

Humanism and the Good Life





Summary

Finding the meaning of life cannot be left to others. Human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning to and shape their own lives. Humanism offers a framework for doing it.

What is the appeal of a humanist way of life?
How do humanists act on their principles?

In this guide HA Board Director, Leslie Allan outlines core principles underpinning the humanist world view and illustrates how they are applied with historical and contemporary examples. In the final part, Leslie draws upon these principles to tease out what it means to live a good life; a life of meaning and purpose.

Credits

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The Humanist Approach



What exactly is a humanist approach to life and living?
How does it differ from other approaches?

The humanist approach can be summed up in these three themes or principles:

1. **Reason and evidence**
2. **Compassion and equality**
3. **Autonomy and dignity**



Reason and Evidence

The first thing to note is that humanists respect reason and evidence. Humanists think that it is through the use of logic and reason that we reliably arrive at truths about ourselves and the universe. Conversely, we don't consider intuition and faith as reliable guides to knowledge. We think that our personal beliefs should align with the strength of the evidence put to us.

Hence, 'Reason' and the reliance on evidence is one of Humanists Australia's core values. But what does that mean? In the social sphere, we think that public policy should be informed by the best scientific evidence we have available. Applying this principle puts into serious question the effectiveness of pseudo-medical treatments such as iridology and homeopathy. Another recent example is the damage done to public health by anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists. This principle also encourages us to get acting on climate change before it's too late.

Applying the scientific method leads us to a naturalistic view of humans and the universe. Science teaches us that the visible universe is some 14 billion years old, that there are four fundamental forces of nature and that life evolved over some 3.5 billion years of evolution on earth, with Homo sapiens first appearing some 200,000 years ago.

That doesn't mean we know everything and that there are no deep mysteries yet to be solved. Scientists are working on figuring out what happens inside a black hole, how quantum entanglement is possible, and what is the nature of dark matter and dark energy. Perhaps the biggest and most elusive mystery is the nature of consciousness; how do the 80 billion neurons that make up a normal living human brain give rise to the feeling of love and the sensation of a red rose?

Humanists (and atheists) are sometimes thought of as joyless worshipers of cool, hard reason with no appreciation of love, wonder, music and art. Nothing could be further from the truth. Humanists stand in awe at the magnificent complexity of the universe, the beauty of nature, the all-consuming power of love, and the inspiration that drives art and music.

A great antidote to this misconception is Chris Johnson's fabulously illustrated book, [***A Better Life: 100 Atheists Speak Out on Joy & Meaning in a World without God***](#). You won't be surprised to hear that one of Humanists Australia's values is 'Culture'.



Compassion and Equality

Regard for other human beings and all other sentient creatures stands at the centre of the humanist outlook. Our feelings of empathy and our drive to act altruistically are encoded in our genes and reinforced through our upbringing. As Harvard University psychologist, Steven Pinker (2012), described it, our desire to help those who are suffering reflects the better angels of our nature.

But to whom ought we show our compassion? To our family? To our friends? Of course. But who else? For a humanist, what marks a truly moral act is one in which we treat people as equals; that is, where we treat people impartially. So, for a humanist, you ought not get special treatment just because you are white, wealthy, heterosexual or male. Treating people as equals is fundamental to what it is to act morally. In addition to Humanists Australia's valuing of 'Compassion', our other value of 'Diversity' is the one that emphasises treating people with equal respect.

"The only possible basis for a sound morality is mutual tolerance and respect: tolerance of one another's customs and opinions; respect for one another's rights and feelings; awareness of one another's needs."

– A J Ayer, *The Humanist Outlook*, 1968



For humanists, it is imperative to treat people with compassion and as equals. It is the result of our long evolutionary history in which we evolved to form co-operative social groups. Let us illustrate this idea.

Imagine for a moment you're going on a holiday by sea. Your ship becomes stranded on a desert island with none of the crew surviving. You are left with some food, materials to make some shelter, and the natural resources on the island. To survive individually and as a group, what rules would you make to govern your behaviour? Would you decide on the rule, 'Kill your fellow survivors when you can get away with it'? Would you choose, 'Steal from the food store

when no one is looking'? Would you decide on, 'Break your promises when you can't be bothered keeping them'?

Or would you, as a group, decide on the opposite? See, for a humanist, there is nothing mysterious or out-of-this-world about the moral rules that we want others to live by. They are simply the rules that we must all conform to if we are to get the mutual benefits of co-operation; for us to survive and thrive.

