angels, has submitted to become the servant and the minister of nature. It still remains to be seen whether the same actor can play both parts".

[Sentientist](#) philosophers criticise humanism for focusing too strongly, sometimes even exclusively, on the human species. They propose sentientism as an extension of humanism that grants degrees of moral consideration to all [sentient](#) beings—those capable of experiencing. Sentient beings include humans and most non-human animals and could potentially include artificial or alien intelligences."

Post by “Cassius” of May 27, 2019 at 5:33 PM

Let's anticipate an argument: "You can't cite Nietzsche for an Epicurean position! Nietzsche thought that suffering (pain!) was good, and Epicurus thought that ABSENCE of pain was the greatest good."

To unwind that you would have to step through many issues, but here are two important ones:

(1) Epicurus said that we specifically at times choose pain, when the choice leads to greater pleasure or less pain in the end. Epicurus did not advocate the elimination of the ability to feel pain - that would be anaesthesia or death.

(2) Despite what the choir of academics say, "absence of pain" is not the definition of the Epicurean goal for living. The Epicurean goal of living is "pleasure," and "pleasure" and "absence of pain" are not strict equivalents. Epicurus is very clear throughout his writing that pleasure is a *feeling* that all of us understand through our senses. "Absence of pain" is (in my view) best understood as a *concept* which has an important use in showing that pleasure has a limit and can thus be defined as the goal of life.

Concepts are abstractions useful for producing pleasure; concepts are not pleasures in themselves. Words on a page are not pleasures unless we experience them. The reason it is useful to establish a "limit of pleasure" conceptually is to deal with irritants like Plato and Seneca who chatter that nothing can be considered a highest conceptual goal if it can be made better by adding something else to it (i.e., if it has no "limit"). Epicurus points out that all experience is either pleasurable or painful, so when pains are eliminated from experience, then

experience is by definition full of pleasures. At that point, experience has conceptually reached its limit of pleasure - its fullest potential - and the Platonists and Aristotelians and humanists are left to walk around endlessly arguing about the meaning of "good."

Post by "Cassius" of May 27, 2019 at 7:22 PM

Also - and I know this is one of your favorite sayings, Hiram, that we should not use "empty words." In naming a philosophy or an outlook, the word is intended to summarize the core idea. Probably if one were looking for a single word for Epicurus, the word would be more like "Naturist" or something that identifies the entire sweep of the philosophy - even more so than "pleasure." Putting the word "Human" in that role puts more pressure on it than it can bear, because there is so much more to the universe than humanity. Yes, all that really matters to us is "us," and from a certain perspective "man is the measure of all things" but I don't think Epicurus would have looked at it that way.

If Epicurus had thought that gods created the universe he would have been a theist. If Epicurus thought that there were a realm of ideas he would have been a Platonist. If Epicurus had thought that playing word-games was of supreme importance he would have been a Stoic. But I think he was focused on the big picture of physics, epistemology, and ethics, and selecting out "human" from the picture ends up misrepresenting what it is all about. In fact it begs the question of categories as well, because how do we know what a "human" is, or how a human should live, without answering all those other questions?

I know you are right that most people consider Epicurean philosophy to be both Humanist and Hedonist, but I think it's our job as Epicureans to point the way to a more clear understanding of the big picture. We are not subsets of them - they are a false and narrowed perspective that stand in the way of a more complete understanding.

Post by "Cassius" of May 28, 2019 at 9:20 AM

There is a very useful discussion [going on about this at the Facebook page](#), and there are posts there which really need to be preserved for future reference, against the day that Facebook decides to delete that group. I dislike linking to the facebook page, and I also dislike cutting and pasting from other places to here, but sometimes it's necessary. When that discussion cools down I will find a way to preserve the core parts so that the discussion can continue here. In the

meantime:

[HumanismPost.pdf](#)

Post by “Hiram” of May 28, 2019 at 3:06 PM

my full reply

<https://theautarkist.wordpress.com/2019/05/28/epi...-is-a-humanism/>

Post by “Mousikos” of June 4, 2019 at 7:00 AM

I agree with Hiram. I think there is value in saying that Epicurean Philosophy is a specific system of thought within both the Humanist and Hedonist traditions. There are specific and important differences with large parts of those wider traditions, but it is also likely that we can find common ground and allies there.

I think a friendly approach will benefit us more than an adversarial one in trying to spread the word about Epicurean Philosophy and building communities around that.

