Emotions and Rationality as a Basis for Humanism: Can Humanism Encompass Both Intellect and Spirit?

Frank Friedlander
Dr. Frank Friedlander has a Ph.D. in social psychology, and presently is professor emeritus with the Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California. He has written extensively on motivation, group dynamics, and organization development.

Two primary philosophical underpinnings of humanism are rationality and emotionality. Rationality along with a focus on reason, logic, and an empirical brand of science fortifies our skepticism toward belief in God, and promotes our theories of evolution. Emotionality provides the deeper feelings and compassion we have for one another. These two, rationality and emotionality, are symbolized by the head and heart of ourselves as individuals. They also, to varying degrees, underlay the religions and institutions of which we are a part.

1. Imbalance in Humanism

I suspect a serious imbalance in our Humanist movement. Our heads do most of the talking and our hearts remain mute. We are justifiably proud of our head. If, however, we hold our heads too high, they will become detached from the rest of our body. Rationality far outweighs the recognition, development, and expression of emotions and feelings.

As I live within the Humanist movement, I become increasingly concerned about this imbalance, about the stigma attributed to emotions, about the confusion of irrationality and emotionality. I am concerned about the impact of these concerns upon our humanist system of beliefs, and even the way we think. I am concerned with how our focus on rationality effects our view of the millions of religious people whose emotions form the basis for their faith.

Like emotions, spirituality and religious behavior are important, if not essential ingredients of the human condition. Edward O. Wilson, in his acceptance speech for the Humanist of the Year award from the American Humanist Association, declared that we have a compelling instinct for religion and spirituality even if these assume an atheistic rationale. He declared that the inability of secular humanists to satisfy this instinct surely is part of the reason that there are only a few hundred members of the American Humanist
Association and sixteen million members of the Southern Baptist Convention. There is more to life than rationality. Our sense of hope, of love, of sadness, joy, rejection – these are valid and authentic feelings. So, I can say how I feel hopeful, or sad, or rejected, and each of these has an important and valid meaning. To deny or suppress these feelings is both unfortunate and unhealthy. Our awareness and expression of these feelings are important.

We can legitimately claim, “I feel, therefore I am.” People experience themselves more deeply as an individual, and more alive, after an deep emotional experience.

2. The Person as Central to Humanism

Underlying any philosophy is a set of values and beliefs. Embedded deeply within our philosophy of Humanism is the centrality of the individual human being.

As a member of the Humanist movement I have often been asked questions like, “what is unique about Humanism that differentiates it from all religions and philosophical positions?” The difference is not that we take a scientific position in regard to evolution and the existence of God. The difference is not that our values are humanitarian; nor is the difference that we are practitioners of social justice. All of these are part of humanism, but they are also practiced by some other religions.

Our philosophy is straightforward: Within a Humanist philosophy, we believe in the centrality of the person, in mankind and in womankind – we believe in people as opposed to a supernatural being. This expression is important for the following reasons:

1. This philosophy focuses on human beings as central in this world, as sources of love and hate, and as friends to share emotions and knowledge. It claims that the individual and the social community are powerful in and of themselves. It not only acknowledges the individual as most central and powerful, it also states that no other being is more so.

2. The belief by the Humanist community in the centrality of the person is surely a belief. We often label ourselves erroneously as nonbelievers. We are indeed believers. We believe in our fellow human beings. Just as theorists believe in God, humanists believe in the person. We have faith in human beings. Faith in this sense means moving ahead without ever having enough data. It means that each person is responsible for himself or herself and for others. It means that we relate and communicate with our fellows, rather than to a supernatural being (as in prayer).

3. Many of the expressions directed to the supernatural can be communicated directly with other people. These include such feelings as the desire for celebration, and needs for help, forgiveness, and guidance. In other words, our primary relationship is with other men and women rather then with a deity. All we have is each other!
4. Our belief is a positive statement. To call ourselves “atheists” is to only state what we are not. The concept of atheism states a cause, a belief, an image which is negative. It creates an image as primarily against (against the existence of God). Atheism allows nonbelievers to avoid specifying their purposes, their beliefs, and their values. Our concept of Humanism confirms our purposes as constructive and positive.

