

Humanism and Types of Atheism

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Abstract: Humanism generally consists of a definite range of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. The tenets of atheism, in contrast, are much more limited, so that many more kinds of atheism exist than kinds of humanism. Given the increasing profile of atheism, humanists must understand which kinds of atheism are compatible with humanism and which are not. The author conducts a thought experiment to provoke more research and writing on this ever more salient issue.

Keywords: Humanism, atheism, ontology, epistemology, axiology

The rise of the “nones,” those reporting that they are not affiliated with a religion, will likely increase the ranks of atheists in the long term. The receding taboo against being openly atheist will likely result in more people openly embracing atheism next to whatever other beliefs they have. I would argue that the public profile of atheists as a subculture will become more differentiated than ever when it comes to what other identities they combine with being atheist. Atheists will no longer be viewed as a monolithic group vaguely on the political left. If these predictions have merit, I think the humanist movement can gain from a thought exercise that looks at other identities atheists may take on, as a means to seeing where humanists are in the landscape of differentiated atheism.

This paper is a thought exercise in the sense of essays that offer “points of view, suggestions, *essais*, on the topics under discussion” without claiming “to be remotely near a final word on the debates they relate to” (Grayling 2007, v (ital. added)). The purpose of this paper is to generate philosophical thought about a growing aspect of humanist engagement with atheists of various types on social and political issues. Primarily, I hope to point out various ways in which the potentially increasing numbers of atheists will not necessarily be humanists.

There are of course many types of humanisms and thus of humanists (see, e.g., Murn 2018a). No doubt atheist, agnostic, and nontheist humanists generally break out in various measure into those same types. And many of those types correspond to types of atheists that I will address below. Overall, this exercise shows how atheism can accompany a wide range of other values and viewpoints except belief in a deity and, in some cases, express belief in the nonexistence of any deities at all. Humanism, in contrast, occupies a narrower position in the belief spectrum. Humanism predominantly entails scientific naturalism with human values. That potentially excludes a lot of atheists.

1. Definition of “Atheist”

I am not the first to suggest that there are “types” of atheism that can be distinguished based on other views that a person can have in addition to atheism (see, e.g., Gray 2018). In this sense, “types of atheism” are categories of philosophies, world views, or life stances that have atheism as one of their tenets. These worldviews are often independent of atheism.

Before delving into these types of atheism, the definition of “atheist” requires clarification. Attempting to do so brings up the issue of whether humanists are atheists by definition. “Atheist” has been defined as “an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods” (Bullivant 2013, 13). While that is but one possible definition, it is a broad one. It has support in the use of the term in ancient Greece, given that Sextus Empiricus’ list, attributed to Clitomachus, of atheists included people who were what now would be called avowedly agnostic, in that they did not acknowledge the existence of the deities of the Greek pantheon (*Math.* 9.50–56). Of course, many humanists are agnostic or nontheist (Duyndam 2017, 706). Under the definition,

agnostic or nontheist humanists would also be atheist (Law 2013, 263), because even being on the fence about the existence of god(s) falls within the broad definition.

However, this differentiation depends on a definition of “atheism” that is referred to as “negative” (or “weak” or “soft”) atheism (Bullivant 2013, 14). It is negative, because it labels as atheist anyone *without* a belief in god(s). That sounds to me like *nontheism*, i.e., not theistic. Commensurate with the reticence of many agnostics or nontheists to being called “atheist,” another definition of “atheist” is someone who believes affirmatively that there is no god(s). This definition is known as “positive” (or “strong” or “hard”) atheism, due to its positive assertion that there is or are no god(s).

Positive atheism is a narrower category than negative atheism. Under the definition of *positive atheist*, humanists who are agnostic or nontheist are not positive atheists. It has been suggested that this definition asserts two facts concerning the subject. The first fact is the absence of a belief (in one or other god(s)), i.e., soft atheism, and the second is an affirmative belief that there is no god(s) (Bullivant 2013, 15). Of course, the second belief necessarily entails the first. One common association with *secular humanism* is that it entails the second belief based on the scientific evidence (Kurtz 2001, 148–50). But subsequently, Kurtz pronounced that “secular humanism does not require atheism as a necessary precondition (2011, 50 (ital. omitted)). Viewed that way, even *secular humanism* is not by definition a positive atheism. Accordingly, *atheist humanism* is a subset of humanism generally, whether religious, secular, or otherwise.

Conversely, this more finely drawn distinction between negative and positive atheism entails another implication. Negative atheists do not affirmatively believe there is or are no god(s). In other words, negative atheists may allow for the possibility that there is or are god(s), however remote, which just corresponds to agnosticism or nontheism. As I noted previously, these agnostic or nontheistic negative atheists correspond to humanists who are agnostic or nontheistic.

The definition of “positive atheist” has another implication. By including a positive belief that there is or are no god(s), that type of atheism ventures into the question of beliefs about religion and specifically theism, i.e., the question of the existence of god(s). That gives me a segue into discussing other beliefs about religion and theism.

2. Other Beliefs About Religion and Theism

One category of beliefs atheists can have in addition to atheism concerns negative attitudes about religion, such as whether they actively discredit theists’ assertions based on theism, oppose theism, attack conceptions of deities, and so on. Perhaps the principle common to them is that these atheists choose to oppose or attack religion rather than, say, simply abandon it. Together, they may be categorized as *anti-religious atheists* or perhaps *exclusivist atheists*. A category of humanists referred to as “radical humanists” might correspond to this group of atheists, who have been characterized as believing that “religion is a dangerous delusion, and it should be conquered” (Duyndam 2017, 706). Perhaps another term for those humanists might be the corresponding *anti-religious humanists*.

