

Student Number: 2400613

Student Name: Amy Perry

How Renaissance Humanists Understood the Self Through Anatomy and the Literary Anatomy

Renaissance Humanism as a movement forged a new age of thinkers, reformed doctrines and revealed new inventions and scholastic achievements. Before the 1300's, the primary form of education in Europe was both run and controlled by the church. Teachings were predominantly in Latin and focused on a curriculum of religious dogma. This gradually began to change with the rediscovery and study of classical texts written by Greek thinkers such as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and Homer. Slowly, the works were translated into Latin and became more readily available to scholars. However, with the invention of the moving printing press, the reproduction and translation of these texts became even more widespread. This led to a more holistic change in scholasticism and self-reflection and even influenced subjects such as medicine and anatomy. By passing the focus of learning from theology to human potential and virtue, renaissance humanists were able to learn empirically about the world, perfecting techniques such as dissection and the understanding of the human body. Rupp emphasises that,

In the standard view, Vesalius was the central figure in the beginning of modern, scientific, anatomy, but adopting a revived tradition of investigating and by rejecting the “dead hand” of Galen and Aristotle.’¹

This led to renaissance humanists viewing themselves differently to their predecessors; where more empirical, hands-on work revealed the true self as developed by the Christian God.

The study of Anatomy and the literary anatomy never would have emerged without the circulation of education. Before Renaissance Humanism, education was very much focused on theology and church-based teachings. In Italy, however, there came a growing unrest, where civic needs, such as commerce and administration overruled the needs of the church. This led to a new form of education, exacerbated by the growing interest in classical Greek texts. The translations of these works into Latin, and their subsequent study and imitation, resulted in a new group of intellectuals who would pave the way for later academic disciplines such as the philosophy of the self, medicine and anatomy. This is particularly true of *scientia*, the rational understanding of knowledge gained through empirical perception and research. Roger Ascham, author of *The Scholemaster*, took pride in making his work accessible to his audience. However, Francis Bacon disagreed with this rhetoric, stating that Ascham and other humanists spent too much of their energy studying the words of the text rather than the context and wisdom behind it. This view would later be mirrored by Vesalius who believed that the lecturers during dissections were focused too much upon the text and not the intricacies of the dissection being carried out before the students.

¹ J. C. C. Rupp, The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of the Anatomical Projects of the Ancients. *Canadian Journal of History* 2000, **35**(1), pp. 121

It is important to recognise how the development of the moving printing press led to the widespread understanding of anatomy and the self. Without the ready availability of the book, the recording, study and distribution of anatomy texts would be impossible. Though humanist scholars annotated and transcribed classical Latin manuscripts by hand, the invention of printing allowed them to be reproduced more quickly and in a larger capacity. This also made the reproduction of such books cheaper, allowing more to be printed and circulated. This was further improved by Gutenberg's moveable printing press – allowing the plates to be moved around and more books to be reproduced. Printing onto paper also supported this widespread availability of books. Previously, vellum or parchment was used for the leaves of a manuscript, the development of which was more expensive and took more time.

Anatomical illustrations were widespread in anatomy textbooks in the eighteenth century. These would never have come about if not for the printing press. However, the first anatomical textbook was printed in 1521 by da Luzzi, portraying woodcuts of illustrated anatomy and its discovery. Though anatomical illustrations in anatomical books were controversial, Dr John Bell found it pertinent to include illustrations of anatomised figures in anatomy books, considering a book without 'no better than a book of geography without maps.'² It is not only the anatomical illustrations themselves but also the iconography surrounding them that gives insight into how renaissance humanists viewed themselves. Rutkow emphasises that 'since antiquity, written words in the form of a manuscript of book have proved to be an

