

An Introduction to Humanism Discussion:

Welcome to the Humanist Association's first meeting in ages. For years, we covered the topic of "What is Humanism" every January. While we used to have an impressive schedule of at least one event per week and have fallen into hiatus in the last couple of years, now more than ever it is important to consider what the Humanist philosophy is and the extraordinary benefit that it can provide to our seeming, increasingly chaotic world. Today we will discuss three topics in relation to what Humanism is, have a great chat, and hopefully convene again on the third Sunday of February to continue our discussion.

For discussion, we will select a moderator, cover each topic for 10-20 minutes, and hopefully generate more. We will touch on 1) What Humanism is, 2) how Humanists see the world, and 3) Humanism in practice. The moderator(s) will be selected and briefly read the prompts and we will go around and discuss what we think and hopefully engage each other in discussion. While there are three topics listed, feel free to tackle either one or all four depending on time or interest.

The goals of this exercise are to explore what Humanism is, to make some new friends, and to engage in further developing our philosophy at the grassroots level.

1. What is Humanism?

Depending on who you talk to, Humanism has many definitions. There is a stark distinction between classical (scholastic), early 20th Century, and contemporary Humanism. Not all of these versions were non/anti-religious, and yet not every version today is either. Two definitions are worth discussing: the preamble to the [Humanist Manifesto III \(2003\)](#) and Humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont's ([The Philosophy of Humanism, 1957](#)).

- "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."
 - "The joyous service for the greater good of all humanity this natural world and advocating the methods of reason, science, and democracy."
- A. What are the qualities of each definition that speak to you?
- A. While both place the social concern of the "greater good of humanity" as the core focus of our shared existence, definition 1 focusses on **naturalism** and "**responsibility**;" the second definition talks of the "**joyous service**" and "**reason, science, and democracy**."
- B. Which definition appeals to you more?
- C. What is your definition of Humanism?

2. How Humanists See the World

While atheism is a position statement on the existence of god(s), Humanism is a position statement on how to operate in the world. The aforementioned philosopher Lamont said that if there is to be a philosophy of life, it is to be a philosophy about living.

A. On God(s):

Mathematician, Pierre Simon **Laplace** was rumored to tell Napoleon that the reason he didn't include God in his book on the workings of the cosmos that that "**hypothesis was**

not necessary.” There are many god(s) throughout the history of oral and written traditions. They tended to be tools of explanation and of the implementation of moral and political authority. The qualities of these characters tend to be particular to the people who create, develop, and carry them. A more polemic author, the **Baron D’Holbach** wrote around the same time as Laplace that “We owe nothing to a god for which we know nothing about, but to the people for whom we live with.”

Humanists place our concern in this-worldly matters. If god(s) exist, our social and moral commitments to each other would still exist regardless of them. This leaves room for religious humanists to “join the fold.” Our destiny is shared, as is our responsibility to and for each other.

One humanist and deeply religious deist was **Thomas Paine** who wrote that his belief consisted in the existence of one god and “**in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.**”

(*Other examples of religious humanists: Ethical Culture Societies, Humanistic Judaism, and Humanist Unitarian Universalists).

- a. Do you see atheism as a prerequisite to being a humanist?
- b. What are your experiences with god(s) either as a (former) believer or someone who has never ascribed to a belief in the supernatural?
- c. If being a former a believer, what experiences led you to that position, and what experiences shifted your affiliation/worldview?
- d. Do you see organized religious institutions as benefitting the human condition or holding us back. If so, how, to what extent, and why?

B. Our place in the universe:

Humanists ascribe to current scientific thought on the matter that we come from a natural, unguided, and self-generated (big bang) universe; and that we are a part of the ongoing processes of that universe. There are certain unique facets of human beings that provide a lot of good, but can also do a lot of damage. Humanists see our capacity for wonder, aspiration, and cooperation as not only useful, but urgent and necessary to help resolve many of the world’s problems (that are often caused by us).

- A. **The story of the universe:** The big bang happened, natural processes led to life on earth, eventually hominids. Those hominids evolved from earlier animals and alongside other animals. They built a series of civilizations, and we continue to do so (**a naturalistic worldview**).
- B. Human beings are one of many **social animals**, exhibiting the characteristics that you would expect of hierarchal, ingroup-living social animals. We have strong drives to both altruism and exclusionary-tribalism. This is a product of our development as a species. There is much that we can overcome of our baser instincts, even if it is difficult. Regardless, our biological makeup (neurology etc) tends us to acts of **reciprocal altruism** and the expectation of fairness.
- C. **The human family:** Modern history has been messy to say the least. From our civilizational alcoves around the globe we have seen each other through different lenses at different times. **Western thought** (for example, and not exclusively) has produced the ideas that certain outsider groups of people were 1) not fully human and thus incapable of living full civic and social lives, therefore they deserved punishment and paternal

dominance for their biological failures; 2) later, these groups were seen as fully human, and their failures to conform to certain ascribed standards were by a failure of intention and willpower, therefore bad circumstances were now a product of their own failures.