The most virulently positive atheists may be those who impose atheism to the exclusion of all religions. Overall, I would suggest that these atheists may be said to support *monist* or *ideocratic atheism*. State sponsored atheism to this extreme has been practiced in Albania and North Korea. Elements of the French Jacobins; Chinese, Cuban, and Soviet Communist Parties; and other state actors have pursued this degree of destruction of religions in their societies (Copson 2017, 76–78; Gray 2018, 80–85). Those that extensively use absolutism or their penal system to enforce this view might be described as *totalitarian atheists* or *autocratic atheists*. Juxtaposed to that view is the opposition in US humanism to, for example, the atheist ideology of the Soviet Union (e.g., Huxley 1952, 203–4).

On perhaps a less negative view of theism, John Gray has referred to the category of “misotheist” as a type of atheist (2018, 94–104). His colloquial term for these atheists is “god-haters.” One of his examples is Donatiel

A. François, a.k.a., Marquis de Sade. In Gray's telling, François called himself an atheist, but in many instances exhibited a belief in the existence of god. Thus, Sade would fall into the category of a theist who was misotheist. For someone who hates god has to believe in the existence of god and therefore is not even a negative atheist. But one could easily justify recognizing a category of atheists who hate the concept of god(s) and the belief in (nonexistent) god(s) by other people. This view would qualify as *misotheistic atheism*. For purposes of this article, the question then becomes whether there are *misotheistic humanists*. Certainly, organized humanism in the US generally does not advocate misotheism, and while it discourages it, it does not reject it out of hand. Rather, humanism's pluralism generally respects the right of theists to have and express their beliefs, so humanism discourages misotheism. Arguably, individual humanists may nonetheless hate the concept of god(s) and the belief in (nonexistent) god(s) by other people, which would make them *misotheistic humanists*.

Another subcategory of anti-religious atheists would be *anti-theist atheists*. This view considers it bad for other people to believe in a god or gods. An example of an anti-theist atheist might be Christopher Hitchens. He detailed many ways that god-belief has led people historically to engage in war, genocide, pogroms, fratricide, and other kinds of persecution (2007). As for humanists, a large chunk are probably indifferent to others' acceptance of theism, instead putting more emphasis on whether other beliefs of individual theists are good or bad, such as supernaturalism. That said, the proportion of humanists who are anti-theist may increase along the range from agnostic to atheist. Organized humanism, too, varies in the extent to which it is neutral to theism or anti-theist.

A still less virulently anti-religious form of atheism might be a *secular atheism*. "Secularism" tends to connote a view of the role of religion in the *public sphere*. Thus, secular atheism is atheism that supports at least secularism on the part of the government and government officials in the exercise of their office. It may extend to advocating the exercise of religion only in private (see Copson 2017, 90). Either way, it tolerates religion practiced in the proper place. One characterization of corresponding humanists has put them in the category of freethinking, as in "we can do without religion; we are better off without it" (Duyndam 2017, 706). Interestingly, as previously noted, the corresponding humanist rubric, *secular humanism*, has at first blush additional implications. First, like the phrase, *scientific humanism*, it has a history of being used to distinguish nonreligious humanism from *religious humanism*. The phrase *secular atheism* does not have that baggage. Second, as noted earlier, *secular humanism* often connotes more of a positively atheistic humanism. In contrast, *secular atheism* clearly can be positive or negative atheism. These semantic issues aside, secular humanists would only constitute secular atheists if, in addition to being atheist, they specifically supported secularism on the part of the government, government officials, and, perhaps, the rest of society.

Atheism is not a religion (Martin 2007, 220–21). But atheists might also be more than tolerant of religion, like many humanists are. Atheists can embrace a religious worldview that has pronounced elements of spirituality, ritual, reverence, and other accoutrements of religions. An appropriate moniker for them would be *religious atheists*, an example of which is Ronald Dworkin (2013, 5). It has been argued that William James fell into this category (Fuller 2017, 577), although others have argued he was more in the pantheist or deist category (Lachs 2008, 310). In any event, a subcategory of religious atheists might be *atheistic religious naturalists*. The emphasis in that moniker is of course on naturalism, rather than atheism. But it seems to fit the category. It consists of "a religious perspective that focuses on nature—on the entire, ongoing, ever-changing universe—as the impersonal focus of religious concern" (Lewis n.d., 37). It may propound a cosmogony based on the idea of "the epic of evolution" of the universe. This cosmogony, like many theories of physics, may always remain a theory. Regardless, the long-term effort for humanity is to "minimize the caricature" (61–63) so as to demythologize the narrative to the extent possible. Such narratives, alleged to be based in science, are compatible with *religious humanism* (arguably, it would seem they would also satisfy scientific humanists), as are the liberal and progressive values that *atheistic religious naturalists* espouse (see 74–83).

Present-day humanism organized in the US a century ago as a predominantly religious, albeit nontheist, naturalist, and instrumentalist outlook (Murn 2018d, 232–34). This *religious humanism* quickly gained nonreligious competitors, but it remains a significant component of the US humanist movement (see, e.g.,

Duyndam 2017, 706). Its variations have particular accoutrements of religions, including celebrants for life events. Even early critics noted that defining humanism as a religion stretches the notion “so wide and sweeping that the word religion loses all distinctive meaning. For such a definition brings under the category of religion practically everything [humans] do” (Lamont 1936, 82). In any case, religious humanism may be in for more competition. As more states permit official secular celebrants, the range of celebrants in the U.S. for atheist events is likely to proliferate.

