

A Short History of Humanism

Brisbane Humanist Club of Friends

Brisbane, Australia

387 members

Meet Up Public group

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1. Context for people discovering humanism for the first time
2. Cicero to Erasmus to Spinoza and forward
3. Ethical Societies in Europe and America
4. The Australian story
5. Humanists Australia today

1. Context for people discovering humanism for the first time

Humanism can have a range of different meanings whether it's discussed as part of humanist literature, humanist politics, humanist education, or humanist psychology. Humanists Australia and other humanist organisations usually use the word in the context of a world view – a particular way of looking at the world, identifying our values and how we ought to live. Exploring the history of humanism can help us to find areas of commonality, but may not lead us to a core set of beliefs.

History is fundamentally about change so, by tracking the chain of events in the history of humanism, broadly speaking, we should be able to discover some kind of common understanding. This is itself a humanist historiography - interpreting the past as human experience.

Humanism first appeared as philosophical humanism, but our modern understanding of humanism is usually seen through the interconnection between the ancient western philosophers and their interpreters, particularly those who were prominent during the Italian Renaissance (14th century CE).

2. Cicero to Erasmus to Spinoza and Forward

Back in first century BCE, Marcus Tullius Cicero described values related to liberal education as the Latin concept *humanitas*, which corresponded to the Greek concepts of *philanthrôpia* (loving what makes us human) and *paideia* (education). The Italian thinkers referred to *umanisti*. It is a challenge to work through considerable historical 'layering' in what was to become known as the *Studia Humanitatis*, from scholars such as Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374; Petrarch), Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), Niccolò de' Niccoli (1364-1437) and Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459). This layering involved thinking which had occurred in the period between the ancients and the early moderns, including Epicureanism and Neo-Platonism, but also Stoicism, and High Medieval Christian 'realism' and 'nominalism', a highly technical argument about names and what is really "out there."

There was also a political dimension and the later humanists of the sixteenth century, in the era we call the Reformation, were able to put humanism in terms more familiar to us today. Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466-1536), usually known simply as Erasmus, was the father of the variant that we usually call Christian, or Catholic, humanism. Whereas Machiavelli (1469-1527) was concerned about the principality for 'The Prince', Erasmus was concerned for the humanity of Europe, a concept which was just emerging, and was being threatened by ongoing religious wars. As a type of peace was found in the next century, particularly through the Dutch international jurist Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), a number of highly-technical thinkers rose in prominence who we loosely think of as humanists. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), and others, developed several features of modern humanism: philosophical and biblical criticism, modes of thinking, plurality, universality, and pantheism, panentheism and atheism. In so far as their thinking was able to shock militants of all stripes, that combination of thinking was, and is, consistent as a set of humanist doctrines.

Erasmus was not just about thinking, and the humanists of this period were also into applying their ethics. The Ethical Culture movement dates back to the late eighteenth century, and can, at least partially, be attributed to a long list of Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Locke (1632-1704), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), Montesquieu (1689-1755), David Hume (1711-1776), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Voltaire, the nom de plume for François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), Adam Smith (1723-1790), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and as mentioned before, Hugo Grotius and Baruch Spinoza.

3. Ethical Societies in Europe and America

The earliest formation of a type of humanist organisation – in the form of an “Ethical Culture Society”- can be found in the South Place Ethical Society, founded in 1793 as the South Place Chapel on Finsbury Square, on the edge of the City of London. Now, this is where the history of organised humanism gets interesting. There are not just one set of roots in ethical humanism. The movement involves the shared history of the Society of Friends (Quakers), Unitarians, and Universalists (since 1961 as Unitarian-Universalism). This gives us the heritage of religious humanism which remains part of the spectrum of modern humanism. Felix Adler (1851-1933), a German American professor of political and social ethics, is often considered to have founded the Ethical Culture movement, initially as the New York Society of Ethical Culture.

While Adler can be seen as the harbinger of the secular humanist movement the actual term “secular humanism” was only coined in the mid-20th century. Adler, and those who followed in the nineteenth century, developed a rationalist form of humanism. By the mid-20th century, that variant began to decline against the development of other variants: Political Humanism as the social liberal movement, humanitarian alternatives to Marxist-Leninism or Maoism; Scientific Humanism, an affirmation that the ‘scientific method’ binds humanity into a positive future; and the Existential Humanism of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and others. In this guise the humanist movement can be seen as returning to its philosophical roots.