3. Rationality and Emotions

If we are to believe in people, we must include everything about a person, both the rational and the emotional, and the acts of thinking and of feeling. Rationality and emotions are not opposite poles on a single dimension, since a person or an institution may have much or little of either. To think and to feel are two separate functions, operating concurrently and interdependently. Both are essential for a fully functioning person.

Rationality stems from ideas that result from reasoning, logic, definitions, and the search for certainty. Emotions are feelings such as love, fear, insecurity, joy, and anguish. While both are essential for a fully functioning person, Humanism, as it is practiced, deals with thinking and reasoning predominantly. Emotions, many of which govern our behavior and influence our thinking, are somewhat unseen and unspoken. This is much like a puppet show, in which a puppeteer (emotions) is invisible, yet controls the show. In fact Antonio Damasio, one of the world’s leading neurologists, finds growing evidence that emotions are essential to rational thinking. Far from interfering with rationality, research by Damasio indicates that the absence of emotion and feeling can break down rationality and make wise decision making almost impossible.

Many of us have learned to repress or ignore our emotions. We have thus left behind much of who we are. We must optimize access to our own personal resources. The feelings that influence our behavior and our relations with others must be known and utilized.

4. Emotions and the Construction of Reality

The paradigm used in most traditional science stems from positivism. The emphasis is on definition and clarity of variables, adequate controls from extraneous factors, on accurate and reliable measurement, and the repeatability and consistency of results. Positivists believe that we can only study what can be directly observed. Since we cannot directly observe emotions (although we are able to measure some of the physical and neurological accompaniments), emotions were not legitimate topics for scientific study.

Reality based upon positivism is essentially a physical reality. Our everyday human experience, however, is based primarily on a social reality. In 1967, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman published their groundbreaking work on the social construction of knowledge. They claimed that we construct this reality through interaction and discourse with others. This is how we make sense of the behavioral world we live in. According to
Karl Weick, reality is thus socially created, and reinforced through discourse in groups, neighborhoods, tribes, organizations, communities, etc.

Emotions have played an “undercover” role in science as well as humankind and Humanist expression. It is tempting to say that it has been the rationality of positivism that has kept emotions captive and focused solely on the physical construction of reality.

The philosophy of Humanism is based primarily on a physical reality. This hinders the development of emotional and social relationships that might come from a greater emphasis on social reality.

5. Are Emotions Irrational?

We must pursue this question of whether emotions are irrational, and more specifically, we can ask if the belief in God is irrational. If we explore the meaning of irrationality, we can see irrationality as having purpose, and providing much-needed hope and support.

Several years ago Alan Greenspan used the term “irrational exuberance” to describe a frothy stock market in which prices had risen to “unreasonably” high levels and were no longer supported by the reality of earnings. Here, irrational exuberance meant letting your emotions take over, of being unreasonable. Although the immediate response to his comments was a downward market, prices soon exceeded this negative condition. An important part of the stock market is, in effect, emotion. Part of the price of any investment is its emotional basis – composed of fear, greed, hope, skepticism, and dreams, to mention just a few.

Most gambling is in this sense “irrational.” But it is the “irrational” part that is particularly appealing. A person may find it compelling to buy chances at a state lottery with a 1,000 to 1 odds of winning. A poker player realizes that the house is the major winner, and yet takes the gamble of winning. The greater the hoped-for payoff and the lower the odds of winning, the greater the emotional basis for the decision. It is the emotional lift from the hoped-for possibilities that is, at least temporarily, satisfying.

My point is that emotions are a legitimate part of most of our lives. What we call irrationality represents strong needs and desires that are for the most part unfulfilled and perhaps not fulfillable. They are essential to our life. To deny or dismiss them is to miss out on a major source of behavior.

One of the most well-known studies in management theory occurred back in the 1930s in a Western Electric Division of American Telephone. A group of scientists from Harvard were measuring the effect of varying the lighting conditions on worker productivity. When they raised the level of lighting, productivity went up. This was repeated several times. When they subsequently lowered the lighting, productivity went up further. Workers were responding to the attention they were receiving, not the amount of light.

