

Humanism - Beliefs and Values

Based on lectures by David Pollock to PGCE courses at York St John University in September 2010 and September 2012

What sort of thing is Humanism? It is a world-view or “lifestance” - a word coined in 1970s by the British Humanist Association. It is equivalent to the German *Weltanschauung* or “world view”.

The word was coined to fill a gap. People with non-religious beliefs were - and often still are - thought to have “god-shaped holes” in their lives: they lacked a religion and had nothing to put in its place. In part this seemed to be because there was no word to cover the whole spectrum of fundamental beliefs about what are sometimes called Ultimate Questions about Life, the Universe and Everything - about the nature of existence & the universe and how we should behave.

“Lifestance” covers the whole spectrum. Lifestances can be religious or non-religious - or both insofar as there is a grey area in between. Different lifestances assert different facts about the universe and how it came to be. They have many different creation stories, for example, and assert different relationships between mankind and the cosmos - including any god or gods - and they draw from their factual claims somewhat different moral teaching.

But all lifestances - religious or not - combine beliefs about **what is** with values about **how things should be** - how we should behave.

It is an important to grasp this concept. Religions do not make up the whole spectrum of ultimate beliefs about life: there are non-religious philosophies of life also. And they are all lifestances.

Not only this but they all have the same status in law and in human rights. In fact, all the relevant laws and international human rights treaties talk about ‘religion or belief’, where the courts have repeatedly held that beliefs include non-religious beliefs like Humanism and indeed atheism and the denial of any belief as well as holding it. In a legal context, “religion or belief” usually means “lifestance”.

Humanism is not an “-ism”

But Humanism is different from almost all other religions and beliefs, because Humanism is not an “-ism” in the sense of a body of more or less unquestionable doctrine. You don’t ‘convert’ to Humanism and then have to take the rough with the smooth.

In this it is different from most - maybe all - religions. It has no sacred texts, no source book of unquestionable rules or doctrine, no liturgy, no founding figurehead, no structure of authority.

Instead, **Humanism is a label for a certain range of beliefs and values**. To the extent that you do or do not share these beliefs and attitudes, so you may be more or less inclined to call yourself a humanist. Taken together, they are a set of beliefs and values which constitute a view of the world - a philosophy by which many people live their lives.

I shall describe the beliefs that I see as at the core of Humanism, but other humanists would offer differing accounts. Not only that, but the word “humanism” is used in altogether other senses - it was coined in the eighteenth century to describe the revival of classical learning in the Renaissance, is linked to the idea of “the humanities”, and came to be applied to our sort of non-religious life only in the early twentieth century. The meaning of words is determined by their use, and the organised humanist movement has no monopoly of the use of the word Humanism.

Beliefs

Nevertheless, ours is probably the predominant meaning today, and in our eyes it is a combination of core beliefs and values. None of them is the monopoly of Humanism - some of them are certainly shared by many religious believers - but the combination is definitive. Of course, people who share all these beliefs and values are free not to call themselves humanists: many people simply do not wish to attach a label to themselves.

I shall start with our beliefs (about what is) and move later to our values (about what should be). There is a clear theoretical dividing line between beliefs and values but in practice the values are based on the beliefs and so there is a close correspondence and interaction between them.

Our beliefs are that the universe works on according to natural laws, that this is the only life we have, and that it is intrinsic to human nature to have a moral capacity.

Our values are to do with reason, morality, social attitudes, and meaning and purpose.

Let me at this preliminary stage meet one possible criticism – namely, that Humanism is just a ragbag of ideas with no real justification for having a name and identity.

The answer to this is that the *coherence* and the *recurrence through history* of this combination of beliefs and values justify seeing Humanism as a unity, as a valid concept. Though the name is recent, there is a long tradition - older than any of the main world religions - of the non-religious philosophy of life that we now call Humanism.

The tradition has had breaks (for example, in Europe during mediaeval times when the Roman Catholic church was all-powerful so that even the freest of freethinkers was unable to think outside a theological framework) but it has always been resumed, because this is a philosophy inherent in the very fact of human existence in communities.

- **Naturalism: there is no transcendental realm**

Religions have in common a belief in a hidden realm of existence - a transcendental realm. Most of them believe in a god - sometimes many gods. Not all religions have gods - for example, classical Buddhism and Jainism have no gods, but both believe in a hidden, celestial realm of existence to which their followers aspire.

In contrast, our beliefs are naturalistic - if you like, physicalist or materialist (though in a sense, of course, that admits the various unseen forces of nature).

We believe that the universe can be explained by natural laws, many of which we have already discovered and the rest of which are discoverable by us at least in principle.