It’s worth noting that none of these variants are exclusive. Often thinkers who describe themselves as humanists will have an entanglement of variant worldviews which can bring confusions. The early Australian rationalists often misunderstood Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), a moderate rationalist and an intellectually-gifted humanist. There was a world of difference between what the British rationalist Joseph McCabe (1867-1955) said and what Russell was saying. Russell’s early rationalism was not philosophically blunt as the other popular rationalist writers, and, indeed, Russell’s writings matured in the evolving philosophical discipline, which went beyond rationalism into language studies and existentialism. Russell retained his analytic method, but, like many great philosophers of the mid-century, there was an adaption to the benefits of continental philosophy. Unfortunately, the populist humanist world of that time struggled to embrace the same benefits, and language studies and existential thought, slowly filtered downwards, until it was common knowledge in the latter quarter of the century.

The history of Australian humanism is as complex as the global grand narrative. There are many interwoven threads of the various movements, mixing the worldviews of freethinkers, secularists, rationalists, and humanists of different persuasions. In the 1980s Ray Dahlitz

argued, in a view that is now considered to be outdated, that the Australian story could be seen as three distinct periods: the secular beginning (1850-1900), the rationalist era (1900-1950), and the humanist challenge (1950-2000). He saw the first period as straightforward secularisation, what he referred to as “shrinking the scope of the sacred.” Whether as a post-secular or an amended secular thesis, scholars do not see the process in this way. If we accept that there is a secularisation process, a person who is ‘secular’ quite frequently and meaningfully speaks of their ‘spirituality’, ‘faith’, ‘beliefs’, and even something that is ‘sacred’ to them personally. There are great freedoms in “the humanist outlook.” Here Dahlitz was right, though, to emphasise the role of the nineteenth century freethinkers: the Australian Freethought Union (formed in 1884). The chief argument in the collection of movements then quickly arose between the anti-systems freethinkers and those who worked from a system thesis, such as members of the Australasian Secular Society. Freethinkers, such as Thomas Walker (1858-1932), were also spiritualists.

What this meant was that there were freethinking rationalists and other, systemised, rationalists who rejected ‘freethinkers’ as being illogical, or nonrationalist, or perhaps, unrationalist. The problem here is our contemporary, retrospective, reading in the history of humanism. The early rationalists and freethinkers did not see themselves as belonging to a singular humanist movement. This is our retrospective reading since the formation of any recognised *humanist* organisation **did not occur until** mid-century, in particular, the Humanist Association (formed in 1963) and the British Humanist Association (1967; now **Humanists UK**); and in the United States, a longer road: Humanist Fellowship (1927), the Humanist Press Association (1935), Humanist Society of Friends (1939 in California), and the reorganised American Humanist Association (1941). In 1952 the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) was formed in Amsterdam, Netherlands. The movement **inherited** the legacy of liberal christian, atheist, rationalist, skeptic, freethought and Ethical Culture organisations, as it was these organisational members who created a new movement.

4. The Australian story

Looking at what Dahlitz called ‘the rationalist era’, the first rationalist organisation in Australia was the Rationalist Press Association established in 1899, which became the Rationalist Society of Australia in 1926. The rationalists had two informal groupings which created tensions in the movement. There was a newer sense of the movement from people reacting to a previous religious adherence, for example Joseph McCabe (1867-1955). The other was the older **grouping - the liberal** theological Christians. A good example of the rationalist liberal theological Christians is the early Melbourne Unitarian Church, under the leadership of William Bottomley (1882–1966). The humanism in this congregation was shaped by a Kantian rationalism, an affirmation of tight limits in the reasoning process (in what we call these days, ‘cognition’ and inclusive of emotion). The congregation, however, changed under the leadership of Victor James (1897-1984). From 1947 to 1969, with the

Rev. James, a single congregation group experienced intolerant tension between the variants of existential, political, and pseudo-scientific. Mixed into the group were Marxist-Leninists who shared James' leadership in the Anti-Vietnam Moratorium. Eventually the congregation was steered into a highly-militant political variant, which some regarded as having insufficient kindness, less than the level expected in humanism.

Australia 1850-1900

Ray Dahlitz's frame is outdated, but his interpretation is a good place to sketch the Australian story up to 1980. What follows is a synopsis from Dahlitz's introductory pages. We wait for an up-to-date history publication.