Post by “Cassius” of August 7, 2021 at 4:30 PM

I'll post this to bump this thread, make sure no one gets a "this thread is too old to post in now" message, and point out that due to a discussion going on elsewhere we may get the thread a new lease on life: [RE: Review of the "What is Epicureanism and Is It Compatible with Stoicism?" video by Vox Stoica](#)

Post by “Cassius” of August 8, 2021 at 7:44 AM

<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/972-epicurean-philosophy-vs-humanism/>

I can't recall at the moment whether the above thread makes reference to Cicero's "[De Officiis](#)," but i have started scanning that again in reference to a [comment from Shahab about "Duties](#)," and i think there is probably much in it, especially the opening part, which would be useful in drawing the parallels between Stoicism and Humanism.

Post by “Joshua” of August 8, 2021 at 10:57 PM

I haven't read all the material here, but I will say that I think Epicurean Philosophy is *definition ally* humanist in the very strictest sense. Similarly, I'm *nominally* registered in the selective service program under the United States Government.

But I haven't reflected much on that since I turned 18, and it has no influence whatever on the way I live my life. If I was introducing a bit about myself to someone, it would be fruitless and quite odd-not to say counterproductive-to open with that fact. It just has nothing to do with who I am.

Humanism in Epicurean Philosophy (again, in the strictest sense) might well be a trivial fact, but it's not a particularly helpful or informative one. It would be strange to dwell on it. It definitely wouldn't make it into the Epicurean *précis* or "elevator pitch".

Post by “Joshua” of August 8, 2021 at 11:09 PM

I keep writing *strictest* sense, but I haven't actually defined my terms. I understand humanism (lowercase) in the strictest sense to be not a philosophy, but an *orientation of interest or inquiry*. Art can be humanist; it needn't have anything to do with philosophy at all. I vaguely remember studying the great cathedrals of Europe in college and learning that even the hidden tops of the roofs were ornamented. "God sees the top" being the motivation. The humanist motivation in modern construction might call instead for an HVAC system up there.

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2021 at 7:21 AM

I think you are illustrating the main point with your practical examples - the point being that while the word humanist carries a genetic implication that is benevolent enough, it also carries in philosophy some very specific connotations that can be very different, and the devil is in the details.

As you say it's not normally an issue to be concerned about except in dealing with people for whom the word holds a special meaning, and I think it is fair to say that the more a person cares about the word, the more they are likely to be caught up in the special meanings which frequently contradict Epicurean philosophy.

In that sense even to be small-s stoic can sometimes be the proper course, but the more one drills down to what is meant by Stoicism the more one sees that there are serious implications to erecting a philosophy around it.

Post by "Don" of April 26, 2023 at 5:51 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

make sure no one gets a "this thread is too old to post in now" message

Fully realizing this thread is almost 2 years old, I've decided to post here since it appears to be the most relevant (and to have context that seems applicable to my current question). I thought I'd use the quote from Cassius's post to illustrate why I'm "bumping" this thread instead of starting a new one.

[Quote from Joshua](#)

I understand humanism (lowercase) in the strictest sense to be not a philosophy, but an orientation of interest or inquiry. Art can be humanist; it needn't have anything to do with philosophy at all

Agreed and important.

Context: I've been watching some atheist and secular humanist videos on YouTube recently, and it struck me to ask myself: "Am I just a secular humanist and not really an 'Epicurean'? What these people are saying makes sense."

I seem to have come around to the idea that I'm definitely secular (or even secularist) and could be small-h humanist without being capital-H Humanist. To define terms:

secularist: [Cambridge](#) gives this definition: 'someone who believes that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country'. So, yeah, under those definitions, I would consider myself a secularist.

humanist: [Cambridge](#) is a bit less helpful when it comes to "humanist" - "a person who believes in humanism (= the idea that people do not need a god or religion to satisfy their spiritual and emotional needs)" That seems a fairly loose definition of "humanism" but, if that was the definition, I would consider myself a "humanist" under that definition.

So, up to here, yeah, I think I could consider myself a secular humanist... but am I a Secular Humanist.

As shown above there are several [Humanist Manifestos](#) including the [Amsterdam Declaration](#) to clearly delineate what capital-H Humanists declare as their worldview. There's also the Humanist Manifesto III. This is where the rubber hits the proverbial road. If you look at the Amsterdam Declaration (link above), some of their "declarations" align with Epicureanism (and I provocatively use the -ism form there on purpose) and others do not. Here is the Amsterdam Declaration excerpt of their 7 tenets for easier reference. I've taken the liberty to highlight some issues that do not seem to me to align with Epicureanism and added some Notes:

Quote

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

1. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
2. Humanism is rational. It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
3. Humanism supports democracy and human rights. Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.

4. Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility. Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. *[NOTE: Really? This Declaration seems just a little dogmatic from my perspective.]* It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination. *[NOTE: Set sail in your own little boat free from indoctrination!]*

5. Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

6. Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.

7. Humanism is a lifeway aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Display More

As Cassius pointed out in the thread above, Humanists "declare" certain principles to be universal or to put forward ideals... possible admirable ideals... but what are those ideals based on other than dogmatic assertions.

So, I appreciate your indulgence in my stream of consciousness here. I had to talk this out... So, it appears I can comfortably think of myself as a secular humanist and a "practicing" Epicurean and not be in conflict in my own mind. However, I don't think I am (currently) a Humanist with a capital H.

Thoughts welcomed!

Post by "Godfrey" of April 26, 2023 at 6:04 PM

[Don](#) I agree with your conclusion. To me, Epicurus was actually much more specific in defining his philosophy than the humanists (or Humanists), and since I agree with him, it makes the most sense to go with the more specific philosophy.

Post by “Cassius” of April 26, 2023 at 6:12 PM

My thoughts have not changed much over the years but they do still tend to flow with the context. Most people who casually align with Epicurus and are casually reading "Secular Humanist" material is going to generally find them attractive, and I don't think it helps anything to jump up and down over it.

The issue is more when the discussion is getting less "casual" and more "serious" in terms of digging really deep into what is going on. It's at that point, when you're really at stage of trying to figure things out, that you begin to see the differences and how important they can be.

But for me it's like a rollercoaster and much of the time I would just let the issue roll off my back like water on a duck. It's just when you really have some reason to take a firm stand on "organizations" or "official alignment" or whatever that most of the details come into play.

Post by “Joshua” of April 26, 2023 at 7:33 PM

The Catholic Church for most of it's history has had 2 main categories for literature--Sacred and Profane. Sacred literature was scriptural or theological, and Profane was everything else. Except for the outliers like St. Jerome, Profane literature was not necessarily regarded as 'bad'. That connotation came later. It just...wasn't sacred.

There is a similar axis when it comes to outlook, orientation or disposition. It shows up in education--studying Divinity prepared one for life in the church. Studying the humanities prepared one for life outside it.

Humanism is everything that has, as it's focus, the nature, life, customs, languages, art, history, folk ways, nations, states, governments, and so on, of human beings.

Divinity has for its object the relationship between man and God. Humanism has for its object the relations between mankind, and between man and himself.

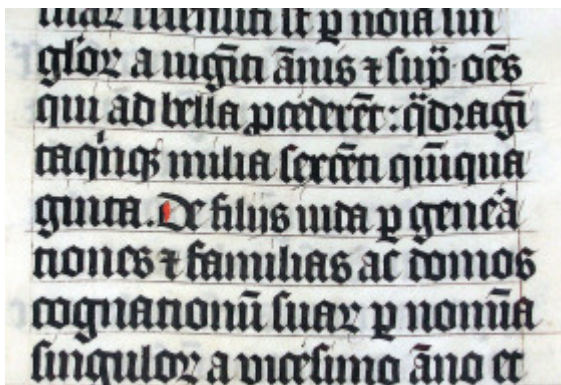
The monasteries of Europe made ornate, jewel-encrusted illuminated manuscripts to enshrine the words of God. Laborious to produce, written in a hand difficult to read (blackletter, an ugly variant of Carolingian miniscule), and in any case usually chained to the shelf or the lectern, these books were made to glorify God, not enlighten men.

In the 14th century, a network of secular Italian scholars in Florence, Venice, and in the Papal Curia in Rome--even in the Curia they were not always in Holy Orders--began to stimulate a demand for a new kind of book. The first major innovation was to rifle the collections of monastic libraries for the works of pagan antiquity. The second was to make them readable again, and to that end these scribes gradually developed their own style of handwriting. Like Blackletter, this new hand, which we now call 'humanist miniscule', was derived from Carolingian miniscule. Unlike Blackletter, it was beautiful--it was clear, graceful, and with room to breath. It could be copied quickly, could be read easily. Reading in the monasteries was meant to be a chore, like cooking, cleaning or plowing--now it was becoming *pleasurable* to read.

In the monasteries, literary discussions were strictly prohibited. No questions were to be asked, and no doubts entertained.

