

# Humanism, Atheism, and Nihilism

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Along your pathway, you've found that there are many directions to go. The questions that you've been considering in these lessons about origin, meaning, purpose, and morality have been with humanity forever. There are many different angles of approach and many different religious pathways.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Humanism vs. Secular Humanism](#)
2. [Atheism](#)
3. [Nietzsche and Nihilism](#)

## 1. Humanism vs. Secular Humanism

The formal possibility of a non-religious approach is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the history of religions and their evolution, the option or choice of a secular path had its formal appearance with certain philosophical and social movements during the late 18th and into the 19th centuries. This continues into the present day.



### DID YOU KNOW

Humanism is the belief that the proper study of human beings is humanity. Humanism of the Renaissance was almost always associated and integrated with some kind of religious practice, belief, and religious life. Secular humanism is specifically a non-religious response to the big questions. The concerns about an ultimate source of morality, such as the Abrahamic monotheistic god or a group of supernatural deities, are not of interest to the secular humanist. The argument goes that morality concerns the human realm. It can be solved by human beings and their institutions, such as politics and certain fields and applications of philosophy, science, et cetera.

## 2. Atheism

Historically this turning point, this conscious and determined turning away from religion, began around the time of the French Revolution in the late 1700s. Church and state were separated, and civil human issues were

addressed in their own domain without reference to religious belief and ideology.

This movement, the historic shift away from God, became known under many names. **Atheism** is the most comprehensive term. This is the belief that God just doesn't exist. Atheism is a very broad term that had uses in ancient Greece and throughout the Middle Ages.

The argument goes that atheism is a valid response to the questions about God, eternity, and all the unknown that religion tries to answer. It's valid because atheism makes no assumptions of truth. Religious beliefs make many assumptions, most of which are empirically and scientifically unprovable.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Atheism**

The belief that God does not exist.

## 3. Nietzsche and Nihilism

Secular humanism, along with different gradations of atheism, gained some popularity during the European Enlightenment, and later found their way into certain elements of German Idealism. There are many German idealists committed to the project of reconciling valid humanist concerns with the wisdom of a religious tradition.

With the tide of modernity and industrialization, there emerged a key figure in Germany. This was someone who crystallized and consolidated all the wayward strands of discouragement, malaise, and despair. At the same time, he harnessed a certain element of hope and affirmation of life. He harnessed the hope that man could pull himself out of the mess that he was so inclined to get himself into it.

Frederick Nietzsche was a German philosopher, philologist, and psychologist. His work in these disciplines was a critique of society and the direction he found it to be going. Atheism is a term that's often associated with Nietzsche and his critique. He believed in the power of the human spirit to manifest its own solutions to the moral and spiritual predicaments of the time.

**Nihilism** is also associated with Nietzsche. Nihilism has its etymological root in the Latin word "nihil," which means "nothing." You could think of nihilism as nothing-ism. It refers to the absence of any objective morality, value, or meaning.

Now the paradox is how can a whole school of thought and philosophy comprised of atheism and some elements of existentialism make conclusions about the lack of objectivity available to us? If not on the basis of objectivity, then subjectivity?

No. Not even that because then the ripe old questions of human agency in the world appear, and a nihilist denies the value of even that on the basis that they are human constructions. They are therefore artificial and devoid of meaning. It is like **Sisyphus** and his boulder.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Where are we? Where's religion and God in all this?

"God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him, yet his shadow still looms. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murders? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of Atonement? What sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods, simply to appear worthy of it?"

This is a striking observation and commentary on the state of modern man in society, and from Nietzsche's conclusion, there are several options left: utter despair and continued nihilism, overcoming the nothingness and pronounced valuelessness with belief, hope, and faith in human spirit, or some return to an as yet unknown origin perhaps in the arms and religion.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Nihilism

The belief that, with the "death" of God, there are no binding social, legal, or moral obligations on human beings.

##### Sisyphus

A figure in Greek mythology who was doomed to push the same boulder up the same mountain endlessly.



#### SUMMARY

The difference between **Humanism vs. Secular Humanism** only began in the late 18th century. Before this, there was very little option for a secular path. **Atheism** is the belief that God doesn't exist. Atheists believe this is a valid approach to the questions of life because it makes no untestable assumptions about life. **Nietzsche and nihilism** go hand in hand. Nietzsche believed in the power of the human spirit to manifest its own solutions.

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