In Dahlitz' view the 19th century cradled the intellectual and cultural growth of Australian secularism. His argument rests on how role of a personal God, the doctrine of eternal damnation, questions of human spirituality and transcendence were keenly debated in and around the Freethought and Secular Societies created over the 1880s period. His humanist perceptive is limited. There is something important missing in the story, even if one subscribes to a cultural dominant secularity. Dahlitz, at least, acknowledged the uneven weave of this cloth of modern humanism, referring to the varying interpretations of freethought and belief, individualism and socialism, anarchy and authority.

Nevertheless, his argument on humanism in the 19th century conflates the aims and objectives been the Australasian Secular Association (formed in 1882) – with free-thinking Edward William Cole of Coles Book Arcade, author Marcus Clarke, the anarchists David Andrade and John Andrews, the individualist banker Henry Keylock Rusden, and the secular democrat, George Higinbotham, and the Australian Freethought Union (formed in 1884) where Dahlitz makes too lighter references. Although you found Freethinkers in the Secular Association, secularity and Freethought do not align as the same idea, and as different concepts, there are major flaws in haphazard thinking of both.

Most of these 19th century figures, described with different labels, argued not only among themselves but could also come to reject their favourite 'dogma.' The anarchist Frederick Upham, quip: "Secularism has outlived its usefulness." It was only on the rarer occasion that different schemas came together, such as when sculptor and freethinker, William Lorando Jones, became the first and only person in Australia to be convicted of blasphemy.

This is also true with the political schemas which inhabit these proto-modern-humanist gatherings. You have a large range of options, mostly formulated in the British experience:

Common Social Liberal (e.g., Charles Dickens, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and John Stuart Mill), and British-Style Folk Socialist also known as the Radical tradition (e.g., William Cobbett, Robert Owen, Richard Cobden, John Bright, and William Morris). These traditions did not make for a singular corpus in the way that mid-20th century humanists retrospectively made it to be.

For the Radical tradition, Melbourne led the way with the Victorian Socialist League (1897), Victorian Labour Federation (1898), Social Democratic Party of Victoria (1902), Social Questions Committee (1905) and the Victorian Socialist Party (1906). Although Queensland argues for the antecedence for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) at the Tree of Knowledge at Barcaldine, following the Great Shearers' Strike, in 1892, the different branches of the Labor Party, and the Labor movement are reflected in these different schemas. The new industrial Trade Unions, such as the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and its ideological militancy, made life on the Australian political landscape a fractious nightmare. Different forms of individual anarchism, such as seen in the Knights of Labor, Industrial Workers of the World, One Big Union movement, and anarcho-syndicalism, did not help Labor's political position, and nor did it help the mid-century humanist formulations which was liberalising.

Australia 1900-1950

Although the early twentieth century was not a "rationalist era", as Dahlitz stated it, rationalists had a role to play in the proto-modern-humanist formation. The Rationalist Press Association (RPA) was a London publishing house formed by a group of freethinkers in 1899. It became an expression of faith in the educative power of reading. That faith was stated in an early article: "We believe in the religion of reading good books, and would willingly be a priest of that religion." And yet the RPA was the source of the secular agitation led principally by Charles Bradlaugh and George Jacob Holyoake. Holyoake had invented the word 'secularism.' As operative metaphor, the confusion of what was the spheres in the secular and the religion plagued the thinking.

The same confusion occurred in this era when the terms, 'secular', 'rational', and 'humanist' were conflated. Clearly, by the mid-century there was a great dissatisfaction. Beginning in 1896, the RPA's Watt's Literary Guide as a monthly collection of reviews and announcements, took the title, 'Rationalist Review', until October 1956 when it became 'The Humanist', and then in May 1972, becoming the 'New Humanist.' However, the rationalist movement of this earlier era have benefits; very mixed benefits. The most successful ventures of the Rationalist Press Committee's the 'Thinker's Library' series, each of which sold more than four million copies. The most significant single publication was Joseph McCabe's translation of Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*. Joseph McCabe

was not a particularly expert translator, but even so, Haeckel was also a promoter of scientific racism, and an exponent of social darwinism of his day.