The only reality is what we can detect through our senses - can see, hear, touch and so on -

or else detect by the use of scientific instruments. There is no 'second layer' to existence - no gods and ghosts, no souls or spirits of the place - and our only route to sure and certain (or rather eternally unsure) knowledge is through an assumption of naturalism.

- [There is only one life](#)

It follows that we have no belief in an afterlife. Death is the end and we do not survive it.

Here again we are different from the religions: almost all religions believe in a continued existence after this life, some of them a reincarnation in this world, others a translation to a different realm of existence - and sometimes they believe in existences before this life too. The afterlife is invariably linked to the way one lives in this life, and the imagery of the Christian Last Judgement terrified Christians until recently - indeed, it still does terrify some today.

Our belief is much more benign: death is the end.

This is buttressed by modern science - by chemistry & biology. We are not souls trapped in a mortal body: what we are resides in our bodies and brains, and bodily death means the end of the vastly intricate system of matter animated by electro-chemical impulses that make us up. Personality cannot survive death: indeed, its dependence on the brain is starkly illustrated by the effects of some brain injuries and of dementia.

But the belief that death ends all is not recent. It is an old idea, supported by modern science. Ancient philosophers already had a concept of death as the end of personal existence: the mind grows with the body, tied to physical being, and nothing is permanent or eternal. Epicurus in the 4th century BCE believed that if there were gods they had no interest in mankind. His attitude to death was simple:

...death is nothing to us. All good and evil consists in sensation, but death is deprivation of sensation.

His follower the Roman Lucretius wrote a poem in several books called *On the Nature of Things*. In it he said:

You have nothing to fear in death. Someone who no longer exists cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who is not born.

Lucretius (95-55 BCE) also wrote: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum* - a very similar thought to the modern observation that normally good men do good things and bad men do bad things: it takes religion to make good men do bad things.

The Roman Seneca was a Stoic. He wrote:

So death is having all these tries at me, is he? Let him, then! I had a try at him a long while ago myself. 'When was this?' you'll say. Before I was born. Death is just not being. What that is like I know already. It will be the same after me as it was before me. If there is any suffering in death, there must have been suffering also in the past, but actually, we felt no suffering then.

This belief about death, that it is no different from what came before birth, is also a response to it: death means non-existence and so is nothing to be feared. This was important given the prevailing beliefs at the time he was writing, when the common

attitude was one of fear of an afterlife. In Homer's *Odyssey* the dead in Hades are in a wretched state - thin insubstantial ghosts, longing for blood for a temporary access of the warmth they lack. Similarly in the nineteenth century those who lost their Christian faith found a belief in extinction at death was a great relief - relief to be rid of the expectation of burning in hell.

Marcus Aurelius, the emperor philosopher, (121-180 CE) had a similarly humanistic response:

A little while and you will be nobody nowhere, nor will anything which you now see exist, nor any of those now alive. Nature's law is that all things change and turn, and pass away, so that in due course, different things may be.

as did Samuel Butler, the Victorian novelist (*Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh*) and thinker (1835-1902), suggesting that you live on in people's memories and in your achievements like ripples on a pond long after the stone has sunk:

To die completely, a person must not only forget but be forgotten, and he who is not forgotten is not dead.

- [Moral capacity is intrinsic to human nature](#)

Another key belief held by Humanists is that it is part of human nature that we are moral creatures - not that we are necessarily moral in the sense of good, but that we all - with the exception of a few psychopaths and severely autistic people - have the capacity to think in moral terms and cannot escape from doing so. What we call morality - our having ideas of things being right or wrong - arises simply out of human nature.

Care is needed to understand this. It is of course in strong contrast with traditional religious views that having no religion means having no morals - that moral law is God's law - a logical nonsense, of course, as Plato pointed out with Euthyphro's dilemma: is something good because God commands it, whatever we may feel (so that our own sense of what is right or wrong is redundant at best, misleading at worst) or does God command it because it is good, in which case goodness is independent of God and God is redundant.

What we are saying is that biology and culture have created our moral sense. There are all sorts of pro-social behaviours - altruism, cooperation - that are necessary for living together with others of your own species - this applies to humans pre-eminently. These behaviours are an evolved mechanism shared by all human beings.

Humans have lived as social animals since millions of years before we were even human, and all social animals have rules - patterns - of behaviour that enable them to live harmoniously and productively together. If they had not had such rules, they would not have survived. We survived, and with language and our ability for abstract thought, we refined these unwritten rules into extensive moral philosophy.