But the humanists had their eye on this world, and this world has problems. How should a State function? How should armies be raised, trained and drilled, laws be written or established, clean water be supplied? What about navigation, agriculture, architecture, medicine, trade, economics and astronomy? Above all, how should we live? The ancients had written on every one of those topics.

That's humanism in a nutshell, and it was best expressed by two poets; "I am human; nothing human is alien to me", wrote Terence in the 2nd century BC. And Alexander Pope echoed the sentiment in the 18th century--"The proper study of Mankind is Man."



Blackletter

Benedicite dno om̄s uirtutes
eius ministri eius qui faci
tis uoluntatem eius
Benedicite dno om̄a opa ei
in om̄i loco dominationes
ei benedic anima mea dno

Carolingian miniscule



bone uoluntatis tue coronasti nos **R**e
quiem eternam. **An** Dirige domine
deus meus in conspectu tuo uiam me
am. **An** Conuertere. **Ps.**

Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me ne
que in ira tua corripas me. **M**iserere mei
domine quoniam infirmus sum sana
me domine: quoniam conturbata sunt
omnia ossa mea. **E**t anima mea tur
bata est ualde: sed tu domine usque
quo. **C**onuertere domine et eripe ani
mam meam: saluum me fac propter
misericordiam tuam. **Q**uoniam non
est in morte qui memor sit tui in infer
no autem quis confitebitur tibi. **L**a
borauit in gemitu meo lauabo per sin
gulas noctes lectum meum lachry

Post by “Cassius” of April 26, 2023 at 8:01 PM

As soon as Joshua gets appointed to set the terms and definitions of Humanism, I am all in! 😊

Post by “Don” of April 26, 2023 at 9:15 PM

I'm getting a similar vibe from humanist vs Humanist as epicurean vs Epicurean.

Post by “Kalosyni” of April 27, 2023 at 2:23 PM

epicurean = gourmand

Epicurean = one who studies and follows the advice and worldview of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus

Post by “Sonderling” of May 7, 2023 at 3:09 PM

I think the citations from the Humanist Manifesto perfectly show how secular Humanism is pretty much Christianity without God, but it seems Humanist organizations have grown indifferent to these principles as they have all sorts of people in their ranks. Check out the American Humanist Association's [annual Humanist](#) awardees. Many of these people wouldn't be Humanists according to the HM, I think the term Humanist now is very vague you could apply it to any non-religious philosophy. The great Dr. Albert Ellis was one of the awardees and his ethical beliefs were quite similar to Epicureanism. I think Humanist groups could be a nice space for Epicureans to battle superstition and share their views but it's not really a space for Epicureanism itself.

Post by "Titus" of September 24, 2023 at 9:26 AM

Humanists are quite an interesting phenomenon. From my point of experience, there are at least two types of current organizations that use the Humanist label:

a.) Those which are secular counter-clubs to confessional Christianity, celebrating coming-of-age-parties, offering secular rituals for weddings and funerals and so on. Historically, they emerged 100-200 years ago. In Germany for example, they are even registered as "Churchs" which gives them certain kinds of privileges.

b.) Atheist propagandists which proclaim science and evolutionary theory as illuminating forces and themselves as experts.

The other question is - consider Humanists themselves Epicureans? I would deny this question but nonetheless they frequently point to Epicurus when it comes to historical precursors giving them legitimacy.

Post by "Eikadistes" of September 24, 2023 at 11:58 AM

"Humanism" has meant so many things throughout history, I tend to avoid it at this point. Cicero's usage 2,000 years ago informs its contemporary, academic usage of as "Liberal Arts". Renaissance "humanism" needs to be contextualized alongside a cultural movement driven by wealthy patrons funding of major art projects. Some early American colonists saw their revolution as being "humanistic" (against the proposition of the Divine Right of kings), and Marxists in the 1920s adopted the word to refer to the transformative nature of their politics and economics. It has also been championed by modern Unitarians to emphasize the human aspect of their Christ. The generalized definition includes half of all thinkers throughout history, in which case, most of the pre-Socratic naturalists, and later Epicurus, would easily fall in this category (or, essentially, *any* naturalists). Interestingly, the phrase "Secular Humanism" was first employed by religious detractors of *Secularism*, but then, as happens, their secular opponents later adopted the the term as a badge.

So, if philosophers, liberal scholars, financiers, clergy, laity, colonists, revolutionaries, and religious critics are all comfortable using the term "humanism", then *that word* may have functionally run its course. I usually only run into it from two sources: (1) *contemporary critics of religion* and (2) *Pope Francis*, and that seems strange.