As British-Australians all these schemas existed on the local landscape. Dahlitz notes that it was claimed that by 1910 the New South Wales district of the Rationalist Press Association had more members in their discussion group than any other except London. In 1906 a Rationalist Association was formed in Melbourne, and established separately in Brisbane (1909), Sydney (1912), Perth, and Adelaide (1918). In time, the influential academics and intellectuals described as rationalists included Professors William Alexander Osborne and James Vincent Duhig, Judge Alfred Foster, writers Vance Palmer and Alfred Ernest Mander, and artist Max Meldrum. It is difficult to include the iconoclastic freethinker, Professor John Anderson, in this list, even though he was described as a rationalist. He was a philosopher who lived by a Platonic-Socratic dictum: "... the unexamined life was not worth living, that the life of prudence and precaution was a mean and base existence, that security-seeking was the enemy of intellectual enquiry, understanding, social enterprise and freedom." That is not philosophical rationalism of the early 20th century which tended to be abusive towards Socratic skepticism.

In 1919, seventy-four delegates arrived in Sydney for the first Australian Interstate Rationalist Conference. The concept and practice of federation was challenging for Australians generally. It would take fifty years, January 1970, before another attempt was made to extend the rationalist's national organisation, becoming the 'The Rationalist Federation of Australasia and the Pacific Countries.' As Dahlitz stated, "the name seemingly longer than its existence as little was heard of it afterwards." The more successful movement was the state-centric Rationalist Association of Australia. The organisation's magazine, *The Rationalist*, was being distributed nationally and a national organisation was deemed to be the next part of the program. However, its Victorian operation betrays failure at federation. A struggle emerged between the strong-willed, left-leaning secretary John Langley, and the equally strong-willed, financial backer of the Rationalist Association of Australia Ltd., W.D. Cookes, who had moved to endorse the right-wing, pro-fascist activities of Australia First. As we have seen recently, in 2021, Melbourne has become a centre of the alt-right movement. Earlier in the history Queensland and New South Wales was prominent in the history with Percy Reginald (P.R.) Stephensen was the co-founder of the fascist Australia First Movement (inspired by William John Miles, with Adela Pankhurst, and involving Xavier Herbert and Eleanor Dark). Stephensen and those involved in the movement are part of Dahlitz's proto-modern-humanist list. The contemporary humanist historiographer has great problems with this interpretation if humanism is to mean something worthwhile. Dahlitz completes the pre-1950s section, stating:

Today, these excursions remain merely as items of yesterday's interest. At the time such personal and ideological upheavals were intensely divisive and augmented by the distractions of World War II, they set a pattern of decline in secular organisation that was only reversed by the emergence of the Humanist Challenge of the 1960's, the subject of the next section.

As secularism, the humanist challenge never reversed the decline. Secularisation is another creature, a contested debate in sociology.

Australia 1950-1980

In many ways the formation of the different state organisations of the Humanist Society was derived from many different variants, unable to understand each other and unable to provide a national vision: Victoria (1961), South Australia (1962), New South Wales (1964), Western Australia (1965), and Queensland (1968) all formed State Societies. The ebb and flow of the Australian history in the late twentieth century had all the vices (Machiavellian manoeuvres) and the virtues (the Erasmus' Christian compassion and Bertrand Russell's Non-Christian intellectual empathy). The new century has brought the learnt lessons of the past.

As Dahilz stated, the tactical approaches of the state organisations ranged along a spectrum from militant confrontation to social consensus. Conflict involved a litany of personality battles, and various interpretations of aims and objects in the previous century. Following the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU, 1952), a national corporation was developed in 1965, known as CAHS, the Council of Australian Humanist Societies. Founding IHEU members included Sir Julian Huxley, the first head of UNESCO, and Brock Chisholm, the first head of the Food and Agriculture Organisation. Among such members was an array of *ideological* thinking (meaning only an organised collection of ideas). Huxley symbolised the secular humanist movement but that was a far too simplification of Huxley's thinking: the author of *Religion Without Revelation* (1927; revised ed. 1957), and *The Coming New Religion of Humanism* (1962). The misunderstanding was not largely the humanists' fault. Christian fundamentalists began to use "secular humanism" as the new term of disparagement and abuse (an earlier term was 'liberal'). What the term described is conflated in self-perception and the othering the other. At its base the term could have meant, by a particular speaker, an *emphasis* on the 'human' and not on the divine or supernatural. It was not necessarily "blasphemous," a term which had become inapplicable in law and meaningless for the broader society. This had even become a mainstream Christian stance – how can the God Almighty be offended by unbelief? Blasphemy merely indicated a lack of confidence in the faith. For the broad society, it was very appropriate for

unbelievers and appropriate for Christian believers whose faith was stronger than any concerns over blasphemy.