No doubt there are subgroups within the element of present-day *religious atheists*. One possibility is represented perhaps by Sam Harris. Harris argues that spirituality is compatible with atheism. For example, he advocates the use of meditation for spiritual health. I would suggest that Harris in this respect is a *spiritual atheist* or even, given his writings, a *mystical atheist*—whether Jean-Paul Sartre was a mystical atheist has been propounded and disputed (see Kirkpatrick 2013)—or more specifically, a *scientific mystical atheist*. Arguably, a spiritual atheist might be religious or nonreligious. In contrast, a related concept, *secular spirituality*, “reflects an attempt to locate optimal human experience within a nonreligious context of existential and cosmic meaning” (Van Ness 1996, 7). By definition, secular spirituality clearly “reflects the recent tendency to distinguish between the words religion/religious and spiritual/spirituality...,” which “have historically been synonymous” (Fuller 2017, 574). The secular version is nonreligious, in that, as paraphrased from James, it obtains “existential and cosmic meaning by adjusting ourselves to some kind of unseen order” (218). In contrast, the atheist version could be religious.

On the humanist side, while there are certainly those who oppose admitting that humanism allows for the spiritual (Famelant 2008, 3), some humanists of the *religious humanist* tradition as well as other purely nonreligious humanists (Ellis-Jones 2015, 47–48) are comfortable with the idea of the *spiritual humanist*. Indeed, even a “natural mysticism” has been summoned within the realm of humanist thought, where it is in the nature of a “sensual experience” beyond the reach of science. But it is still purely natural and worldly, whether apprehended in wilderness or in the midst of human interaction and association (Patton 1943, 94–96).

Atheism can also include support for religious freedom that includes the right to not have a religion and be atheist (see Copson 2017, 97–98). This kind of atheism might be described as *pluralist atheism*. The pluralism of that atheism corresponds to the generally accepted norm of pluralism in humanism. Nonetheless, *pluralist humanism* has been called *inclusive humanism* and represented as believing “although I may be a not a believer myself, the majority of the world population is religious in one way or another, so let’s keep the dialogue open to learn from one another” (Duyndam 2017, 706). For humanism, pluralism has implications also for epistemology as well as values and ultimately public policy that humanists support. Those implications provide the basis for turning now to differentiation of types of atheists based on the ontological considerations underlying the epistemology.

3. Ontology

Atheists may view ontology from a naturalist perspective (Fales 2007, 126–28). For these purposes, I will define naturalism as being inherently scientific, in that science is the means for most accurately discerning what nature is, as in what is natural. So the various types of naturalistic ontology accept the evidence that nature exists, in some sense of the words. Humanism is a naturalism and also accepts this evidence. Thus, *naturalistic ontological atheism* as well as the more narrowly drawn *physicalist atheism* are generally compatible with the beliefs of humanists who are atheist, perhaps except when the *naturalistic ontological atheism* starts venturing into abstractions, dualisms, and the like.

Accordingly, atheists might adhere to a dualistic ontology, accepting of a mind-body distinction (Shook 2011, 2) or accepting of property (Fales 2007, 119) or substance dualism (Fales 2007, 121, 127). It seems that such *ontologically dualistic atheists* do not have much of a correlate in humanism. Ontological dualism does not comport with humanism. Concomitantly, scientific humanism rejects the mind-body distinction on empirical grounds (Kurtz 1983, 169). Of course, an obvious exception to this generality are *transhumanists* who suggest

that the human psyche or consciousness might someday be transferrable to a machine (e.g., Benedikter 2015, 138).

Yet another type of ontology that naturalists might choose to accept is synoptic monism. *Synoptically monist atheists* may take the perspective of dual aspect monism or panpsychism. Under one definition of this view, “[s]cience needs assistance from other ways of knowledge to fully understand reality” (Shook 2011, 2). While aspect monism or panpsychism is compatible with naturalism, whether it fits US humanism is a finer question. Certainly, scientific humanists have acknowledged that science has not yet explained much about reality that is perceived (Murn 2018c, 189–91), but the scope of that acknowledgment is limited to what is also perceived by others. In contrast, synoptic monism supposes purely mental entities, evidence of which, other than perceptions registered mostly by proponents of synoptic monism, is scant. Arguably, humanism, then, would demand scientific evidence that something as supposedly noumenal as such entities exist outside the mind of the believer. Nonetheless, for example, Robert Wright considers himself a *secular humanist*, but asserts purpose in the universe, even to the point of suggesting that natural selection evolved for a reason (2000, 310–14).

Similarly, two additional types of ontologically naturalistic atheism are those in the categories of “perspectival realism” and “transcendent realism” (Shook 2011, 3). The definition of these views focuses in each case on supposition that mental entities must exist in the universe even if science may never explain them. Again, internal perceptions inherently underlie these views, rather than external verifiable scientific evidence. This feature in common with synoptic monism raises the question of what ontological distinction is in play. At first glance, these three views might be characterized as epistemologically unscientific, rather than making an ontological distinction. Of relevance to my purposes, they all in fact depend on a version of a two-part ontological assumption that (1) the perceived mental entities are real and (2) science will never explain these entities.

Recapping on the humanist view of synoptic monism that I set forth above, the humanist insistence on objective evidence of such entities is incompatible with (1). As for (2), while scientific humanism acknowledges that obtaining scientific evidence of certain aspects of reality may forever elude humans due to physical realities, humanism does not assume or even presume that that will prove true for any *particular* aspects of reality.

More straightforwardly, atheists can hold at least three views of ontology and whether science yields knowledge about reality that are clearly not within the realm of naturalist views of ontology. They include: (1) radical skepticism, (2) the anti-scientific perspective holding that science does not describe any part of reality, and (3) skepticism of science that holds that non-scientific perspectives almost always describe reality better than scientific perspectives (Shook 2011, 2). One could perhaps add to this group *ontologically quietist atheists*, who believe there is no way to know what is real. Generally, it might suffice to loosely call this group *skeptical atheists*. I think it is safe to say that these views are incompatible with humanism. That argument relies foremost on the centrality of naturalistic epistemology to humanism in the US. That said, as recently as the 1920's or so, the *new humanism* of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More fell into the skeptical category. To varying degrees, these humanists rejected scientific knowledge in favor of the humanities. That emphasis also earned their movement the alternate name, *literary humanism*. While there may still be adherents to this philosophy, as a movement it would appear to me, in my admittedly not exhaustive research to date, to be moribund.