² John Bell *Engravings Explaining the Anatomy of the Human Body*. Edinburgh: J. Patterson, 1794) p. iii

integral instrument of education and training for physicians and surgeons.’³ *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* by Vesalius depicts a woodcut of a skinned man gesturing to the sky and the ground, with Roman ruins crumbling to dust in the background.⁴ Rutkow praises this work, stating that the ‘printing of the *Fabrica* revolutionized not just the understanding of human anatomy but also how it was taught.’⁵ By delving deeper into the iconography behind the woodcut in the *Fabrica*, we can expose how renaissance humanists viewed themselves from a psychological and theological perspective. The cadaver in the image can be seen pointing simultaneously to the sky and the ground. The human body and its workings were seen as proof of the design of the divine. The figure’s heavenwards gaze and gesture represents recognition of God as the creator, while his other hand points towards the ground depicting the knowledge that humans are of the earth and will inevitably return to it. In this manner, renaissance humanists saw man as both a part of God and the divine, whilst also being a part of nature and the natural order. Man is caught between the two worlds, neither fully divine nor as lowly as the beasts, and yet a part of both. This duality is also apparent in the reverence shown to both the

³ Rutkow IM. On the Fabric of the Human Body: A Translation of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem*: Book 1: The Bones and Cartilages. *Arch Surg*. 1998;133(11):1251. doi:10.1001/archsurg.133.11.1251

⁴ Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* (Basle: Johann Oporinus, 1543)

⁵ Rutkow IM. On the Fabric of the Human Body: A Translation of *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem*: Book 1: The Bones and Cartilages. *Arch Surg*. 1998;133(11):1251. doi:10.1001/archsurg.133.11.1251

classical world and the Christian. Renaissance Humanists revered, studied and lived by both. This reflects humanist Montaigne's views, who 'inquires into the human condition and finds it good, at least in part because God made it so.'⁶

It is pertinent to note that, whilst the images of the dissected cadavers were copied from real corpses, in the images they are seen walking around in vibrant landscapes, almost as if caught between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is speculated that this is an attempt to show that dissection of a cadaver is part of the natural cycle of life and death. In this sense it is seen to be a way to lessen the blow of the process of dissection on the public and to lessen any potential the moral outrage.

Inspired by Plato and later Galen, Renaissance Humanists saw the soul as having three parts or 'powers'.⁷ The *logistikon* located in the brain, the *thymoeides* located in the heart, and the *epithymetikon* located in the liver. Dissection not only brought humanists closer to these powers but opened the way for self-reflection in a way that had never been seen before. That which was considered hidden was suddenly exposed – both through live dissections and in illustrated books. When it came to the actual act of dissection and the recording of subsequent findings, there arose disagreements between practitioners on whether they should record every difference between the individual body or settle on a 'generic mean'.⁸ In the *Fabrica*, this is precisely what Vesalius does, developing an 'ideal' perception of anatomy through dissection and revealing the handiwork of God.

⁶M. L. King, *Renaissance humanism : an anthology of sources*. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014). p. 92

⁷ Julia Trompeter, *Galen on Ethics and Human Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2025) pp. 1-15

⁸ David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) p. 257

Anatomical lectures allowed students insight into practises of medicine and dissection. A *lector* would lecture to the theatre whilst a *sector*, usually a barber or surgeon, would carry out the dissection proper. Meanwhile, an *ostensor* would translate the *lector* for the *sector*, pointing to where they should cut, whilst indicting to the audience the newly exposed insides. Practise and theory were seen as two distinct roles, with the lecture a commentary of the anatomical texts and the cadaver serving as an illustration of the texts. Rather than a learning tool in themselves, the purpose of the bodies were to help the students remember and visualise the contents of text rather than the other way around. Vesalius, however, was opposed to this. He would carry out dissections himself whilst lecturing and even draw on the dissection table with charcoal to ensure he was getting his points across in a way that his students understood. In his view, how could the *lectors* hope to understand the contents of their lecture if they had never undertaken the process with their own hands? Lynn writes that, 'Vesalius believed that the field of medicine was being ill served by sending its students to books to learn their anatomy.'⁹ Indeed, Vesalius emphasised that his students must see for themselves the anatomy that was revealed to them during the public dissections.