These types of religious categories were less important and being replaced by secular equivalence. For example, in the past you had references to “morality” as understood with full Christian inference. Much contemporary Christian discussion has converted these past ideas into “ethics”, not necessary opposed to Christian belief, but grounded more in the non-Christian ancient and modern thought). Religious believers had long demythologised their beliefs, led by the liberal theological movement (going back three centuries). It was a long-time quandary for the Christian world, which explains the new fundamentalist (1920s) and neo-orthodox (1940s) movements. Christians who liberalise their beliefs, even as neo-orthodoxy, can legitimately be called humanists. Nevertheless, the broader humanist movement was controversial, if not politely rejected by a number in their ranks. It depended on the measure of liberalisation for a Christian’s faith statement. How far do you go to reject traditional statements of belief for the secular equivalence? Like the example of morals-ethics above, there is no pure positioning. Talk of Christian ethics is a mixture of scripture passages, references to Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Kant as system thinkers, and the appropriate use of anti-system ‘secular’ thinkers or skeptics, particularly the ‘antichrist’ Friedrich Nietzsche. The point here is that no religious or secular organisations is unified around the modern humanist agenda, as a singular narrative.

Humanism influenced by American pragmatists, particularly John Dewey, began to focus less on the intellectual questions and more on practical and political issues. None of these descriptors (intellectual, practical, political) are exclusive. Nevertheless, for humanist organisations it was a matter of an agenda, a neutral term from traditional business management theory. For the Australian Humanist societies, the agendas in this era were: censorship, law reform and sex education; extended a nationwide link-up of Civil Celebrants performing marriages and officiating at name-giving and funeral ceremonies; those of the Abortion Law Reform Association, Voluntary Euthanasia Society and Family Planning Association. The CAHS also produced the quarterly *Australian Humanist*, co-ordinating such items as secular educational kits for the school curricula and the sanctioning of the prestigious Humanist of the Year. What this last activity meant for the era was that Humanists were recognised as a humanist, rather than as a secularist or a rationalist (*necessarily*). In the media and the broader social discussion, among those past recipients of the Award there were recognisable humanists –include Phillip Adams, Lionel Murphy, Gareth Evans, Robin Williams and Fred Hollows.

The problem was that the agendas had different and *conflicting* intellectual schemas for modern humanism. Liberal Christian believers could support aims of Abortion Law Reform Association, Voluntary Euthanasia Society and Family Planning Association, not as an

argument for the sanctity of life, but on the nature of state law and Christian social conscience. The stance might be a demographic minority, but not atypical in the liberalising world Christian leadership. Victor James (mentioned above) was a Unitarian Minister in Melbourne who described himself an agnostic. He gave radio broadcasts dealing with moral education and publicly and aggressively repudiated the “Christian Humanist” tag entirely. He was out of sync with the humanists of Unitarian-Universalism, including agnostics and atheists.

The challenge in this era was that the state organisations were not able to create a unity among likeminded Australians under the humanist label. Starting with the most distant of the Australian states, Western Australia had a continuous secular influence from the early Rationalist organisation, “attributing, as Dahlitz says, “such *celebrities* as Thomas Walker and John S. Langley (author’s emphasis). In 1958 the W.A. Secularist Fellowship was established from the work of Collin Coates and Dick Lawler. It was followed by the West Australian Humanist Society (or the Humanist Society of Western Australia) involving President Jim Kane and Secretary Warren Walker. The beginnings in South Australia were the Free Discussion Secular and Rationalist Societies. The year 1962 saw the formation of the Humanist Society of South Australia in 1962 with Bruce Muirden, John Scott and Don Ellis. Adelaide became the centre for the editorship and production of *The Australian Humanist*. In New South Wales, at a public meeting at the Teachers' Federation House, Phillip Street, Sydney, 14 August, 1960, Alex Carey, from the Department of Applied Psychology, University of Sydney, addressed sixty people in a talk on humanism. It was the formation of the “The Sydney Humanist Group.” Within a year the group had grown from the convening six to 103 members. In 1964, they purchased their own property, the first “Humanist House.” As Dahlitz reports, there was some joint activity by the Sydney Rationalists and Humanists but a splinter group from the Rationalists formed themselves in the Atheist Society of Australia in 1971.