Our instincts are the basis on which the concept of morality is built - but we are not naturally (exclusively) good: some instincts are aggressive or selfish, and some are group-focussed, which can seem hostile to outsiders. Human nature is indeed almost infinitely plastic - as history has shown - and with the wrong education and experience - formation, if you like - people can adopt very anti-social behaviours and feel them to be

not only acceptable but morally necessary.

So, our current moral views are massively redesigned and built on by culture but at root reside in human nature, hard-wired into us.

Values

Now let me move on to our values.

- Reason

One key humanist value is the high importance we set on truth and on rational thinking as the only proven route to secure (-ish) knowledge about the facts of the universe. That may seem obvious, but it is not, so I want to linger on it for a minute.

Religious people will often give answers that are beautiful or comforting, even if they are doubtful how true they are, or will rely on an unquestionable dogma in the face of evidence that it is plainly false. Often critics of the so-called New Atheism reject its critique of religion by saying that it rests on a view of religion as a set of propositions, hypotheses that seem nonsense if taken at face value. Instead, these critics say, religion is a felt experience, a relationship or something.

Well, maybe - but it is still founded on propositions - the existence of a god, redemption, resurrection and so on - and if these are disbelieved it must lose its integrity and credibility. And religion needs to answer for real-world actions that are based on these propositions - dogmas that the Vatican uses to justify obstruction in the UN and elsewhere of family-planning programmes or the use of condoms against AIDS.

Humanists find it difficult to see a distinction except in comparative antiquity between mainstream religion and 'New Age' people who accept unthinkingly nonsense about the healing powers of crystals, about feng shui, astrology or alternative medicine whose practitioners refuse to test it in controlled trials. For humanists, belief should be proportioned to evidence. We see a value in scepticism when the evidence is inadequate and we reject dogma, religious, political or of any kind.

Karl Popper, the great political philosopher, wrote:

Rationalism is an attitude of readiness to listen to contrary arguments and to learn from experience. . . [an attitude] of admitting that 'I may be wrong and you may be right and, by an effort, we may get nearer the truth'.

So, Humanists reject ideas & theories that are not reasonable, and we do not accept notions that are not backed by adequate evidence. Our aim is to get as close as we can to the truth. We proportion our belief to the evidence available, and we regard it as folly to believe things without enough evidence and even, depending on the circumstances, morally wrong to do so.

As William Clifford, the Victorian philosopher and mathematician, famously wrote:

It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. (W K Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief*)

This is a strong contrast with religions that value faith and belief in the teeth of the

evidence. Humanists think that belief against the evidence is not a virtue at all - in fact, it can be a vice, especially if it leads to damaging action.

In many cases finding the truth means turning to scientific enquiry, which has proved to be an outstandingly successful and reliable method of finding the truth since it came back into common use 200 or 300 years ago - back into use because the ancient Greeks and the early Islamic scientists were pretty good at it.

Just think how different - how much clearer and more comprehensible - our understanding of the world is now than only 200 or 300 years ago. Then we had no idea of the origins of disease, of the atomic structure of matter, of the size or age of the universe, of the evolution of species; we had few medicines, no painkillers, no detergents, no transport quicker than a horse and only candles, the moon and stars for light at night. Our present knowledge and abilities have all come about from scientific study of the world.

And science is a *method*, not a set of facts.

Science is built up with facts, as a house is with stones. But a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house. (Henri Poincaré - *Science and Hypothesis*)

It is the method of forming a hypothesis, the simplest that will explain the known facts, then deriving from it consequences that you can test - if that is true, then so must this be; and then by enquiry or experiment testing your hypothesis, possibly to destruction. When you detect weaknesses or failures in it, you amend the hypothesis and start again. If it stands up to testing, it may get recognised as a theory - provisionally accepted but always open to question.

Science is simply the best - almost the only - way of finding out reliably about the world, but its answers are always provisional - always open to re-examination in the light of new evidence. They are not eternal truths, never unquestionable. Newton's laws were overthrown by Einstein; Einstein's theories cannot accommodate quantum physics; string theory may overturn our present ideas.

What science gives us is not the truth but an ever closer approximation to the truth. Science refuses to accept dogma, refuses to allow anything to be unquestionable, accepts that it may make mistakes, but contains its own means of correcting them. Of course, scientists can go wrong - but that is human error or delinquency, not a fault with the method. And this spirit of open-minded, rational enquiry is an important part of Humanism.