4. Epistemology

Atheists may view epistemology from a methodological naturalist perspective (Fales 2007, 121–22). For these purposes, I am referring to naturalistic epistemology in general, not the theory that humans simply cannot know the supernatural (see Fales 2007, 125). So methodological naturalism accepts the idea that human knowledge comes from perception and comprehension of the nature that exists in naturalistic ontology, however problematic human faculties of perception and comprehension may be. Humanism is a naturalism and also accepts a form of naturalistic epistemology. However, the story does not end there.

Naturalistic epistemology may be subdivided on the basis of “the number of scientific fields permitted to describe reality” (Shook 2011, 4–5). The categories of physicalism, scientism, and pluralism cover the range from pure physics to physical sciences to all sciences. So one therefore must consider *epistemologically physicalist atheism*, *epistemologically scientific atheist*, and *epistemologically pluralist atheist*. Humanism, by contrast, specifically arose as the adoption of social sciences into naturalistic philosophy (see Nickels 1933, 154). Thus, of the three listed, only *epistemologically pluralist atheist* is compatible with US humanism.

One broad category I propose, for purposes of this discussion, is *unscientific atheist*. Certainly, there are atheists who reject the scientific method as a basis for establishing truth. Others simply misunderstand the scientific method and are therefore unscientific in their approach to truth, if not also in their rhetoric. At the same time, atheists who accept science may advocate theories contrary to the scientific evidence or not supported by existing evidence. For example, Harris has argued that dualism between mind and body is still a possibility, and it has been suggested that his position is erroneous (Farmelant 2008, 3). Either way, Harris’ position does not necessarily push him into the camp of unscientific atheists if his overall outlook is scientific.

Humanism’s insistence upon a scientific basis for epistemology thereby certainly excludes wholly *unscientific atheists* from the ranks of humanists. As with atheism, individual humanists have at times made even grievous mistakes in trying to interpret the facts of scientific findings. However, their errors are not the errors of humanism itself. For example, Julian Huxley’s misstatement of evolutionary principles early in his career falls into that category. Huxley as an individual early on embraced the view of the inferiority of Africans to Europeans (Gray 2018, 53–54). But humanism as a philosophy has never done so.

Progressivist atheists like Karl Marx consider progress an inevitable fact (Gray 2018, 32–33) and may also qualify as *unscientific atheists*, at least in that respect. That includes those who rely on evolution to assert an inevitability of progress. Some readers may recoil at such a notion, but humanists have to recognize that acceptance of atheism does not mean acceptance of scientific epistemology. While it may well be that British and Continental humanists believe in the continuous progress of human society, humanists in the US have acknowledged the constant struggle to maintain gains that have been made from the beginning in the face of an indifferent universe (e.g., Otto 1924, 289). Recently, Steven Pinker has explained that humanists do not “believe” that humans and their societies have been improving, we *know* it based on the vast evidence proving that has occurred, albeit with periodic regression. But humanism does not assume progress will generally continue in perpetuity unless we humans make it happen (2018, 13, 15, 16). Indeed, since the early days of US humanism, humanists have forcefully argued that people not following humanist and similar principles are in danger of destroying the progress humanity has made (e.g., Morain & Reiser 1943, 53, 55–56).

Another basis for epistemology in atheism is John Stuart Mill’s rationalism. I suggest the corresponding category of *rationalist atheist*. A corresponding “rationalist atheology” may be invoked “[w]here logic suffices to expose theological fallacies and raise skeptical doubts towards arguments for god’s existence” (Shook 2014, 32). As a rationalism, rationalist atheism values only knowledge gained on the basis of pure reason. Strictly speaking, I would argue that atheist humanists cannot fall into this category. Certainly, humanism has had to fight rationalist tendencies among its supporters. Unquestionably, humanism needs to up its game on the role of emotions and values in its philosophy and in everyday life. But humanism’s valuing of reason as does rationalism does not render humanism rationalist. For humanism counterweights human values derived from experience against the knowledge gained from application of reason to the evidence that gives humans more power to affect their fate. By definition, rationalist atheism does not do that.

A materialist version of rationalism is historicism. Historicism has been described as the view that “all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish” (Strauss 1965, 25). The implication is that “however much thought has changed and will change, it will always remain historical.” In other words, reason is valid only when applied to the present. Thought is thus relative to history. In historicism, “history” is all of history. Within those parameters, an *historicist atheist* is certainly conceivable. In contrast, humanism is incompatible with historicism as so defined. First, the same objection as that to rationalism applies. Second,

humanism relies on only a scientific understanding of history for its methodology. A third objection, one which belongs in the discussion of axiology, below, and should be understood in relation to the axiology of humanism that is relative to human experience discussed there, is that historicism views values as historical in an objective way: there may be nothing meaningful to say about them other than that they are historical.

A further methodological comparison involves analytic philosophy. The category of *analytic atheist* has been previously deployed (see Pigden 2017, 309). A subcategory of analytic atheists is *verificationist or falsificationist atheists* (312, 314). This subcategory's methodological requirement of verifiability or falsifiability of the question of the existence of deities is unusual. The assertion of meaninglessness of that question due to its unverifiability or unfalsifiability seems to correlate with agnosticism in humanist thought. It certainly flies in the face of secular humanism's naturalism, on the basis of which secular humanists generally observe that there is no evidence for deities. The question whether there are any deities has meaning, and agnostic humanists would by definition think that there is insufficient basis for concluding whether any exist.

