

# Theoretical Humanism

A Definitive Foundation for the  
Contemporary Philosophy of Humanism

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## Prelude: Humanism as a Philosophy

Humanism has the potential to become not only a major philosophy, but THE major philosophy of the modern era. But the Humanism of today is not well defined. It is not well understood. The root cause lies in the fact that the fundamental tenets of Humanist thinking remain clouded in confusion. In short, Humanism is suffering because it has not been succinctly and definitively defined.

Today Humanism is a captive and exploited philosophy, hijacked for its name by atheists. Their religious obsession has misbranded and obscured Humanism, preventing its wider acceptance. “Secular Humanism”, as this is called, is stuck in a religious past. Humanism is a philosophical worldview that is neither explicitly atheistic nor theistic. It is not the objective of Humanism to reject personal individual beliefs. The purpose of this book is to provide a definitive definition of Humanism, redefining the philosophy so that it realises its true potential.

An authentic Humanist philosophy must, by definition, seek to be fully inclusive; this is inherent in the very name HUMAN-ism. Its fundamental concern is with the immediate needs of ALL human beings. It does not begin with nationalism, atheism or faith as the basis for its worldview and actions. It is wholly practical in nature, beginning with humankind and the needs of the world’s human beings. It takes the pursuit of fulfilment as the ultimate, universal purpose of human life and uses the end results of actions on the pursuit of fulfilment as the means of assessing whether actions are “good” or “bad”. Finally, as its ultimate concern is with the well-being of human beings, its most succinct definition reads:

*“Nothing above the human being, and no human being above any other.”*

## The Ultimate Goal of Humanism

Before I begin with the formal theory, I would like to ask you to join me in imagining a picture I wish to paint. Not a picture of the world as it stands today, but of the world as it could be. A world where every human being has the guarantee of life, liberty, and the pursuit of fulfilment enshrined in law. A world where peace reigns, where human beings of every race, gender, denomination and nation do not feel the need to hurt each other because they enjoy justice and equality before the law. A world where human beings have learned to respect the rights of others because they recognise that they have no more or less value than any other human being on earth, and where a lack of luck in the lottery of birth does not condemn an individual to a life sentence of misery, suffering and pain. So, if you would, please sit with me for the briefest of moments and imagine a better world, a world where our people – all of our fellow human beings – are provided with the opportunity to be happy.

Imagine a world of prosperity and education for all. Sustainable prosperity. Universal education. A world where we need not worry about our children's children. A world in which we know that humanity has a long-term future. Imagine the potential it would unleash. Imagine what we could do. Together. Unified as one. Imagine all of humankind living side by side, revelling daily in the spectacle of its own diversity.

Imagine direct democracy on a global scale. Imagine the monopoly nation states hold over the destiny of humanity coming to an end. Imagine a reformed United Nations where the representatives of all of the world's people made the decisions and held ultimate power. Imagine a World President who we could look up to and hold to account. Someone who would be given responsibility for the well-being of humanity as a whole and who would answerable to the people when things were not as they should be. A people's government that covered the entire earth. For the people. By the people. A world in which every human being was a stakeholder and held the power to vote in the affairs affecting the human race.

Imagine a world with a global constitution. Nobody – literally no one – could hold themselves above the law. From the richest CEO to the most powerful head of state, we would be capable of holding everyone to account for their actions. All would be made to respect human rights. Governments would be held in check. War would be made illegal. Nuclear weapons would be dismantled. Controls on pollution would come into effect. The oceans would not be fished to extinction and the forests would be protected. Economic redistribution would exist on a global scale. Poverty would become a thing of the past.

Can you imagine this world? I can, and I do. Thoughts of it plague me daily, providing me with a striking contrast to the world we live in today. When I discuss it with people, however, a recurring response is that my ideas are unrealistic. The immediate question is always “but how?”, while

others scoff at the very notion because “human nature” dooms us to a perpetual state of mutual competition, aggression and exploitation.

All I can say at this point – the very beginning of this theory – is that a better, Humanistic world is possible, and that “human nature” does not necessitate a thing. We constructed nations, not the other way around. Corporations were designed by us. And human nature means nothing. Our human “nature” is animalistic – we were all born in a state of perfect ignorance – and yet every one of us overcomes this through education and learning.