- [Morality](#)

Of course, reason is not enough, and there are areas of life where it has nothing to say. As Sir Joshua Reynolds said:

Reason, without doubt, must ultimately determine every thing; at this minute it is required to inform us when that very reason is to give way to feeling. (*Sir Joshua Reynolds, 13th discourse (quoted in The Guardian 16.8.03)*)

As we have seen, it is a key humanist belief that morality arises from human nature, but it is shaped by our experience and culture. Karl Popper said it was like food: breakfast, lunch

and dinner are human inventions, but the need to eat and to space out that eating are part of our nature.

So, our moral instincts are not necessarily a guide on how to behave but they are a good starting point, because they derive from patterns of behaviour that facilitated group survival that have been overlaid and worked on and adapted over thousands of years by our moral philosophy and practical reasoning.

But circumstances alter cases and particular formulations of morality and ethics can get out of date. It is our responsibility to keep morality under review. Humanist morality provides a searchlight, not a map - it is a way of thinking about these questions and not an answer to them. In other words, the purpose of morality, as humanists see it, is not to conform to some pre-ordained model such as might include (say) a fascist or totalitarian idea of morality being to preserve the nation or the group, nor is it to serve some religious end. Morality exists to serve a human end - human welfare and fulfilment.

Our moral sense, along with our beliefs, provide a framework for ethics, within which Humanists can adopt a utilitarian ethic or a virtue ethic or may take any number of positions. Human welfare and fulfilment set the terms of ethics - the framework. They lay the pitch on which the ethical game is played. But humanist morality does not go so far as to lay down fixed rules. It requires us to exercise judgement in the circumstances of each case. This flexibility, this commitment to dialogue and ethical conversation, is fundamental to humanist morality - just so long as, for all the flexibility, the touchstone is always human welfare and fulfilment.

And (as one would expect given the origin of morality in our existence as social animals) human welfare and fulfilment are socially determined. They are based on the individual in society. Society cannot exist without mutuality. This even seems to be hard-wired into us - a young child (the closest we can get to someone untainted by culture) already has a sense of fairness and sharing. Mutuality implies directly the value of the individual and over time human moral thinking has come to impute this value to all humans on earth rather than just an in-group of family, tribe or nation.

So humanist morality attaches value and importance to the individual – all the more so because we believe that this is the only life we have – there is no pie in the sky when you die. The interdependence of the individual and society implies the duty of the individual to society - individual responsibility for one's behaviour as it affects the collectivity of society.

And cooperation is the basis of living in communities. It is also empirically observed to conduce to human welfare. These considerations provide the framework for humanist moral thinking about particular issues.

Mutuality is in fact fundamental to all morality, as is seen in the universality of the Golden Rule. All religions and all ethical systems include the Golden Rule. It is the rule of behaving to others as you would wish them to behave to you. The Golden Rule surfaces and resurfaces across the world and across time as a central proposition - which, incidentally, implies strongly that religions and non-religious beliefs and law codes are all influenced by the same ultimate facts around us – in fact, that morality has influenced religion more than religion has influenced morality.

So we are individually responsible for our own lives and collectively responsible for the

future of the planet - for the sake of our descendants and all the life on earth. This makes it unsurprising that Humanists were very prominent in starting and running such bodies as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Health Organisation and UNESCO, whose first directors-general were respectively Lord Boyd-Orr, Dr Brock Chisholm and Sir Julian Huxley. Similarly Lord Ritchie-Calder, while working for UNESCO, was instrumental in starting the UN Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy and was later, alongside another eminent humanist, Dame Jennie Lee, prominent in the creation of the Open University.

It also follows from our basic moral outlook that we are strongly committed to human rights - those definitions of the limits to which we will allow the majority or the authorities to go in restraining deviant individuals or minority groups from behaving in the way they wish. Alongside this commitment to individual freedom and dignity and other liberal values, we also have clear views about the organisation of society, especially now we have such a diverse community by contrast with the comparative (sometimes exaggerated) uniformity of past ages.

We stand for a free, open and inclusive society: one

based on the recognition that people have divergent views and interests and that nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth (*George Soros: appendix to The Bubble of American Supremacy - Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004*).

In such a society, the government, other public authorities and social institutions need to seek the maximum individual freedom while building on common interests so that people may live together constructively. Given the huge disparity of lifestyles - religions and beliefs - in society today, that means that the government and official institutions must remain neutral on such questions. There must be no privileges for Christians or Humanists or any other belief group.

We call such a state a **secular state** - not in any sense of being atheist but in the sense of neutral, providing a level playing field for all beliefs and religions. Secularism does not mean (as opponents disingenuously pretend) that the religious are barred from the public square - only that they enter it on the same terms as everyone else, without the traditional deference given to religious views, and that decision-makers pay no attention to purely religious arguments.

[Meaning and Purpose](#)

Finally we come to the 'existential' question of the meaning of life: why are we here? what is the purpose of life?