The dissections had to be carried out in a very specific order, otherwise it would be difficult to access certain structures, and the exposed interior would begin to smell. Galen suggested that the study should begin with the bones, followed by the muscles as they served as the basic structure of the body. This, however, was impractical, as pointed out by Vesalius. It was instead suggested that dissection should begin in the abdomen, work up through the thorax before concluding at the

⁹ Marri Lynn, Vesalius and the Body Metaphor, *The Public Domain Review* (2013), <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/vesalius-and-the-body-metaphor/> [Accessed: 24 February 2026]

head. These sections also happened to correspond to where the humanists believed the three parts of the soul were located. Biesbrouck and Steeno give great insight into Vesalius' methods, stating that,

Vesalius was sparing in his use of corpses, as they did not come cheap.

Dissections took place during cold winter months, as no preservatives were available at that time. The most perishable parts were dealt with first: the stomach, the thoracic cavity, and the cranial cavity, in that order. Only then did the muscles follow, and finally the bones¹². When dissections were completed, the bones were usually cleaned to assemble a skeleton.¹⁰

This quest for understanding and the hunger for sharing knowledge that the humanist anatomists displayed can be traced back to early Italian Humanists. Their concern was of an educational ideal based on classical texts and knowledge. By holding this classical knowledge in high regard, they saw themselves through the classicist's eyes. The ideas of philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato became a touchstone through which they saw themselves. This was indirectly passed down to the Humanist Anatomists who dispersed their knowledge to theatres of people, much like the orators in classical Greece. However, it is prudent to recall Montaigne's words here. He stated that, 'you can feel from experience that so many interpretations dissipate the truth and break it up.'¹¹ It was essential, then, to anatomist humanists such as Vesalius, that the information he was sharing was

¹⁰ Maurits Biesbrouck and Omer Steeno, Andreas Vesalius' Corpses, *AMHA –Acto-Medico-Historica-Adriatica*, 12 (1) 2014 [Accessed 25 February 2026]

¹¹ Michel de Montaigne, *On Experience, in The Complete Essays, trans. and ed. with an Introduction and Notes by M.A. Screech* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1210

correct so that his students could have the best and most up-to-date knowledge of the material he was teaching.

In conclusion, by taking part in dissections and understanding more about anatomy, Renaissance Humanists were able to relate their Hellenistic, moralistic and theological understandings to the inner workings of the human body. To them, the body and its inner workings was proof of God's handywork laid bare. The act of opening a body and recoding its workings and intricacies reacquainted humanists with their own morality, as well as the certainty of the immortality of the soul.

Word Count: 2,200

Bibliography

Bell, J., *Engravings Explaining the Anatomy of the Human Body*. Edinburgh: J. Patterson, 1794)

Biesbrouck, M., and Steeno, O., Andreas Vesalius' Corpses, *AMHA –Acto-Medico-Historica- Adriatica*, 12 (1) 2014 [Accessed 25 February 2026]

King, M.L. *Renaissance Humanism: An Anthology of Sources*. (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014

Landau, D., and Parshall, P., *The Renaissance Print, 1470-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994)

Marri Lynn, Vesalius and the Body Metaphor, *The Public Domain Review* (2013),
<https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/vesalius-and-the-body-metaphor/> [Accessed:
24 February 2026]

de Montaigne, M., *On Experience, in The Complete Essays, trans. and ed. with an
Introduction and Notes by M.A. Screech* (London: Penguin, 2003)

Rutkow IM. On the Fabric of the Human Body: A Translation of De Humani Corporis
Fabrica Libri Septem: Book 1: The Bones and Cartilages. *Arch Surg.*
1998;133(11):1251. doi:10.1001/archsurg.133.11.1251

J. C. C. Rupp, The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of the Anatomical
Projects of the Ancients. *Canadian Journal of History* 2000, **35**(1) [Accessed: 24
February 2026]

Trompeter, J., *Galen on Ethics and Human Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2025)

Vesalius A., *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* (Basle: Johann Oporinus,
1543)

Sawday, J. (1998) "The Anatomical Renaissance: The Resurrection of the
Anatomical Projects of the Ancients . Andrew Cunningham," *Isis*, 89(3), pp. 537–538.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1086/384099> [Accessed 25 February 2026]

