

# Why Secular Humanism Can't Be Scientific

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Secular humanism is not a single set of beliefs. It comes in several flavors. Nevertheless, secular humanism does have some pervasive themes. Many secular humanists seem inclined to reject all beliefs that can't be demonstrated scientifically. This variety of secular humanism has a serious flaw: it is *logically inconsistent*. In this short essay I will lay bare the inconsistency for all to see.

Most secular humanists seem to agree that secular humanism is an outlook that embraces the value of humans while rejecting the existence of anything supernatural (and especially the existence of God). In practice, most secular humanists appear to reject anything that science can't demonstrate. Secular humanists often say that their beliefs are based on "critical thinking," "rationalism" or "skepticism." What this usually amounts to is a refusal to believe anything that isn't scientifically confirmed. (This refusal is not the same as rationalism or critical thinking, but some secular humanists talk as though it were the same.)

Secular humanists of this sort believe in the worth of humans, but they also refuse to believe anything that lacks scientific confirmation. The problem with this combination of beliefs is simple: the belief that humans have worth cannot be scientifically demonstrated! This belief is about values, not about facts. Therefore, one cannot confirm or disconfirm it through scientific methods. If you believe that humans have worth, or that human actions have worth, or that anything at all has worth, then you are embracing a belief that is outside the scope of science. Therefore, if you believe that humans have worth, and refuse to believe anything that isn't scientifically provable, you have fallen into logical inconsistency. To be a real humanist, you must admit at least one belief that is beyond science.

Secular humanists might try to rebut this argument by claiming that value judgments really are not beliefs at all, but are just reflections of personal decisions, or perhaps expressions of feeling. (The philosophers known as “ethical emotivists” might like this rebuttal.) But a little critical thinking reveals that this rebuttal is just a sleight of hand. If your value judgment that humans have worth is not really a belief, then you don’t really believe that humans have worth, so you are not a humanist—and that’s that. If, on the other hand, you hold the belief that humans have worth, then you believe something that isn’t within the power of science to prove or disprove. And if you don’t believe anything that isn’t scientifically testable, then you *cannot* consistently believe that humans have worth.

Secular humanists often claim that they believe in values and in the meaning of life, but they don’t believe that values and meaning have a supernatural source (such as God). This does not change what I just said about logical inconsistency. No matter where you think values come from, if you believe that something has value, then you believe something beyond the scope of science. The possibility that values and meaning have a purely natural origin does not free you from the hard choice. Either you reject the reality of values and meaning, or you bite the bullet and admit that you have a scientifically untestable belief.

A humanist can’t reject all beliefs that lie beyond the reach of science and still credibly claim to be a humanist. To reject scientifically untestable beliefs is to reject the possibility of believing that anything, including human life, has any real value or meaning. And that is the last thing an *honest* humanist would want to do.