Post by “Peter Konstans” of October 2, 2023 at 6:56 PM

In this excellent book by [Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism: an alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany*](#) (Cambridge 2011) we see that humanism was once a movement (a concrete intellectual and political movement of the early modern period and not just a set of abstract ideas) that was closely associated with nationalism. This is something that modern 'humanists' would find completely preposterous and yet it is true. As Hirschi observes the concept of 'humanism' has today been absorbed by humanitarianism. Nevertheless the epithet humanist still vestigially preserves in Europe some of its original chauvinistic flavors and Europeans will often make quick use of the handle to express pride in the cultural achievements and refinement of European civilization and then proceed to bask in its reflected glory. In the US the word humanism functions as a registered trademark of mainstream leftists who especially use it when in a mood to attack the religious aspects of their political opponents in the name of progress and modernity. None of this has anything to do with Epicurus who lived in world that was alien to modernity and its political agendas and whose only concern was guiding his community to a pleasurable life. If he lived today would he tell us that the key to leading a life of pleasure is becoming humanists and spend our time picking quarrels with the enemies of progress? I doubt it.

Post by “Titus” of October 20, 2023 at 1:20 PM

I am probably going to attend a "Humanist" event this weekend, as it deals to some extent with Epicurean Philosophy and I'm also interested in how they perceive Epicureanism. It's organized by a society called "Humanistische Vereinigung" (Humanist Association).

The introductory text states:

Philosophical Breakfast: Thoughts on Man, Happiness and Death

Speaker: Dr. Frank Schulze

Starting with the question of what Friedrich Nietzsche actually means by the phrase "human, all-too-human", which has become a common phrase, we will first embark on a short journey of discovery in the direction of the question "What is man?" and from there to the question of human happiness. Here we devote special attention to Epicurus, whose "consistent and coherent grand design of a form of life" (K. Jaspers) is neither ascetic nor dissolute, but aims at inner independence. From this thought, various philosophical perspectives on the problem of death are presented, from antiquity to contemporary thought.

(translated by DeepL)

Do anyone of you have any questions you would like to ask them?

Post by “Cassius” of October 20, 2023 at 2:53 PM

Not too bad an intro, and in my experience if they indeed have an interest in Nietzsche they will not go too far astray toward excessive asceticism (but that's the direction I would expect them to take anyway). Will be interesting to hear your take on the program.

Post by “Titus” of October 20, 2023 at 3:57 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Not too bad an intro, and in my experience if they indeed have an interest in Nietzsche they will not go too far astray toward excessive asceticism (but that's the direction I would expect them to take anyway). Will be interesting to hear your take on the program.

I think I won't act well as a yardstick as I definitively have a tendency towards frugality. 😊
Anyway, I too expect the speaker to focus on the moderate life. I will take the forum navigation map with me and try to figure out where they are positioned. I know humanist groups to value Epicurus at least as a person giving them historical legitimacy.

Post by “Titus” of October 22, 2023 at 9:14 AM

The lecture was quite interesting as it reminded me of a popular stance on Epicurus which is predominant in modern German literature. Epicurus is understood as a philosopher who reaches for inner independence while also granting enjoyment of pleasure as long as the enjoyment doesn't collide with freedom from pain. The focus is slightly different than that of the

forum, as it traditionally centers the ethics and doesn't dig deeper. Physics and Canonics remain nearly untouched.

Nonetheless I was amazed by the quite remarkable volume Epicurus was granted by the speaker.

In the following discussion I asked what the reference of Humanism to Epicurus is and he indeed answered, that Epicurean Philosophy has many similarities to Humanism because of Materialism and a positive attitude towards life and the human being. But he also stated, that rather Cicero is seen as a father figure, referring to the term "humanitas" which he told had been coined by Cicero.

I also asked what Humanism is, and they answered that it's about focussing on the human being and individuality. Speaking from the point of being an organisation, they don't want to be critics of religion but form a secular alternative, giving positive value in the world.

I would definitely see them as allies, but I also recognise them as focused more on societally tasks than promoting the personal transformation through philosophy which I regard as the key point.

Post by “Cassius” of October 22, 2023 at 12:09 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

while also granting enjoyment of pleasure as long as the enjoyment doesn't collide with freedom from pain

Looking at that from Torquatus' perspective, that is like saying "as long as the enjoyment of pleasure doesn't collide with pleasure."

And that's the problem with those who aren't willing to straightforwardly identify freedom from pain as pleasure and see that the overall goal is not some kind of definition of "freedom from pain" that conflicts with or is superior to pleasure, but "pleasure" itself.