I will postpone further discussion of these points for the moment so that we can get started on the laborious, methodical process of constructing a fully coherent argument from the foundations up. I wish to avoid jumping from point to point or simply rambling as many philosophers are wont to do. We must be clear, logical and explicit throughout. And thus we begin.

## Deconstructing Rawls

John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* was one of the most influential works produced in 20th century philosophy. In it, Rawls sought to construct a universal theory of justice, a theory which could be used to objectively discern whether any society was just. He was searching for that elusive Archimedean point – the way out from the quagmire of absolute relativism – seeking to avoid the trap presented by competing claims to the truth.

His goal was certainly a fine one, and his dedication to such a noble cause should be greatly lauded. Unfortunately, however, he failed in his project. He did so because he clung to pre-modern dogma, unable to free himself from Enlightenment-era ideas.

He failed primarily because his methodology was appalling. Rather than beginning with an evidence-based foundation for his theory, he chose to construct fictional characters who exhibited only those traits which suited his ends. Rather than basing his theory on the fact that human beings experience emotion, empathy, and are inescapably social, he assumed that people are purely rational – making the same mistake as is still done today by economic and political “scientists”. Rather than beginning with all of humanity – as would seem reasonable given his goal of universality – he remained imbued with unjustified nationalism, assuming that justice only applied within societies, not across humanity as a whole.

By the time of his later book, *The Law of Peoples*, he had begun to broach the topic of global justice, but by that point he had already realised that the ideas contained within *Theory* had contained fatal flaws. He later admitted his cultural bias and concluded that he had not attained his original goals, giving up his original claims to universality and claiming that his ideas were now only applicable to liberal societies.

The problem with Rawls' methodology stemmed from the use of something which he named “reflective equilibrium”, believing that we should:

*“work from both ends. We begin by describing the original position so that it represents generally shared and preferably weak conditions. We then see if these conditions are strong enough to yield a significant set of principles ... going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing principles and conforming them to principle.”*

In other words, the game is rigged. Rather than taking real people as the starting point of his theorizing and reaching whatever conclusions seem most plausible and reasonable, he decides at the outset which conclusion he thinks best and makes changes to the imaginary characters in the original position so that it all fits together nicely. This is akin to running a horse race and handicapping all of the competitors – except for the one you want to win. In an everyday context we call this “cheating”. It is neither valid, nor desirable.

Rawls’ theories, therefore, do not move us beyond cultural subjectivity, leaving us back at square one. How, then, are we to reach a theory that is truly universal, escaping the trap of relativism? Clearly, a better methodology is necessary.

## Methodology: the Limits of the Knowable

As human beings, we are limited by our experience. Ultimately, we know nothing about the world around us with absolute certainty (or, in academic-speak, no non-analytical, non-tautological proposition can be conclusively verified). Everything we “know” comes to us as sensory data via our sensory organs. All that we experience is then selected and interpreted for us by our brains as it turns the mess of reality into something our minds can understand. There is, therefore, an inescapable human “matrix” of understanding. What lies beyond our experience is, by definition, unknowable.

It is worth pointing here what science actually is. Science is not science because of the conclusions it reaches. Science is science because it adopts a self-imposed convention which limits inquiry to the testable. Science is a methodology. Nothing more.

This methodology is known as either “the scientific method” or “methodological naturalism”. It seems so usual to us as to be rather unremarkable in everyday life as we take this as a given of modern science.

The scientific method, however, is absolutely critical to philosophy because it provides us with a filter through which we can test the validity of propositions. Referring back to my discussion of why Rawls’ theories failed, we can say that it provides us with “rules for the game” that set a limit on what is acceptable and what isn’t in our discussions and subsequent discussions.

One of the first figures in philosophy to make this distinction was Immanuel Kant, who called the knowable “phenomenon” and the unknowable “noumenon”. He explicitly acknowledged that things lying beyond experience – noumenon – can be neither confirmed nor denied, nor can they be scientifically demonstrated. Only phenomena lie within the realm of the knowable, and thus human experience forms the entire framework within which human knowledge exists.