As civilisations have progressed, the range of people to which we show compassion and equal regard has expanded. People who are enslaved, women, gender and sexually diverse people and our Indigenous peoples are more and more treated as equals. At their noblest, the world's religions actively promote this idea of compassion for all, regardless of a person's religious belief, ancestry, gender and sexual preference. This universalist ethos is best expressed in the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.

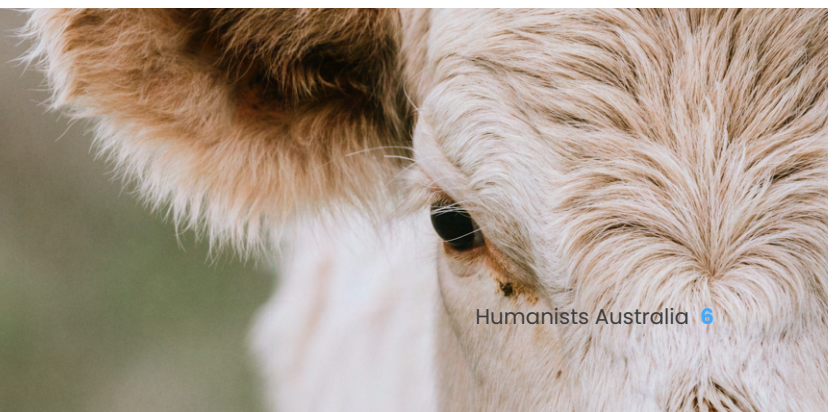
The Golden Rule can be found in the holy texts of all of the major world views (see [The Golden Rule poster](#); McKenna 2001). Unfortunately, as history teaches us, many of these world views have also divided us into an in-group and an out-group; the sheep and the goats, the saved and the infidel, the chosen race and the outcast. Humanists actively work to reduce this blind prejudice—this sectarianism that divides us—to build strong bridges between community groups and nations.

Another way of expressing this universal regard for others is the Utilitarian principle: 'Act so as to bring about the most happiness and the least suffering'.



Since the 1970s, this feeling of universal regard is continuing to expand bit by bit as we include non-human animals within our circle of care.

“We should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures.”
– David Hume





Autonomy and Dignity

With this principle, we affirm that everyone should be able to go about their lives without unnecessary restrictions by the government and other people.

We ought to be given our autonomy—the freedom to do what we want—to the maximum extent possible. Constraints on our freedom should occur only when our actions restrict the freedom of others or cause them harm. For example, it is this principle that motivated humanists for many decades to campaign against laws that criminalised homosexuality.

Humanists regard human freedom as an ideal because each of us is different. Each of us has our own unique talents and dispositions, drives and values. Global research (Ortiz-Ospina et al 2017) shows that it is only by exercising our freedom that we can fully put our special capabilities and plans towards creating our own happiness.

It is this capacity for happiness and suffering that also gives us our inherent dignity. Each of us is a unique sentient being; a universe in our own right. Each of us is a locus of consciousness. One person's pleasure and pain is of no greater or lesser value than any other's. It is this belief in the inherent dignity of each person and of their worth as autonomous agents of their own future that humanists have campaigned hard for various legislative reforms. A recent example here is our fight for a person's legal right to die if they are suffering from intolerable and unavoidable pain. In a similar vein, humanists the world over campaign for gender and sexually diverse people to have the freedom to marry whomever they chose.

It is in the name of this principle, also, that humanists historically campaigned against slavery and, much later, for full civil rights for women and people of colour. For a humanist, even if there is no higher power looking over us, fighting for freedom and the inherent dignity of all, regardless of race, gender, social position and sexual preference, is worth doing.

“Yet what greater defeat could we suffer than to come to resemble the forces we oppose in their disrespect for human dignity?” – Ruth Bader Ginsburg



Humanism & The Good Life



What is the humanist conception of the good life?

What is a worthwhile life and how ought we live it?

The humanist principles just described give us a way to think about what it is to lead a good life. But first, let's distinguish the humanist view of a good life from other ways of looking at the question.

What is a good knife? What is a good life?