Deferring to Cicero and Plutarch and others who insist that "freedom from pain" is not a term that is identical to "pleasure" makes this paradox forever unintelligible. But I wager that is what the "humanists" will always do, because like Cicero they insist on seeing "being human" as something higher than pleasure. They refuse to take the next step and say that "being human in the absence of pain" IS pleasure.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 22, 2023 at 1:21 PM

[Quote from Titus](#)

The lecture was quite interesting as it reminded me of a popular stance on Epicurus which is predominant in modern German literature. Epicurus is understood as a philosopher who reaches for inner independence while also granting enjoyment of pleasure as long as the enjoyment doesn't collide with freedom from pain.

Just for clarity sake, wanted to point out this ([Titus](#) you likely already know this) from the Letter to Menoeceus:

"And because this is the primary and inborn good, we do not choose every pleasure. Instead, we pass up many pleasures when we will gain more of what we need from doing so. And we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, if we experience a greater pleasure for a long time from having endured those pains. So every pleasure is a good thing because its nature is favorable to us, yet not every pleasure is to be chosen — just as every pain is a bad thing, yet not every pain is always to be shunned. It is proper to make all these decisions through measuring things side by side and looking at both the advantages and disadvantages, for sometimes we treat a good thing as bad and a bad thing as good."

[Quote from Titus](#)

I would definitely see them as allies, but I also recognise them as focused more on societal tasks than promoting the personal transformation through philosophy which I regard as the key point.

This is definitely a key difference between Epicureanism and Humanism. Within Humanism, I think there is nothing wrong with the attempt of societal transformation, but there is only so much time in life -- and it is quite a difficult task to actual do something rather than just talk about it (plus potentially more pain than pleasure). And ever since Epicurus, perhaps this is an issue (and virtue not being the goal) that detractors brought against Epicureanism.

Post by “Titus” of October 22, 2023 at 2:00 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

But I wager that is what the "humanists" will always do, because like Cicero they insist on seeing "being human" as something higher than pleasure.

They definitely do and from their point of view, Epicureans adhere to some kind of dogma or be just the unfinished raw diamond or just an example of the past (while still a good one!).

[Quote from Cassius](#)

And that's the problem with those who aren't willing to straightforwardly identify freedom from pain as pleasure and see that the overall goal is not some kind of definition of "freedom from pain" that conflicts with or is superior to pleasure, but "pleasure" itself.

I tend to think they might understand the constellation between "freedom from pain" and "pleasure" as you do. The authors I refer to rather argue Epicurus promotes self-sufficiency over excesses, because in the end they cause more unpleasure than create pleasure. Perhaps their main difference is, they emphasize Epicurus' search for painlessness and self-sufficiency (for the reason to be always available of pleasure) rather than calling it pleasure directly (this way would be more antizipating of the canonical structure of the philosophy itself, but makes it even more difficult for the external reader to understand), although they mean the same. Perhaps the devil is just in the details. Especially when it comes to different languages.

They don't seem to speak of pleasure, but indeed they do. But I agree, without a proper understanding, "freedom from pain" can stroll apart and be seen as something different than pleasure.

Post by "Pacatus" of October 22, 2023 at 3:46 PM

"Humanism" is such a broad concept, with many - often conflicting (e.g. theistic and nontheistic) - strands, that I find it pretty meaningless as a catch-all philosophical term in itself. Better, perhaps, to speak of "humanisms" of different sorts.

With that said, if one considers the following definitions (from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humanism>) as valid, then I would think of Epicurean philosophy as **a** humanism (not necessarily - or perhaps even often - compatible with others):

2: **devotion to human welfare** : [HUMANITARIANISM](#)

"renowned for his humanism"

3: a doctrine, attitude, or **way of life centered on human interests** or values

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 22, 2023 at 4:56 PM

The philosophy of Epicurus can't be humanism because it is already called Epicureanism, lol 😜
(Apples and oranges are both a fruit)...and maybe we need a chart comparing them.

Quote from Pacatus

"Humanism" is such a broad concept, with many – often conflicting (e.g. theistic and nontheistic) – strands, that I find it pretty meaningless as a catch-all philosophical term in itself. Better, perhaps, to speak of “humanisms” of different sorts.

Perhaps a chart with some common types of humanism listed.