What then might we think when we say that the belief in God is irrational. Might a subtle rationality underlie this belief. Might people believe in a God for reasons similar to those mentioned earlier: to cope with feelings of anxiety and insecurity which result from a life limited in both quality and quantity, from poverty, from fatal disasters, and from other misfortunes of life. Similarly, the need for a God may stem from a need to be more
There is no proof that God exists, but there is ample evidence that the vast majority of people believe in a God. We can assume that these believers are meeting important needs or receiving rich rewards – feelings of comfort, success, security, and hope from this belief. I personally do not believe in a God, but I do believe in their belief. I believe that those who are comforted by their God should not be challenged by us. I do not want to take away their faith. It is essential to their existence. I believe that science-based expressions which cast doubt on the existence of God are poor substitutes for people experiencing destitution, poverty, hunger, and disease.

It is only through arrogance (similar to the arrogance of Christian missionaries) that we can believe we are doing theist believers a favor by pointing out to them that there is no evidence for the existence of God. I remember watching the destitute after the Haiti earthquakes pray to their God for comfort. It would be insensitive to interrupt them to say that there is no God.

6. Emotionless Mystery, and Secular spirituality

The concept of spirituality includes a sense of mystery, uncertainty, and wonderment, that reaches our deepest emotions. After a spiritual experience, one may feel moved by the event, but also confused about its (rational) cause. An example might be helpful. I was watching a program on PBS in which Paul Simon received the first Gershwin Prize for music. Simon and other musicians from his era were playing and singing songs from the 1960s and 1970s, mostly from the soundtrack to the movie *The Graduate* – songs such as Homeward Bound, Rosemary and Thyme, Like a Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and Mrs. Robinson. I found myself feeling emotional, sentimental, choked up, and teary. I asked myself “Why?” I had no answer. Perhaps it reminded me of my youth, my own rebellious days, my early loves. I don’t know. And it is the very mystery of not knowing that defines this as a spiritual experience.

Mystery, deep passion, sentimentality, and uncertainty are also the antithesis of rationality. The rational approach favors definition, it values objectivity, and it strives for certainty.

Humanism, with its emphasis on rationality, generally limits manifestations of spirituality. There is a dearth of music, poetry, art, dance, and of most aesthetic experiences. For example, through music we often express deep emotions that are otherwise difficult to express: the depth of love, the glory of war, the yearning for peace, the joy of nature, the fortitude to overcome. Poetry and dance are similarly expressive.

7. Ethics as a Belief in Relationships

Both rationality and emotions underlie and influence ethical behavior. The more popular term, “doing the right thing,” is a wonderful simplification of these complexities. The person in transition to atheism may ask: Who now is going to tell us the right thing to do? How will I know the right way to behave? These questions may arise especially if the
person is in transition from a religion which is highly prescriptive, such as Catholicism or Conservative Judaism.

Acting as a virtuous person is the only way one can live with himself or herself and fulfill the goals of one’s life. A second view of ethics focuses on the consequences of one’s behavior. Since ethics always involves a relationship, this approach raises questions about the impact of one’s behavior upon others and upon the relationship itself. A third view is that ethics must be based on a set of principles that are knowable and universal. This approach calls for rationality and obligation.

We can infer that the first view is dependent upon character building and training, the second on insightful analysis of one’s action upon the others, and the third is dependent upon an external list or commandment of what one should and should not do. It would seem that the latter is more typical of traditional religion and a bit unappetizing for Humanists. The first two of these call for clear efforts toward understanding one’s emotional self, and a candid analysis of one’s impact on others.