You could think that asking the question, 'What is a good life?', is like asking, 'What is a good knife?' How do we answer, 'What is a good knife?' Well, by first asking, 'What is the function of a knife?' It's to cut. A good knife, then, is a knife that cuts well. That is, it has an easy to grip handle, has a sharp blade, and so on. The salient point here is that what makes for a good knife is determined by the purpose of a knife. And a knife's purpose is not given by the knife itself. The purpose of a knife is external to the knife itself.

Now, you may think that humans are like that. You may think that a good human life is determined by the function—the purpose—of a human. And like knives, the purpose of a human is dictated to humans from outside.

In contrast to this way of thinking, a humanist thinks that human beings determine their own purpose; that humans have no function that is dictated from above or beyond. This thinking is in line with the humanist principle of autonomy and dignity. Each of us has plans and projects that we wish to pursue. Some embark on a lifetime of service to the poor and dispossessed. Some want to build the best model railways ever. Some devote their lives to finding a cure for cancer or to discovering what's inside a black hole or to bringing pleasure to others through music. Global studies (by Ortiz-Ospina et al 2017) on happiness and well-being show that the happiest, most contented people are those who can determine their own life trajectory without it having dictated to them. So, for a humanist, this is part of what it is to lead a good life.

The second principle mentioned, compassion and equality, complements the value of a life that is lived pursuing one's own plans and interests. To live a 'good' life—that is, a life that has moral value and not simply one that satisfies its owner—is to live a life of compassion and justice. For a humanist, though, living a good life does not require you to live like a saint, sacrificing your happiness and well-being entirely for the benefit of others. That would be to deprive yourself of your own dignity and value. To live a good life, however, does mean alleviating the sufferings of others where you can and fighting for justice—the equal treatment of others—where you see people being treated unfairly. Again, research (by Ortiz-Ospina et al 2017, and Helliwell et al 2019) shows that for people whose lives are deeply embedded within their families and communities, they live more fulfilling and satisfying lives. Living in service to others not only enriches their lives, but also your own.



The first humanist principle, reason and evidence, also plays an important role in living the good life. This may sound counterintuitive. What has reasoning correctly got to do with living a moral life? Here's an example.

In 2017, BBC (Yeo et al) reported on what happened to Naima, a cancer patient. Naima foregoes cancer treatment for an expensive quack cure. She dies prematurely, robbing her of another few years of productive life and robbing her parents of their daughter. Her untimely death was good for no one; not for her, not for her family, and not for all of her friends who cared about her.

[See also [Alternative Medicine Kills Cancer Patients, Study Finds](#), Real Clear Science, Pomeroy, 2017]

Here is another example of how ignoring reason and evidence detracts from living a good life. In his work running Humanists Victoria's [Ex-Religious Support Network \(ESN\)](#), Leslie Allan hears all too often stories from people who left a very strict and controlling religious sect. To their deep regret and sadness, they feel that much of their life had been wasted. Within the sect, they were not allowed to have birthday parties, to dance and sing, search the internet and to go to university. The imposition of these irrational religious constraints, they felt, stole from them their childhood and early adult years.

Perhaps the most alarming example on a global scale of how turning a blind eye to reason and evidence can rob us of a good life is our current climate catastrophe. If the world's governments continue to ignore the scientific evidence, with the inevitable result that our climate passes the global warming tipping point, billions of people will suffer. Billions will be impacted by increased storms, bush fires and floods, food and water shortages, rising sea levels and wars over scarce resources.

To finish up on a more positive note, we want to emphasise that for a humanist, there is not one way and one way only of living a good life. We each have our own talents and drives to make this world a better place and in a way that is uniquely ours. Humanism is a truly pluralist world view that cherishes diversity, both in thought and action.

Humanists are striving for a more tolerant world in which all of us can reach our potential while respecting the rights and freedoms of our fellow world citizens.

“As man advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races.”

— Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*



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More Humanism Resources

Humanists International

Including The Amsterdam Declaration
www.humanists.international

Humanists UK

Including:
The Little Book of Humanism
The Little Book of Humanist Funerals
The Big Questions series
www.humanists.uk

Ethical Society of St Louis

The Magic of Humanism
www.ethicalstl.org/the-magic-of-humanism

Richard Norman

'On Humanism' (book)

“Love is wise; hatred is foolish. In this world, which is getting more and more closely interconnected, we have to learn to tolerate each other, we have to learn to put up with the fact that some people say things that we don't like. We can only live together in that way. But if we are to live together, and not die together, we must learn a kind of charity and a kind of tolerance, which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet.”

— Bertrand Russell



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