Post by “Pacatus” of October 22, 2023 at 6:10 PM

I couldn't find much (and I'm not a chart-maker), but here's a limited one:

	Liberal Humanism	Socialist Humanism	Evolutionary Humanism
	Homo sapiens has a unique and sacred nature that is fundamentally different from the nature of all other beings and phenomena. The supreme good is the good of humanity.		
Humanity's Nature	Humanity is individualistic and resides within each individual Homo sapiens.	Humanity is collective and resides within the species Homo sapiens as a whole.	Humanity is a mutable species. Humans might degenerate into subhumans or evolve into superhumans.
The Supreme Commandment	The supreme commandment is to protect the inner core and freedom of each individual Homo sapiens.	The supreme commandment is to protect equality within the species Homo sapiens.	The supreme commandment is to protect humankind from degenerating into subhumans, and to encourage its evolution into superhumans.

Post by “Godfrey” of October 23, 2023 at 1:17 AM

Not sure I buy into "unique and sacred nature that is fundamentally different from the nature of all other beings and phenomena". That seems to me to be in conflict with evolution. Also, separating ourselves out as unique, sacred and fundamentally different sounds like one of the evils of idealism and religion which leads to all sorts of misinterpretation and ensuing conflict.

But I appreciate the chart [Pacatus](#) ! Quite interesting.

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 23, 2023 at 8:48 AM

Perhaps this Principal Doctrine has some applicability with regard to Humanism/virtue/ideology:

[PD22](#): "You must reflect on the fundamental goal and everything that is clear, to which opinions are referred; if you do not, all will be full of trouble and confusion."

(a reminder to "not put the cart before the horse").

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 23, 2023 at 9:43 AM

I keep mulling this over...it seems that Humanism goes a step further than Epicureanism -- with an ethical goal of improving the greater good of humanity - so progressive politics, philanthropy, and on-going involvement in projects to make the world better according to conceived ideals of peace and equality would be part of Humanism. So while thinking/acting this way wouldn't stop one from "being Epicurean" (finding pleasure in philanthropy), not all Epicureans think this way (and pleasure is found in myriad things). And I think many Epicureans might consider that "perfect peace and equality" are impossible when clearly observing the root causes of inequality and war -- and we are animals with basic needs for food, shelter, and security -- and who have "animal" fears and anxieties. But so many people want to see humans as being something other than animals -- and that we must evolve into "perfect human beings" -- in spite of the stresses that civilization causes to human animals.

Post by “Titus” of November 20, 2023 at 12:49 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"GOOD WITHOUT GOD"

That should be an immediate tipoff that feeling - pleasure and pain - are not at the center of Humanism. What's at the center is "being good."

Yesterday, I visited the "Philosophical Breakfast" for the second time. It would have been an interesting event for you, Cassius, as it dealt with Paul Rée, a nearly forgotten philosopher who is said to have inspired Nietzsche to start his materialistic phase. He finally got another direction than the later madman Nietzsche, becoming a philanthropic physician for the poor and died falling from a cliff - one say it was an accident, the other say it was suicide.

More importantly, through my observations I've started to recognize that they are really concerned about being atheist. They are in fact a secular version of theism as they deal with various points they exclusively have in common with the established churches. Firstly, they are registered as a church and they offer secular rituals as substitutes to classical Christian ones. Secondly, they share some stunning patterns with their religious counterparts. They try to meet the same societally consensus to be "good" under the current definition.

Ironically, with the established churches in Germany dropping their faith in sin and the afterlife, they start becoming even closer to the Humanists than mainline Christianity to the the free churches. (The American equivalents e.g. mainline doesn't fit exactly, but they are relatively the same. The American Humanists also use a quite similar logo as their German counterpart and both take part in the same international conferences on Humanism).

I have to say that I enjoyed the atmosphere and speaker was quite talented. I might visit this format again. What they definitely lack is the concept of the happy life. They don't know about the remedies and although many of them would acknowledge some wisdom in Epicureanism, they are far more centered on current topics which finally gets political.

In my opinion, Epicurean Philosophy is a system of thought which tries to guide the individual towards wisdom and gives practical advice how to accomplish a happy life. In the end, Humanism seems to be a complex of atheist ideas which tries to develop influence in society.

Post by "Cassius" of November 20, 2023 at 2:02 PM

I think your observations are spot on, Titus. If we were to try to really put our fingers on the issue, I think it would be that "Humanism" is essentially Platonic-Aristotelian-Stoic in presuming that there is an ideal form of "the good" somewhere which they can identify and then conform to. And that's where Epicurus takes the fundamentally different position that no such thing exists, and that instead nature gives us only the feelings of pleasure and pain from which to determine what to choose and what to avoid.