The overarching category of *analytic atheists* suggests the corresponding category of *analytic humanist*. In contrast with *verificationist* or *falsificationist atheists*, finding the overlap between analytic atheists and humanism is easy. On the one hand, Bertrand Russell was a co-founder of analytic philosophy, though not a verificationist (312), and wrote several atheist tracts (307). On the other hand, Corliss Lamont estimated the later Russell to be a naturalistic humanist. Russell called himself a humanist (Murn 2018e, 61). As already noted, analytic humanists who are agnostic or nontheist would not fall in the analytic atheist camp. Russell's values generally correspond to the values of US humanism. But of course, other analytic atheists might have differences with humanism in various respects, including on values. That gives me a segue into a more general axiological comparison of atheists and humanists.

5. Axiology in General

Nietzsche is credited with the idea of “transvaluation”: the need to derive new values after atheism discredits religious values (Onfray 2007, 34–35). Onfray summarizes nicely:

Do away with God, yes, but then what? Another morality, a new ethic, values never before thought of because unthinkable, this innovation is what makes it possible to arrive at atheism and to surpass it. A formidable task, and one still to be brought to fruition.

Onfray says that Nietzscheanism calls for “proposing alternative hypotheses” to advance transvaluation in the face of nihilism. Transvaluation must eclipse “the religious and secular hypotheses born of the monotheisms.... [A]theism alone makes an exit from nihilism possible.”

Onfray borrows Gilles Deleuze’s concept of *quiet atheism* on this point. Onfray takes quiet atheism to consist of (55–56):

less a static concern with negating or fighting God than a dynamic method designed for postconflict reconstruction. Negation of God is not an end in itself, but a means of working toward a post-Christian or frankly secular ethic.

By conscious human design, the balancing of human values with reason is key to humanism. Humanism’s advancement of human values is centrally important to humanism. I dare say it was intentionally made a part of contemporary US humanism, in order to counter not only the problems with rationalism, but also for “postconflict reconstruction.” Functionally, that balancing of human values with the use of reason to establish scientific truth fundamentally distinguishes humanism from rationalism, not to mention many other naturalist philosophies. So the idea of a “rationalist humanism” is simply an oxymoron. By definition, it is impossible, because classic rationalism asserts that values are *a priori*, while humanism asserts that values are *a posteriori*, in that they are gleaned from human action, problem-solving, and highly variable human nature. Humanism and, among others, rationalism have different sources for their values.

One category of rationalist atheists who think they can generate values from reason is the objectivists, such as Ayn Rand. Another name for this tradition is “(rational) egoism” (Biddle 2012). These *objectivist atheists* or *egoistic atheists* are rationalist, in that they claim they derive their values from reason. But they specifically assert that the values they derive from reason value only egoistic action and disvalue all altruistic action (Biddle 2012; Gray 2018, 50). Of course, they are unable to derive these values solely from reason, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Rather, by any reading of their views, they have *chosen* those egoistic values. Be that as it may, those values become the point of differentiation of *objectivist atheists* or *egoistic atheists* from humanism.

Here, I have to discuss a fissure in the humanist movement that does not get much attention. In fact, it has been suggested that Rand espoused secular humanism (Gray 2018, 47–52). Indeed, objectivists like Rand may qualify as humanists outside the US. But humanist values in the US exclude them. Those values have always been egalitarian and progressive (Murn 2018b, 99–100). But European (e.g., EHF 2022; HUK 2022; HVD 2022) and international humanist statements (WBC 2002) do not include egalitarianism in their stated values, and those values do not otherwise exclude objectivists and egoists. If anything, Rand is an anti-humanist atheist: a (*political*) *libertarian atheist*. At least with respect to values of humanism *in the US*.

To be clear, I add the “political” qualifier to distinguish Randists from “civil libertarians” who fight for human rights. In general, I view political libertarians as seeking the freedom to impose their personal power on other people, while civil libertarians seek institutionalization of individual rights as limits on, and therefore protection against, political libertarians. Civil libertarianism can be quite compatible with humanism, depending of course on the human rights advanced. For despite the contention of its critics, humanism derives its values from human action, problem-solving, and highly variable human nature, including compassion (Murn 2018b, 96–97).

Perhaps as an extension of rationalist atheism is atheism that makes a religion of science. I purposely left out of my earlier discussion of unscientific atheism those atheists who have an unscientific view of values. Rationalists are in that category, because they think they can generate values from reason alone.

That category includes the New Atheist thinkers who assert ethics from science. These atheists seem to agree with rationalist atheists in that they also think ethics are *a priori*, given they assert a scientific basis for ethics. Given that science generally is the search for truth, implicit in this view is that ethics are some kind of truth. George Moore called this concept the “naturalistic fallacy” more than a century ago (1968, 9–13). Given that scientific naturalists like humanists in the US view values as not coming from science, they rejected that view in the first half of the 20th century. Not surprisingly, the New Atheists have neither demonstrated they can prove a scientific basis for a system of ethics, nor disputed the humanist view on the source of ethics. As a name for the New Atheists’ assertion, I might suggest the phrase *metaphysically naturalistic atheists*. Again, the views of these *metaphysically naturalistic atheists* are not compatible with humanism. That statement requires the clarification that metaphysical naturalism (see Fales 2007, 127–28), the view that at least some values, and perhaps many values, can be derived *a priori* from nature, has been rather uncommon among US humanists. Those humanists who have taken that view have called on such concepts as natural law and philosophical naturalism for their *a priori* values. However, those humanists have yet to establish a sound basis for asserting the objectivity of those values, a century after Moore laid down his challenge. I would argue, then, that that view of values is at the minority view within humanism, given the dominant view of the origin of human values in human experience.