Well, using our reasoning powers, we start by examining the question and we soon see that it is muddled and needs to be taken apart. Trees have no purpose: we may have uses for them - shade, or timber - but they just exist. We may cut down a tree and make a table, and the table will have a purpose insofar as we plan to make use of it.

But life as a whole, as a phenomenon on earth or any other planet, has no purpose of this

kind. My life has no purpose in a sense analogous to the table that I make having a purpose.

However, in the absence of an ultimate purpose or meaning to the universe, humans have the capacity to create meaning and purpose for themselves. What meaning we have is of our making. Meaning and purpose are human constructs. As Epicurus said:

Nothing arises in order that we may use it, but what arises has its uses.

So, I can give my own life a purpose: I can adopt goals that seem worthwhile, I can shape my life to achieve them - and at the end look back and assess whether I have succeeded or failed, whether I have made good use of my time or not.

And my life will contribute to those of other people, who will remember me and be influenced by me after my death. At a humanist funeral we remember and celebrate the life of the one we have lost and find comfort in our shared feelings of not just loss but also gratitude for what we have gained from his or her life.

The humanist approach allows for massive diversity in choices of “the good life”. What exactly constitutes a meaningful, worthwhile, purposive flourishing life is an area where we not only differ but where it is good that we differ, both because people are inherently different in their talents and inclinations and because it allows different experiments in living, trying different models that feed off each other and lead to a diverse and interesting and flourishing human society.

However, a good life is not only one led with due regard to morality - another important aspect of a good life is human happiness and fulfilment. Now happiness here is not just the absence of suffering or indeed the passing of time in amusement and entertainment. As Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), the American freethinker, said:

Reason, Observation and Experience – the Holy Trinity of Science – have taught us that happiness is the only good; that the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so.

Happiness is something much more substantial. It is about striving after and achieving goals and ambitions. It is about relations with other people - for our personal happiness is inextricably tied up with that of others and depends on a richness of emotional contact. It is about cultural and artistic fulfilment.

So this is not happiness in the rather superficial sense of today but in that of say the Declaration of Independence when it speaks of men being

endowed with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

As J S Mill said, “better Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied”.

Another formulation comes from Bertrand Russell: “A good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” These two categories - love and knowledge - recur in humanist conceptions of the good life - love because one’s inner life, one’s emotional life is vital – it is the relational aspect of life, of emotional fulfilment, sympathies and affections both in relation to others and to the natural world; and knowledge, because the life of the mind, finding things out, learning, knowing and understanding, gives joy & fulfilment. (Sadly as Russell himself acknowledged: ‘Many people would sooner die than think. In fact, they do so’!)

Spirituality

Another aspect of fulfilment in life is that realm of elevated and intense experience that includes what the religious call spirituality. This is a vexed word for Humanists because it seems to imply the existence of a transcendental realm, of souls and spirits, which of course we reject.

But the experience is still very real, even if of natural origins.

The fact is that the mystical feeling of enlargement, union and emancipation has no specific intellectual content of its own. It is capable of forming matrimonial alliances with material furnished by the most diverse philosophies and theologies, provided only they can find a place in their framework for its peculiar emotional moods.
(William James *Varieties of Religious Experience*)

Finally, let me just indicate the breadth of the humanist tradition by flicking through some of the people in whom we recognise humanist thought, albeit the word (as I said) did not come into its present meaning until the last century. The tradition embraces Confucius, Epicurus, the Stoics - like Marcus Aurelius; David Hume, John Locke, the French philosophes; Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot. Humanists today include broadcasters like David Attenborough and Laurie Taylor, cultural figures like Jonathan Miller; novelists like Ian McEwan, Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett; world-class scientists like Sir Michael Atiyah, Sir Harry Kroto and Dr Helena Cronin, journalists like Polly Toynbee and Jenni Murray; philosophers like A C Grayling and Simon Blackburn; politicians like Ken Livingstone, Neil Kinnock and John Bercow, the Speaker of the House of Commons, entertainers like Stewart Lee, Robin Ince and Stephen Fry - and so many more.

So that is Humanism - an alternative to religion that fulfils much the same function as a religion. It gives us our bearings in the world. It is demanding but immensely rewarding - it puts a lot of responsibility on you to think for yourself, but it provides you with the freedom to do so and a basis on which to make ethical decisions. You don’t have to have a religion, but if you don’t have a lifescape of any kind, you are rootless, without answers or purpose. Humanism provides the answers for those who can’t accept religion but want an ethical approach to life - and it brings with it the inheritance of a glorious history and the promise of a better future.

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