I wish to suggest that, in order to move beyond Rawls and reach a valid universal theory, we should adopt the scientific method so that we can escape the trap of absolute subjectivity. As I move forward, I will demonstrate how effective, powerful and essential this methodology is.

## Methodology: Falsifiability

The philosopher Karl Popper coined the term “falsifiability”, saying that:

*“Insofar as a scientific statement speaks about reality, it must be falsifiable;  
and insofar as it is not falsifiable, it does not speak about reality.”*

Or, in other words,

*“Our knowledge can only be finite, while our ignorance must necessarily be infinite.”*

Falsifiability, simply put, is the acknowledgement that no “truth” is ever entirely true – it can only be taken to be “true” as long as it is not disproven - also called “refutability”. In other words, no theory is ever completely correct, but if it is not falsified, it can be accepted as a provisional truth. Falsifiability concerns the second part of the scientific method – how we can move forward despite being imprisoned within the realm of our experience. It acknowledges that there are limits to what is knowable and yet allows us to posit working provisional truths, or “functional certainties” as they are sometimes referred to.

Popper stresses that it should not be inferred from the fact that a theory has withstood the most rigorous testing, for however long a period of time, that it has been verified. A theory that has received a high measure of corroboration may be provisionally retained as the best available theory until it is finally falsified (if indeed it is ever falsified), or is superseded by a better theory.

To illustrate the point, let us remember that the world used to be flat. Or so people “knew”. The world also used to be the centre of the universe (remember that Galileo was arrested and put on trial by the church for rejecting this idea). Likewise, Newtonian physics “knew” that gravity and time were constants until Einstein came along – time is, in fact, relative and gravity bends the very fabric of our universe. The Darwinian revolution has virtually destroyed the theory of creationism, which was taken as beyond question in some parts of the world until not so very long ago.

Scientists and philosophers alike build tentative theories (conjectures) all the time. These are the “theory” of everyday language – something which someone believes to be true, but has not yet proven. Such theories are not, however, even provisionally true according to falsifiability.

Falsifiability is a scientific methodology which imposes an extremely strict definition on us and forces us to be incredibly careful with our words and our thoughts, creating a demarcation line between what is and what is not scientific (the “filter” I mentioned previously). Theories which are evidence-based and provable are scientific. Theories without sufficient evidence are not scientific and are therefore “pseudo-scientific” – relegated to a place of lesser importance – or taken to be not scientific at all. Marxism is pseudo-science – it can be neither proven nor disproven as it interprets history in a certain way (but as is not the only way of interpreting history it has no claim to “truth”).

Monotheistic theology is not scientific at all - its interpretation of the universe as originating in God is beyond our realm of experience, by definition. It is purely speculative. Likewise, our demarcation line gives us an answer to scientists who posit that they can explain the origins explain the origins of the universe. They can't. The Big Bang is mere speculation and, for our purposes, can be ignored. It is unknowable by definition and, as such, entirely irrelevant to human affairs.

So what falsifiability has to say about all of the things that underlie our everyday “reality” is that they are not necessarily true. All we can ever know is that they have not been disproven yet. Falsifiability involves a self-imposed convention that all truth is and can only ever be provisional. It gives us a way out of the quagmire, as well as a practical way to criticize and reject any and all claims to absolute truth. It is therefore something I would like to adopt as we move ahead with our theory of Humanism.

## Practical vs. Speculative Philosophy

Based on the demarcation line provided by the scientific method and falsifiability, I would now like to propose that a distinction be made between two fundamentally different approaches to philosophizing in general. One I will call “practical philosophy”, the other, “speculative philosophy”. Practical philosophy concerns itself only with the here and now, and only with the knowable. It follows Wittgenstein in seeking to use everyday language as much as possible – as I am attempting to do here – so that the chances of confusion are minimized. Speculative philosophy, on the other hand, concerns itself with what lies beyond the realm of the knowable, beyond experience, and attempts to make claims that are, by definition, non-falsifiable.

I now wish to argue as forcefully as possible that Humanism must be a purely practical philosophy. Only by adopting the scientific method and a purely provisional approach to “truth” can we ever hope to avoid the trap that caught Rawls and reach a universal theory that becomes of real benefit to people in the real world, today. It is only by making Humanism a purely practical philosophy that we can hope to gain widespread agreement on fundamental principles. In short, we can only realize the true potential presented by Humanism if we explicitly define it as a purely practical philosophy.