8. Personal Growth and Development

If our Humanist belief is in the person (as opposed to a supernatural entity), one of the goals of Humanism must be to advance the development and growth of the person according to the needs of that person. Arthur Jackson, a noted Humanist, uses the term “the good life” to describe the experience of individuals who actualize their yearnings and dreams, the values and passion in their lives. Abraham Maslow proposed an hierarchy of needs starting with lower levels (such as physiological and security needs), social needs (such as friendship, a feeling of belonging, acceptance by the group), esteem needs (self respect, recognition), and self actualization (maximizing self potential). Methods for fulfilling these would include participative discussions, lectures, and personal growth sessions. Such an endeavor suggests that opportunities be offered to promote human growth and development.

My initial exposure to personal growth sessions was in the 1960s. They were held at remote resort hotels for periods of a week or two, and generally in groups of about a dozen people. Although these sessions have been modified and shortened over the years, they still emphasize candid expressions of feelings, personal expressions beginning with the word “I” rather than with “you,” “we,” or “they,” and expressions in the “here-and-now” which all members had experienced in the group about the group. The group was guided by an experienced trainer who played a non-directive role. Group members were in charge of the group process, with the trainer occasionally pointing out how the group was developing.

The result for me was a vastly increased sensitivity to the impact I had on others, and the impact they had on me. Specifically, I was seen as analytical and relatively uninvolved. This was not the person I thought was nor wanted to be. I have amended ways since, but life is a work in progress!

Note that the focus is on growth and development rather than therapy. Therapy suggests ways to remedy or resolve personal problems often developed from past
experiences. Human growth focuses on new opportunities, new insights into oneself, new paths for fulfillment, and new ways of relating to other people.

9. Building Community

Personal growth is a difficult and complex process. It proliferates in a community of mutual support, caring, cohesion, trust, and common interests. The common interests can be philosophic, academic, social action, health-oriented, political, and so on. The effectiveness, attraction, and satisfaction of the community will be partially dependent on the emotional ties among its members, and not just the common interest.

Further, communities have a structure and a culture which help implement or deter the best of our human qualities: encouraging participation and democratic governance, and fostering a culture of engagement and constructive behavior. These ensure wide participation and a focus on building the community.

We become a community when we share with each other our deeper feelings and thoughts. A community can discuss a social issue as a debate, as an intellectual topic, or as the beginning of an action program. The development of the discussion into an ongoing action project will often depend in part upon the sets of relationships or social structure of the group.

Community is a social structure. It is the set of functional relationships that community members build with others. It may be collegial or hierarchical, and it may be in person or on the internet. It may be loving or hateful. But the functional or rational qualities of the relationship certainly affect each other.

The core links for building any community are relationships that are based on both common interests and on close friendships. Not all communities have both of these qualities. Common interest gives the community purpose and the comfort of similarity. Intimacy among members gives the community the attraction of friendship, of support, of caring for one another. This is the emotional component that is essential to Humanism. Without the emotional appeal and emotional ties without intimacy, Humanism becomes a scientific society with particular interests in evolution. Without a devotion to science and rationality, Humanism becomes a social club. I believe that both strong rational interests and strong social ties are essential to the growth of Humanism.

Building relationships, then, is the first step and underlying fabric for building effective community.

10. Centrality of the Person

The centerpiece of Humanism is the person – men and women. In contrast to traditional religions, Humanism looks to no “middleman” to whom to pray, to express regrets, to bow down, to love, etc. For these emotional needs, we have each other.

Humanism must expand to encompass its emotional values and content so as to become a richer offering. Its focus on rationality, reason, logic, and science serve it and society well. This focus provide us with a solid empirical base for our behavior and our beliefs. The more timid provision that Humanism makes for emotional needs is
unfortunate. Rationality needs its companion, emotion, to ground it, guide it, and humanize it.

There are many paths in this direction. They intersect with each other. Among these are increasing our awareness of our emotions, better expressing these emotions, acknowledging the legitimacy of feelings, understanding irrationality as a broad human need, allowing the mysteries and spirituality of life to exist in people’s mind, encouraging people to work on higher level needs such as self-actualization, and encouraging artistic, poetic, dance, and musical expression.

Can we build communities having such norms and values to support these behaviors and activities? Can we build communities in which participatory structures encourage the full expression of Humanism? Can we build inter-community relationships which share our values and expose us to contrasting beliefs? How might we launch this endeavor?