Dahlitz has very little informative to say about the Queensland organisation, one sentence: “In Queensland, Rationalist members walked into their 1967 annual general meeting, resolved to delete the ‘Rationalist’ name from the organisation, retained the constitution and walked out as Humanist.” It might read as a backhanded compliment about Queenslanders – little thought was added. It is general part of the bias in Australian historiography which WA historian Geoffrey Bolton pointed out, where the Australian outlier states are coloured by the outlook of the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne triangle. Stories tend to be legend, myth, and of thin narrative where the characters are there for comic relief.

There is little doubt, for the Australian story, Victoria or Melbourne is the heart of humanism, with all its flaws and virtues. The impetus for the new organisation came from

Glanville Cook, Rationalist Secretary, and Victor James. Established in 1961 the Humanist Society of Victoria developed rapidly as an active organisation willing to campaign on the contemporary issues of abortion law reform and voluntary euthanasia. The two Rationalist organisations created in Victoria still remain. The first, the Rationalist Association of Australia Ltd., is best defined as a self-selected board of trustees. Their function was to oversee the investment portfolio and use of several legacies bequeathed for the promotion of rationalism and freethought. The second Rationalist organisation was a rank-and-file membership and published a quarterly magazine, *The Australian Rationalist* and the periodical Newsletter.

The Melbourne Existentialist Society should be mentioned. It was founded by David Miller in the 1980s, as a very open and non-judgemental group: “Existentialism is an ‘umbrella’ term covering diverse and often conflicting schools of thought. Consequently, we are not agreed on who or what is an Existentialist; we simply agree to disagree.” The rationalist-orientated Victorian-based Atheist Society, of which Miller was also a member, had great difficulty with the Existentialist’s open and pluralistic approach, open to both secular and religious Christians, as well as non-believers. Who walked from whom is a contentious question, but Millar became a pariah among the more militant in Melbourne. Melbourne is the historical capital for Australian intellectualism, but part of that history has been the bitter populist reaction among locals who felt themselves locked-out of the education system and tended to dismiss philosophical thought as something ‘unreal.’

There is one more organisation that Dahlitz does mention but it is not usually seen as a part of the modern humanist movement, and that is very unfortunate. The Australian Skeptics was formed in 1981 with six State branches and an Australian Capital Territory (ACT) group. Its set purpose was/is, “Investigating pseudo-science and the paranormal from a responsible scientific viewpoint.” The main focus of the organisation was the quarterly magazine *The Skeptic*, which in 1980 had a network of about 1200 subscribers, and was very successful in lead stories for the Fairfax newspapers. Indeed, out of all the modern schema organisations, the Australian Skeptics have been the most successful in terms of membership and reputation. Much of the success comes from the early 1980s battle over the Christian fundamentalist claims for its ‘creationism’ and housed in the Creation Science Foundation Inc. Most of the energy was in Queensland, and scope down to Brisbane.

The reason for the achievements of the Australian Skeptics is that its membership is highly educated compared to the history of rationalist and secular organisations. In its fight with the creationists the skeptics used education from members who were highly skilled in the sciences, in philosophy, and in history. The rationalist narratives in their publication – too

often (not always) – go for the hyperbole.¹ Even today, trained philosophers must correct self-described rationalists, and to say that David Hume was not a “rationalist”, he was an empiricist, and the deeply religious René Descartes was a rationalist. We see the absurdity from those who do not learn from history and philosophy.

Hume and Descartes were also the skeptics of their day. Not all skeptics are rationalists. Not all rationalists are skeptics. Not all secularists are humanists. Not all humanists are secularists. Not all rationalists are humanists. Not all humanists are rationalists. It is desirable that all have a measure of skepticism.

5. Humanists Australia today

Finally, in late 2020 Humanists Australia was established as the first national organisation for humanists in Australia where individuals can join. Membership is used for individual Australians to show their support for the movement and allows them to demonstrate their beliefs and commitment to humanism as a caring, compassionate world view. For the first time in its history Australia has a professionally staffed organisation able to support and work for humanist aims on a national platform. This also allows for the coordination and organisation of campaigns, ceremonies and celebrants, and pastoral care across state lines to benefit all non-religious Australians.