Some other atheists do not find values purely from reason or in science. One such group is *axiologically relativist atheists* (Wielenberg 2017, 94). Humanism in the US openly rejects the notion of ethics or morals being true and adopts a relativist axiological stance. Humanist values and disvalues derive from “experience” and “the purposive nature of humans” (Murn 2018b, 96–97). However, not all humanists may deny objective values (see Law 2013, 263). Even humanists get caught up in the trope that relativism is the equivalent of nihilism (270). Rather, the relativism of US humanism recognizes some values are more desirable or beneficial

than others (Kurtz 2008, 96–103). Thus, humanists who are atheists are relativist atheists, but not necessarily the reverse.

One specific group of relativist atheists are *Marxist atheists*. The literature on atheism doesn't widely discuss this group, probably because Marxisms tend to be all-encompassing worldviews of which atheism is just a part. As a counterpart, *Marxist humanism* has its advocates, who may argue that Marxism is the best humanism (see, e.g., Marković 2018). The considerable debate about whether Marxism is a humanism (see Murn 2018a, 47–48) is beyond the scope of this article. I think it suffices to say that at least some Marxist atheists would fall within the range of Marxist humanists. The ambiguity lies in the range of views called Marxist. That, too, is beyond the scope of this article.

In the skeptical vein, *nihilistic atheists* are of course those who view morals and other values as nonexistent (see Wielenberg 2017, 94). Their equivalence of all values is totally alien to humanism (Law 2013, 270). That humanists hold that human values come from experience renders humanists and nihilistic atheists mutually exclusive groups. One might persuasively therefore argue that Nietzsche was not a humanist.

Another form of skepticism is existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre was an *existential atheist* (Stone 2013, 279, 283), although not necessarily in that order. He argued that as free individuals without essence, each human is free to create oneself, one's own values. Existentialism has faced the charge that it is little more than nihilism, providing little to distinguish it from cultural relativism (286–88). Whether existentialism is a humanism, as Sartre argued early on, has been controversial since he proposed it (see Murn 2018a, 46). The part about creating oneself is at least similar to the self-actualization in humanistic psychology. In short, for my purposes, arguments that existentialism is compatible with humanism (see, e.g., Domhoff 2018) ground the proposition that existential atheism may at least in part be compatible with humanism.

Of course, the range of human values is vast, and one could make numerous comparisons between atheists and humanists along that range. An expansive consideration of those differences could fill a book. Not the least reason for that is because it would necessarily entail a murky assessment of what values do and don't fall within the range of humanist values. The opposite is true of atheists, as it seems that atheists could hold almost any set of values other than theistic values. Accordingly, the rest of my discussion will consider a few illustrative categories of humanist values in relation to values that atheists might hold.

Discussion of the source of values leads next to the question of values that are not purely philosophical. Discussion of not purely philosophical values in atheism truly opens up the full range of political and public policy views that people have.

6. Political Value Sets

For their impact on society, political values are an important category of not purely philosophical values. They specify the distribution of power in society, so they set the framework of personal and social action. In general, humanism is compatible with atheism accepting similar political values, and vice versa. Of course, there is a range of opinion on many of these issues within humanism. I will not try to define that range here, but instead cite only a couple broad examples. Humanism supports democracy, so it is compatible with atheism that does so as well.

On the other side of the coin, one can posit the category of *nationalist atheists*. There is nothing internally inconsistent in the notion. The German Nazi movement has been suggested as fitting the bill (Gray 2018, 85–89), the only problem being that Adolf Hitler was not atheist and the Nazi movement did not espouse atheism. In present-day US, some nationalists may also be atheist (see, e.g., Mehta 2017). In contrast, I would argue nationalism and humanism are incompatible, because humanism does not support arbitrary division of humans based on the borders of historical nation-states. Instead, humanism supports the internationalist view of all humans having a common bond based on common origin and collective habitation on planet earth. The

planetary humanist view (Murn 2018a, 45–46; Tapp 2015) is certainly opposed to nationalism. Beyond that, humanists tend to have political values compatible with their personal values.

7. Religious Value Sets

Some personal values come in a religious package. Atheists' views of moral and ethical values can have their roots in old-time religion. Scholars have debated whether several Asian "religions" or belief systems are themselves nontheistic or atheist in the negative sense. Examples include Buddhism (Martin 2007, 223–27; Skilton 2013), Confucianism (Martin 2007, 227–29); Jainism (Martin 2007, 221–23; Valley 2013), and Lokayata Hinduism (Frazier 2013, 370–72). It is difficult to fit them into the definition of atheism, however, and they mostly seem more appropriate in a category that I might refer to as *amonotheistic*. I say that because they more consist of a deism (Confucianism) or a pantheism with supernatural beings having powers usually associated with the minor deities (e.g., angels in Christianity) in monotheistic religions (Buddhism, Jainism, Lokayata). But I am not going to attempt to resolve the question here. Instead, the clearer statement is that atheists might nonetheless hold the values advanced by those religions and simply not believe in any supernatural elements of the religions. In that way, one can speak of a *Buddhist atheist*, or a *Jain atheist*, or a *Lokayata atheist*. Those categories of atheists, as I have denominated them, could have humanist counterparts. In fact, those possibilities could be an avenue for more scholarly elaboration.

Where the "old-time" religion is Judaism, the notion of an "atheist Jew" relies on the "distinction between those Jews who profess atheism and decamp from Judaism and those who insist that they are both Jews and atheists" (Berlinerblau 2013, 333). For its part, the category of *Jewish atheists* is easy to match up with that of *Jewish humanists*. Obviously, in its most common form, Humanistic Judaism, the components of the name are reversed. Substantively, it includes both negative and positive atheists, while retaining Jewish values and identity (Society). Certainly to the extent that Jewish atheists hold values commensurate with humanism, including methodological naturalism, they would constitute Jewish humanists. On the other side, agnostic Jewish humanists would not fall into the Jewish positive atheist category.

