Secular humanism – a modern worldview

Secular humanism is an ethical philosophy, based on reason and science, that places human responsibility at the centre of ethical decision-making. It’s a way of life for many who seek to live ethical, meaningful and deeply satisfying lives without superstition, religious dogma or guilt.

Secular humanist philosophy rejects the supernatural and instead uses the scientific method to discover knowledge about ourselves and our world and to understand ethics. The secular humanist philosophy can be summed up as: “A good life is the responsibility of human beings; we are responsible for what we do and for the consequences of what we do.”

Secular humanists use reason and evidence to answer the big questions about life, meaning and the world around us. Historically, there have been several strands of secular humanism, including rationalism, humanism, scepticism and freethought.

In this course, we propose six principles that underlie all these philosophies:

1. There is a natural universe independent of human experience, thought and language, and this natural universe is the ultimate reality.
2. The universe and everything in it, including people, were not created by a god or gods.
3. Every person has only one life, which ends when a person dies. Purpose and meaning are generated by people, not received from a god or a religious text.
4. People are therefore responsible for how they live and treat others, including non-human species, and the environment.
5. Secular humanists draw on collective experience, empirical evidence and reason to establish ethical principles, based on a sense of common humanity and aimed at enhancing human wellbeing.
6. These principles include affirming human dignity and individual freedom, compatible with the rights of others; such principles form the basis of practical moral decision-making.

Secularism

The word ‘secular’ comes from the Latin saecularis or saeculum, meaning generation or age. In modern times, ‘secular’ has come to be used in two main ways:

1. To refer to people or things that are non-religious (eg, “Probably the most significant national secular celebration is Anzac Day on 25 April” and “They can choose to have a secular marriage without any reference to religion of any kind”).
2. In a religious context, to refer to things that are worldly as opposed to things that are timeless (eg, “Can the ethics of a godless secular state be lastingly legitimate and effective?” and “With the rise of humanism, the unicorn also acquired secular meanings, emblematic of chaste love and faithful marriage”).

In politics, ‘secularism’ refers to the idea of separation between religious institutions like the church and government institutions like parliament.

Modern secularism has three key principles:

1. The separation (non-interference) of religious institutions from state (government) institutions.
2. Unrestricted freedom to hold religious or non-religious beliefs (worldviews); plus, the freedom to put into practice codes of conduct associated with those beliefs as long as doing so does not harm others; plus, the freedom to not have a religion at all or to change one’s religion.
3. Political and social equality between worldviews, so that holding any particular religion or belief confers neither an advantage nor a disadvantage.

Secularism raises important questions about how, in a modern society, we should balance fundamental human freedoms: freedom of religion and belief; freedom of expression; freedom of association.

Humanism

Humanist thought has ancient roots. From the first millennium BCE in ancient China, India, and Greece; through the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment; to modern secularisation and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, humanist ideas have helped to shape the world in which we now live.
Modern Worldviews: Overview of secular humanism

The common thread that weaves through all humanist thinking is the belief that this life is the only life we have, that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side, and that we can live ethical and fulfilling lives based on reason and humanity.

Humanists have trusted the scientific method and reason to discover the best evidence-based knowledge about the universe and have placed human welfare and well-being at the centre of their ethical decision making.

Humanism is a broad worldview which describes several shades of opinion, but fundamentally, a humanist:

- trusts the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural,
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals,
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking satisfaction in this life and helping others to do the same.

Rationalism
Rationalism is an intellectual philosophy and a political movement that promotes the role of reason in analysing and finding solutions to issues and problems that confront us in society. There are Four Pillars of Rationalism:

Reason: Rationalists are committed to utilising reason in their beliefs and in their behaviour. In forming beliefs, a Rationalist tries to rely on empirical evidence, logic and thoughtful reflection, not on unquestioning obedience to authority, blind faith or emotional knee-jerk reaction.

Naturalism: Rationalists believe the natural world is the only world there is and that the life we live in this natural world is the only life we have. This means Rationalists do not believe in an after-life, or a life before birth, or in any supernatural or ‘other’ world. It also means that as humans, we derive our values and ethics from the natural world -- from our need to live together and improve the well-being of all around us.

Liberalism: Rationalists support liberalism -- that is, freedom of the individual, social progress and reform, and government by law with the consent of the governed.

Secularism: Rationalists support secularism, meaning legal and substantive separation of religious institutions (church, temple, mosque, etc) from state institutions (parliament, the public service, the courts, etc). Secularism values both freedom of religion and freedom from religion and seeks to balance all human rights in practice.

Skepticism
Skeptics use the methods and tools of science and critical thinking to determine what is true. These methods are generally packaged with a scientific attitude and a set of virtues like open-mindedness, intellectual charity, curiosity, and honesty.

To the skeptic, the strength of belief ought to be proportionate to the strength of the evidence which supports it, so skeptics tend to be critical of woo like conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, alternative medicine, and the paranormal.

Skeptics regularly investigate pseudo-scientific and paranormal claims such as UFOs, monsters and ghosts, quack cures and conspiracy theories.

Freethought
Freethought, or free inquiry, is a catch-all term referring to beliefs on religious subjects that reject tradition, authoritarianism, and established beliefs, including revealed or fundamentalist religion, insisting on the primacy of facts and reason, especially science. Hence the term ‘free’ meaning ‘free from external dogma’, implying that beliefs came from one’s own thinking and research, on which there are no prohibitions on what may be doubted or questioned.

It is the basis for rationalism, secularism, humanism and skepticism. It overlaps with atheism, agnosticism, and secular humanism, but may also describe some theistic beliefs such as deism.