By adopting a philosophical distinction such as this and limiting ourselves to the knowable, we can realistically begin to aim for our ultimate goals – unity, peace and universal justice. Regardless of an individual’s cultural background and theological beliefs, all human beings recognize themselves as human beings, and recognize other human beings as human beings, also. All human beings possess an innate capacity for empathy and compassion because of this recognition. This is worth noting because it will become important to us later on.

As a practical philosophy, Humanism furnishes us with clearly defined principles and an end goal for humanity as a whole. It is able to immediately and openly acknowledge the massive diversity of worldviews, and yet not become crippled by them. It stands independently of unknowable claims to the truth while simultaneously remaining compatible with them.

It does so because it imposes self-restraint on itself with regards to people’s personal belief systems. It makes a clear distinction between issues which concern everyone – the universal issues of humanity – and those which belong in the private, “speculative” world of the individual. It does not attempt to get involved in personal beliefs or spiritual issues. Each individual’s underlying worldview – how they choose to interpret such things as the underlying purpose to the universe – is their own business and theirs alone. Such issues lie beyond the remit of Humanism and on those issues Humanism says absolutely nothing.

What it does do is place the practical needs and aspirations of the human being as the central value in all cases, while adopting a methodology which rejects claims to absolute truth. This gives us a way to draw a dividing line between Religious Humanism and fundamentalism by clearly asking which comes first, the human being or God. If the human being comes first in a religious individual's value system, his/her views are fully compatible with Humanism. If the individual places God or religious dogma above the well-being of human beings in their value system then they are clearly fundamentalists, and their views are not compatible with Humanism.

Humanism takes on board what the Royal Society of Arts terms "modern consciousness". This, elucidated by the developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, involves a firm sense of self-awareness borne of accepting the inevitability of human diversity. As Kegan states, successful functioning in a world of widely diverse traditions, values and lifestyles requires our holding an ability to:

*"Resist our tendencies to make 'right' or 'true' that which is merely familiar and 'wrong' or 'false' that which is only strange."*

In other words, it:

*"Requires us to have a relationship to our own reactions, rather than be captive of them."*

Terming this self-authoring, diversity-accepting set of competencies "modernist", he concluded that only one in five people throughout the world have this capacity, based on an overview of a 2002 OECD survey. Being modern in this sense involves acceptance that all claims to truth are provisional. Modern people do not seek to impose their beliefs on others. They hold themselves back and are capable of respecting others.

The philosophy of Humanism is fully modernist in this sense. It takes widespread human diversity as an inevitable fundamental premise and builds upon it. The purely practical philosophy of Humanism is very much a philosophy of and for the modern era.

## A Word on Human Nature

Now, having discussed the methodology of practical philosophy and its limitations, I wish to briefly discuss the issue of human nature before beginning the argument proper.

I will get straight to the point: building an argument upon an idea of human nature being either inherently “good” or “bad” is not only foolhardy, but nonsensical. As Shakespeare put it,

*“There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”*

Both Rousseau and Hobbes are famous for basing their arguments upon accounts of human nature, imagining what life may have been like in pre-societal situations. In response to this, David Hume is most succinct in pointing out that:

*“Any hypothesis, that pretends to discover the ultimate original qualities of human nature, ought to be rejected as presumptuous.”*

All we can really say about “human nature” is that appeals to it are meaningless. All human beings are born in a state of absolute ignorance and, left to our own devices, it is highly likely that we would remain in that state, acting accordingly. It is a mistake to assume that human nature implies anything at all. Likewise, thinking about imaginary people in imaginary situations is unhelpful – this is completely irrelevant to the real needs of real people in the real world. Theorising in this way does not get us beyond subjectivity and towards the constructive of a meaningful universal theory, as Rawls found out to his cost.