Where the "old-time" religion is Christianity, one might speak of a category of *Christian atheism*—not to be confused with the *atheist Christian* (Onfray 2007, 55–57). It seems doubtless that Christian atheists have Christian values but not Christian ontology, alethology, or epistemology. Atheists described as believing that knowledge can provide "salvation" or in a type of millenarianism amounting to a religion of science have been described in terms fitting to that rubric (Gray 2018, 80–85). Thomas J.J. Althizer's version has been characterized as viewing the death of Jesus to be God's giving up of omnipotence (Caputo 2007, 276–77). In the same general category would be the *Catholic atheist* (Farmelant 2008, 9). Certainly, the only way to understand such an otherwise oxymoron is as another axiologically positivist view. While it might have a naturalist epistemology, Catholic atheism would conceivably have values corresponding to those of some definition of Catholicism (see Miano 1971). On the humanist side, a supernaturalist *Christian humanism* has been posited as a bulwark against the alleged failure of reason. It harkened to an absolute truth and absolute value (Maritain 1942, 107), when it actually was relative to the teachings of self-selected Christian prophets, theologians, and clergy. Accordingly, the epistemology, ontology, cosmology, and cosmogony of this "theocentric humanism" (168) conflict in whole or in part with those of scientific humanism in the US today. Christian humanism thus falls into the category of unscientific humanism at the least. Further, it places "spiritual things, religious faith, and the Church" on a "higher plane" than mere "temporal things, philosophical and scientific reason" (166). Christian humanism provides humans with their end (173), rather than leaving it to the individual to exercise his or her liberty in pursuit of the meaning of his or her own life. Furthermore, depending upon which version of Christianity is in play, other values of Christianity may be inconsistent with the human values of scientific humanism. And finally, supernatural humanisms would be inconsistent with both negative and positive atheisms. Given the recent antipathy of religious leaders to scientific humanism, I would surmise that the number of people calling themselves Christian humanists today is tiny.

I'll include in this discussion of religious value sets the idea that people might make a religion of science. John Gray proposed Voltaire as an example of an atheist who made a religion of science. Gray assumes Voltaire was an atheist (Gray 2018, 60–62). In the same category might be those who adhere to scientism to the extent that they exclude human experience from the valid sources of values, and/or assert that values are objective and have their source somewhere in the universe. Certainly, collective principles of US humanism do not make a religion of science, although conceivably individuals who call themselves humanist might.

8. Other Moral and Ethical Values

Generally, nonreligious atheists may have the full range of possible moral and ethical values. The range of human values in humanism are not nearly as broad. That is to say, humanism in the US is pluralistic, but its human values respect human rights from an egalitarian perspective. The major Humanist Manifestos provide a pretty good picture of those morals and ethics, and atheists who do not agree with them would not be humanists.

Onfray calls for *atheistic atheism*, which he defines as a *postmodern atheism* that “divests itself of its theological and scientific trappings in order to construct a moral system” (2007, 57–58). He only clarifies that sources for such a system may include “philosophy, reason, utility, pragmatism, individual and social hedonism.” He mentions only two individuals, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Of course, their utilitarianism corresponds to aspects of pragmatism in humanism. But the notion of throwing off “scientific trappings” brings it into direct conflict with humanism’s scientific naturalism. There is certainly more to say about that, but there is more to the story of *postmodern atheism* that needs elaboration first.

For Postmodernism itself claims an interdependence between atheism and religion. So how can atheism be postmodern at all? Derrida claimed only to “pass as an atheist” (Derrida 1999, 155), yet reportedly held “messianic” beliefs and espoused a “religion without religion” (Caputo 2007, 279). But what that is he never makes clear, perhaps intentionally so, in the hope that some new alternative might be discerned. In accordance with his view of deconstruction, he suggested a third option of undecidability between religion and atheism (274–76). But his messianic tendency corresponds to the idea of a postmodernist hoping for “justice to come.” These ideas seem to fall within his category of the “undeconstructable.” Certainly, any expectation that the future will bring justice—leaving aside the question whether “justice” itself is deconstructable—is not compatible with humanism. Arguably, that is because humanism would certainly consider expectations about the future to be deconstructable as unfounded self-deception. That certain is one not good way of throwing off “scientific trappings.” For, again, humanism does not accept the inevitability of progress.

But Onfray’s *postmodern atheism* has a bigger problem. Throwing off “scientific trappings” appears to include rejecting the pluralism inherent in the scientific viewpoint. After all, he calls for construction of “a moral system.” A moral *system* implies a monist viewpoint, as if there is one systematic set of morals that may be constructed to apply to all. That kind of absolutist philosophy is exactly what humanism rejects, whether theist or atheist.

9. Other Social Values

Beyond religion and postmodernism, there are lots of possible sets of social values on which atheists and humanists may or may not agree. Certain atheists have been called out as having racist and elitist values. For example, Bolshevism has been put into this category (Gray 2018, 80–85). Gray, who assumes Voltaire was an atheist, cites racist comments by Voltaire. Gray argues that his foundation for those comments was reason (Gray 2018, 60–62). On the other side of the political spectrum, there are avowed right-wing atheists who are also racist and/or elitist. That includes at least some white nationalists in the US (see, e.g., Mehta 2017). I would suggest the proper moniker for these atheists is *racist or elitist atheists*. On the humanist side, US humanism’s embrace of egalitarianism and anti-racism excludes both racist and elitist atheists. Already in the middle of the 20th century, humanist Alain Locke set forth principles of cultural pluralism as the antidote to cultural absolutism, which is inherently divisive. Locke pointed out principles of cultural relativity that don’t

view all cultures as the same, but instead look for “cultural equivalence” in shared values, “cultural reciprocity” of recognition of different cultures as having a variety of points of comparison, and a “limited cultural convertibility” that recognizes cultural exchange, rather than displacement or replacement (1989, 73).