Humanists certainly want to be "happy" too, but they have a fundamentally different view of the universe and think that they can identify a single "good" to which they can (and everyone should) conform. Ultimately I don't think the philosophy issue is any more complicated than that.

But on the social level there is an inbuilt absolutism in Platonism - Aristotelianism - Stoicism - Humanism which, when the chips are down, would not make them friendly to Epicurean perspectives.

Most of us are lucky enough to live at a time and place where we can pick and choose our friends and go our own way relatively easily. However I don't think that will remain the case forever. The tensions of the world that we won't discuss due to the politics rule have placed "censorship" issues front and center, and pressures that may be used today for purposes we find agreeable can very easily grow into pressures that can be used against anyone who dissents from the "party line."

And I think one deduction you can make about Epicurean philosophy is that it attracts people who do not adhere to party lines and encourages their independence..

Is that a fatal flaw that doomed organized Epicureanism in the ancient world and dooms to always be like herding cats in the shadows? I don't think so. I think we can reinforce the non political center of the philosophy and form a non political team that can survive even in the face of organized censorship from the opposing schools.

It's probable that certain tactics we associate with opponents of Epicurus, such as organized meetings and support structures, will be needed. But Epicurus built into the philosophy an inherent bias against radical skepticism and radical reductionism, and I think those enable us to find a common ground of core viewpoints that can bring a group of people together at least as well as Humanism or other social organizations.

Post by "Bryan" of November 20, 2023 at 5:34 PM

That is so well said Cassius! THANK YOU!

Post by “Pacatus” of November 21, 2023 at 7:47 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Most of us are lucky enough to live at a time and place where we can pick and choose our friends and go our own way relatively easily. However I don't think that will remain the case forever. The tensions of the world that we won't discuss due to the politics rule have placed "censorship" issues front and center, and pressures that may be used today for purposes we find agreeable can very easily grow into pressures that can be used against anyone who dissents from the "party line."

First off, I want to say that I have (reluctantly 😊) come to appreciate the limits on political argument here. It helps create a more tension-free space in which to share (and even cordially argue) on deeper matters. 😊

With that said, I have come to think that “the Garden” can only survive under three alternative scenarios:

1. Whatever despotic regime (“the party line”) controls society (the extended polis) happens to appreciate Epicurean philosophy (which I find to be a doubtful happenstance).
2. The Garden goes underground as long as necessary (which seems to have some history behind it as a scenario).
3. A sufficient level of pluralism prevails in the relevant polis/society.

+++++

As I recall her editor’s unease over the word “pleasure” in Dr. Austin’s book title, I wonder in what libraries (and for whom) it might fall onto the proscribed list – without even being read by the censors.

+++++

BTW, [Cassius](#) : I would've given your post from which I quoted more thumbs up if I could have. 👍

Post by “Cassius” of November 21, 2023 at 7:56 PM

Yes, 1 is unlikely, 2 is more likely, and 3 is desirable and sort of where we currently are. (At least we're still online right now!) 😊

Luckily I think the things we need to do under scenario 2 or 3 are about the same.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of November 22, 2023 at 1:04 PM

I have read a few humanists popular works, from a purely lay mans point of view, humanism really falls into the trap of using reason to the neglect of all else i.e. emotional intelligence, feelings, our senses etc..

Which from my conversation both online and in person with humanists leads to either a utilitarian greater good end goal or some abstract goal such as "freedom, peace, joy". Which leads to the question "what exactly does that look like for you?" in the end instead of being grounded on our immanent reality it once again leads to a goal which is in the sky in the intelligible realm.

It also places once again too much stress on humanity and somewhat divinizes us but that's minor, what I mean though is that it doesn't treat us like the animals we are and misses the mark of what our Good truly is, pleasure.

Now overall humanists are fine it isn't to bash them, although one final critique is that humanism really has no fire underneath it, it doesn't really challenge the theist or the atheist it's just kind of there. Epicurean philosophy at the very least challenges both the theist and the atheist, the former to stop forgoing their pleasure for some unseen post death bliss and the latter by truly asking them to find "meaning" in pleasure. (Many atheists my age become nihilists or super skeptics)

Anyway just some unrefined thoughts.

Edit: I also am in general not a fan of eclecticism (which humanism is in a lot of it's forms), perhaps a topic worth discussing [Cassius](#)? Can't find another thread directly on it..

Post by “Cassius” of November 22, 2023 at 2:47 PM

Yes it is worthy of discussion! Would you be willing to do the honor and start the thread?