Humanists see ourselves as part of the great “human family.” What nature has provided and from our philosophical developments, we see that we have a responsibility to and for each other. This comes from seeing a bigger picture where **ecological stewardship**, **cooperative-interdependence**, and **reason-tempered compassion** are essential to our future survival, aspects of the “**better angels of our nature**,” and the recipe for flourishing.

- a. Do you agree with the idea of an unguided universe, through the lens of a “naturalistic worldview?”
- b. To what extent is reciprocal altruism and cooperation cultural vs. biological?
- c. Chimpanzees and other great apes have exhibit extra-species cooperation with human beings, as have dolphins, and some other animals. Is this type of cooperative impulse at our core ‘humanist’ or ‘mammalist?’

C. On morality and social responsibility:

- A. **Moral Systems:** Moral systems tend to address the central questions of what the “good life” is, how we achieve and maintain it, and the practices associated with such. Some view moral systems as absolute while others are more relativistic. Some moral systems have divine entities and exploits as guide posts. This is widespread and commonplace. While many Humanists come from those traditions, the Humanist moral outlook looks toward the world from a naturalist viewpoint and places the worth of the individual as a co-equal member of the human family as the guidepost for our ethical aspirations and moral behavior.

The Humanist moral system is proactive, rather than a spectator activity. We see that the need for reinforcing a sense of communitarian concern among our fellow human beings. That we are individuals and members of a greater community. There is a balance between the worth of the individual and the responsibility to the community, and of the community to that individual.

We have an unbridled optimism that the world can be a better place, but only if we work for it together. This interdependence is not meant to impose a grueling activity on humankind, but to anchor what often gives purpose to our lives, our relationships and meaningful work.

We may not always agree on what the “greatest good” is or on how to get there. That is why Humanists value reasoned discussion and collaboration. As said in [Humanist Manifesto I \(1933\)](#), that ours is a “shared life in a shared world.”

Many positions on current ethical debates fall along the progressive end of the spectrum. The Humanist moral calculus often is seen as unpopular or unthinkable and when sober, experienced, and considerate heads emerge later, we are often seen as leading the way. This includes the subjects of the rights of gays and lesbians, the abolition of slavery, reproductive rights, labor rights, etc.

Humanists also see that we are not merely subjects of a moral scheme, but collaborators. We not only have the invitation to contribute to the discussion on moral facets and structure, but a privilege and obligation to do so.

- a. What is necessary to ground a moral system?
- b. What are the values and pitfalls of both absolutist and relative moral systems?
- c. What do you see the moral imperatives for the Humanist worldview to be? I.E., what are our moral priorities vs. secondary moral concerns?

D. On meaning:

We crave a reason for things to have occurred (or occur) to make sense of the world around us. Our brains compel us to know why. For perspective on outcomes, human beings seek intention for both the actions of other individuals and for the causes of our circumstances whether they be natural or beyond.

Meaning helps us establish order in the clouds of chaos that envelop our everyday. Meaning also adds the necessary incentive to endure grueling circumstances. [Viktor Frankl](#) (psychologist and father of “logos therapy”), building off of Friedrich Nietzsches “will to power,” found that prisons in Nazi-era German prison camps would have a much greater chance of survival if they conceived of a reason for to endure their suffering (seeing their families after the war), than those without meaning.

Many people subscribe to established lines of thought, often out of deeply engrained cultural traditions like religion. A popularly-trafficked thought states that without a god, all things are meaningless and all bad behavior is permissible. [Jean Paul Sartre](#) (Twentieth Century philosopher) says that the opposite is true. For Sartre, a god-schema takes away our responsibility to/for ourselves and each other. If we were created to fulfill a particular plan, then we are but automatons. Sartre says that a coward, born a coward, will always be and has no excuse otherwise.

These peculiar aspects of human nature, the capacity to create meaning, and the tendency to demand it, make us all the more incredible. Meaning is inherently social.

- a. What do you find meaning in?
- b. Do you derive any meaning or guidance from traditional forms of perspective-dialogue (e.g., religious scripture, poetry, novels?).

3. Humanism in Practice:

Humanism is a pro-social, proactive, and powerful philosophy the tenets of which can build bridges.

Humanism in practice is seeing the world through the Humanist lens, seeing the uncertainties of the world not with unease but with calm, curiosity. If there are issues before us, we try to do our homework. It is our responsibility to do so. Then we work together to make the world a better place. I leave this particularly vague because it is meant to sprout more chat. And, we will have more chat.

Humanism in practice is best seen through the “Great Agnostic’s” (Robert Green Ingersoll) “Humanist Creed.”

Justice is the only worship
 Love is the only priest
 Ignorance is the only slavery
 Happiness is the only good

The time to be happy is now,
The place to be happy is here,
The way to be happy, is to make others so,
Wisdom is the science of happiness.

Next month's Discussion:

Evolution, Science, and American Public Science Discourse