More generally, “[t]here is no inherent connection between secularity and political progressivism” (Smith 2017, 522). Certainly, there is no logical connection, and there is some evidence that secularity occurs with a wide range of political views. The same is definitely true of atheists, even if the modalities of political views among atheists may vary. By contrast, the egalitarianism of US humanism no doubt limits the overlap between atheists and humanists on that count.

On the progressive side, atheists can be feminist (e.g., Overall 2007, 233, 243) or not. In my observation, individual humanists also can be feminist or not. Certainly, given the human values of humanism in the U.S., the percentage of humanists in the U.S. who are feminists is much higher than the percentage of atheists in the U.S. who are feminists. However, none of the various manifestos and statements mention feminism. Starting with the *Humanist Manifesto II*, equal rights for women and reproductive freedom are recognized positions. The *Manifesto* was also the first to recognize sexual freedom, so US humanism is an anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia viewpoint (Lamont 1982, 321). Certainly, atheism does not necessarily entail either of those values.

As discussed earlier, the term “progressivist” is already in use for the view that progress as valuable and inevitable, but the aforementioned political progressivism is contingent. So atheists in that category might be *contingent progressivist atheists*. I already mentioned Pinker’s view that in the long term, progress has occurred. He took pains to point this out because humanism values progress. Thus, *contingent progressivist humanists* have similar views in that regard with their atheist counterparts.

The opposite of progressivist atheists might be atheists who not only don’t value progress, but perhaps shun it. Gray falls into this category. He clearly is not just opposed to the idea that progress is inevitable. He is opposed to the idea that progress is *desirable*. He states flatly that pursuing progress, which in his mind includes anything from self-improvement to struggling for justice, is a waste of time (2003, 197–98). He praises idleness, which makes his disparagement of Russell ironic, given that the latter wrote an essay praising idleness before Gray came along. Russell’s own argument comes closer to the truth about humanist views of the broad view of progress Gray attacks. Thus, it might be in the realm of, for lack of a better moniker, *anti-progressivist atheism*. In contrast, humanism in the US embraces diversity and pluralism, recognizing that some people will pursue progress and others may not. Humanism in the US is much more oriented toward the liberty of individuals to choose idleness or progress for themselves. But I would argue that humanism and a doctrine of anti-progressivism are not compatible. Certainly, humanists will argue about what constitutes progress and that some developments considered by certain sectors of society as progress—for example, unsustainable practices—are in fact not progress. But that is different than opposing all efforts and ideas for change.

Even Gray’s notion of what is not progress could arguably be a progressive step in the right direction. He cites Schopenhauer as being detached to the point of valuing the silencing of the will. Yet Gray admits that Schopenhauer’s views were mystical in the manner of many religions.

Gray lauds George Santayana for combining value relativism with an ideal of contemplation. Santayana was content to detach and isolate himself from the cares of the world and did not care about progress, according to Gray (2018, 129). But Santayana nonetheless praised a state of mind he had achieved that might be called “mindfulness” today. That suggests Santayana could be considered a spiritual atheist. Depending on the point of reference, that state of mind could easily fall into the category of “progress.” It certainly can under the values of humanistic psychology.

Gray was attracted to what he described as the quietism of Spinoza and Lev Shestov (2018, 147–56), but their religiosity interfered with their compatibility with Gray’s project. He seems to call it “atheism of silence.” I might suggest the moniker, *quietist atheist*, for Gray. As for humanism, quietism of this psychological variety

seems compatible as a personal choice. I think *quietist humanism* is therefore quite feasible. In my opinion, for many people, being quietist would be an improvement over their present state of mind and being. Also, for humanists who don't like the rubric of spirituality, quietism would seem to come right up to the edge of spirituality without going over the line.

10. Where This Leaves Us

Quietism seems to be a good point for bringing my thought experiment to an end. I can reflect on where this discussion has gone. Only humanism that is agnostic is incompatible with positive atheism, and only humanism that is agnostic or nontheist is categorically incompatible with negative atheism. Conversely, given that lack of belief in a deity is central to positive atheism and express belief in the nonexistence of any deities at all is central to negative atheism, the range of other beliefs that are compatible with those values is wide-ranging. More selective, humanism specifically asserts a naturalistic ontology and epistemology. Along with that, humanism embraces more general human values that are pluralistic and egalitarian but derived from highly variable human nature and human experience. That combination makes humanism incompatible with atheism that accepts other ontologies, epistemologies, or more general values.

I have no doubt that more comparisons between atheism and humanism can and will be made beyond those I have made in this paper. Be that as it may, I hope this discussion helps move thought processes about the compatibility of atheism and humanism along. For my purposes, suffice it to say that there are indeed many, many types of atheism and atheists. While there are also many types of humanism, I think my thought experiment shows that there are many more types of atheism than types of humanism. I would argue that that is becoming more apparent as more people become atheist. Atheist organizations are seeing fights about values other than atheism, and I would predict those fights have just begun. In the past, humanist and atheist organizations easily worked together. But as atheism increases and religion decreases, the nature of the culture wars that humanists fight will change substantially. The struggle will migrate away from belief in deities versus nonbelief and toward what to believe about the full range of human experience outside a theist framework. The spectrum of atheist groups with different values not concerning atheism will fill in. Humanists and humanist groups will have to contend more and more with atheist organizations whose values are not compatible with humanism. Being relatively progressive in that realm, humanist thinkers and organizations will have to be on top of their game to meet the challenge.

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