Dahlitz at the end of his ‘history’ stated:

The faith inquirer is asked to think with the heart: not the brain. One secular contention persists: that our life seems to be the one life that we will ever know and our thoughts and actions during this life are determined by that base. Social awareness of our common humanity, human love, human solidarity, and the recognition of common identity is, and remains, the basis of what is now called humanism. Existing secular humanist organisations will continue to evolve and adapt to give humanist answers to the challenge of a post-religious society. They will provide explanations left for the future to argue, to accept or reject. This book aims simply to record the rich heritage of the secular past and the beating of its different drum.

¹ The author has been published in The Australian Rationalist. The experience was unpleasant with a magazine article full of bizarre handmade artwork (sketches on the Star Trek theme which had nothing to do with the article). The author’s The Skeptic magazine publication (around the same time) at a professional standard.

Today, scholarship talks of the postsecular society, not the postreligious society. Humanism has been rethought in the last 40 years. Dahlitz, though, was correct in his self-description: “social awareness of our common humanity, human love, human solidarity, and the recognition of common identity.” The great failure in the past was not to be able to give common semantics to the adjective, “human.” In recent times humanism is challenged by different narratives of posthumanism or transhumanism. The first sentence of Dahlitz in the quotation demonstrates one important challenge. The historian would like to think that self-described humanists do not make such a disrespectful, illogical, and even absurd, statement of “faith people.” A person of faith is quite capable of being skeptical, rational, secular, and humanist.

Humanists Australia is a new organisation. This initial strategy is based on a deep dive into what other national humanist organisations do in the pursuit of their change objectives, while considering the uniquely Australian landscape and history of humanism in this country. The aim is to have an expert, reliable organisation readily recognisable in humanist, secular, and mainstream Australia. The opportunities are:

- Campaigns, for example Virtual Assisted Dying, Census: No Religion, People Seeking Asylum, NSCP etc.
- Ceremonies, wedding and funeral especially.
- Chaplaincy, policy development and campaigning for provision of secular wellbeing options in defence, hospital, prison, schools etc.
- Communities, establishing communities to improve mental health, reduce social isolation and provide places where the humanist message and vision can be amplified.
- Education and Events, could be done as Humanists Australia or through promotion of community initiatives.

The following are the objectives for change for the organisation focused on in this initial strategic plan.

True separation of Church and State

Humanists Australia advocates for true equality for every Australian whatever their race, religion, cultural background etc. There is currently a culture of 'religion by stealth' as evidenced by strong Church influence in areas such as National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP), prayers before council or parliamentary meetings, religious discrimination bill etc.

It is important to prevent religious doctrine from interfering with legal and governmental processes to ensure the rights of all Australian citizens.

Established secular wellbeing support in defence, hospitals, schools etc

Many areas of public service have a deeply entrenched culture of religious pastoral care which is fiercely defended by the Church. More than 50% of the ADF report having no religion and less than 5% of all concerns dealt with by chaplaincy are religious in nature, yet almost all full-time welfare positions require religious ordination. Hospital chaplaincy is dominated by religion with unclear or unavailable routes of entry for secular wellbeing professionals. The NSCP program in schools is commonwealth funded and chaplains may be of 'any faith' yet, in practice, the program is almost entirely Christian.

Excellent access to community help and support for non-religious folk

There are currently few equivalents to Church support for secular non-religious folk. Being part of an established community is closely linked to better mental health outcomes and reduces social isolation.

This change objective wants to see humanist communities available in all areas of Australia.

Guidance available on how to live well and mark life stages as a humanist

Humanism as a world view provides structure and guidance on how to live as a good, compassionate human citizen of the world.

Better understanding of humanism as a world view can help individuals to live well and have positive outcomes for progressive social issues such as climate change, inclusivity, tolerance etc. Ritual and marking of life stages ('hatching, matching and despatching') is critically important to humans. Good non-religious options are currently lacking. Wider recognition

and uptake of humanist ceremonies will aid us in the delivery of our mission and increase wellbeing for individuals.

Concluding Remarks

As a personal view, I see **Humanists Australia** (HA) as a reboot on the history of humanism for Australians. It brings great hope that lessons of the past have been learnt.