Human nature is neither “good” nor “bad”. People are capable of the most astounding acts of altruism, philanthropy and kindness. Today we are watching some of the richest men in the world give their wealth away to those who need it most. Humanity is strewn with individuals who dedicate their lives to the benefit of their fellow human beings. At the same time, people are also capable of the most heinous acts of hatred, destruction and selfishness, capable of creating untold misery and perpetrating vicious acts of violence. If we stay within the realm of experience, we see that there is no single “human nature” that we can appeal to. Our “nature” encompasses both extremes, as well as everything in between.

What we can see from experience is that several factors are important in determining how human beings treat each other. One is the belief system or worldview that the person holds. As the Nazis,

Manifest Destiny-era Americans, and Hutu Power Rwandans so clearly demonstrated, not everyone believes that genocide is wrong – the determining factor is the underlying belief system.

If an individual truly believes that an action is right, he or she will act on that belief, thinking it right to do so and rationally justifying it to themselves. This is true of an Islamic suicide bomber who truly believes that the willful destruction of others will send them to paradise. It is true of a Kamikaze pilot who truly believes in the Japanese Empire. It is true of an American soldier who dies for his country. It is also true of a Buddhist monk who truly believes that taking his own life will lead to his being reborn. It is the underlying belief system that provides the motivation.

The second factor is the individual's situational context. If a person lives free from oppression, in peace and security, has their material needs met, and enjoys equality before laws that are fairly imparted, their capacity for compromise, generosity and tolerance tend to come to fruition. However, if the same person is placed in a situation of lawless anarchy, they tend to act accordingly, placing their own needs above those of all others and doing whatever necessary to ensure their own survival and the well-being of those closest to them.

The third and final factor is an extremely important one for us as we build our argument. For want of a better term, I will call this our “structural relationships“. By this I mean our institutional, organizational or societal roles – the reason why the CEO of a corporation cannot take the profit from his or her corporation and give it to the poor, and the president of a country cannot act in the interests of humanity as a whole. The cause of this cannot be said to be human nature. It is our structural relationships which cause this.

Psychological studies such as the 1971 Stanford prison experiment and 2002 BBC Prison Study help illuminate this point. In these experiments, the simulation demonstrated that it is our social roles that often determine our behaviour. Human beings have a tendency to internalise their roles, as became apparent when the Stanford student volunteers took on the personas of prison guards and, given the task of asserting their authority over the “prisoners”, resorted to extensive physical and emotional abuse, including extreme brutality, torture and other “inhumane” acts. The later BBC study took the work of the original 1971 simulation further and suggested that social identity is also an important factor, as it is only once an authoritarian agenda has become associated with a group's identity that the move towards tyranny begins.

Despite the slight difference in findings, both simulations were cut short because of serious concerns about the participants' well-being. The tendency towards tyranny ultimately remained the same in both cases. Professor Philip Zimbardo, the leader of the original Stanford experiment who also played the role of “Prison Superintendent” within it, afterwards concluded that,

*“Situational variables can exert powerful influences over human behavior;  
more so than we recognize or acknowledge.”*

The line between good and evil is permeable and almost anyone can be induced to cross it when pressured by situational forces.

So looking to our human nature does not provide the answers to the question of why human beings are “good” or “bad”. It is ultimately our structural relationships, in combination with our belief systems and situational contexts, that determine our actions. And it is here that we must focus our attention.

## The Purpose of Existence

*‘The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances.*

*“Whither is God”? He cried. “I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I.  
All of us are his murderers...”*

*... the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners;  
and they too were silent and stared at him in astonishment.  
At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out.*

*“I came too early,” he said then; “my time has not come yet.  
This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering  
– it has not yet reached the ears of man.”*

What Nietzsche is referring to in this passage is the radical shift that he foretold but had not yet been acknowledged in his lifetime. Western thought was on the verge of realising that it was not God who had created man, but, in fact, man who had created God. It was the beginning of the current trend towards “anthropocentrism” – meaning the view discussed previously, that reality must be interpreted solely in terms of human values and experience.

This followed on from the work of Kant and the Enlightenment wherein claims to absolute truth were rejected, and the methods of modern science were developed. Kierkegaard, one of the first existentialists, acknowledged this distinction and admitted that God is unreachable by reason alone, concluding that this required that we take his well-known “leap of faith” into the existential void in order to reaffirm a religious worldview. Nietzsche, on the other hand, took the opposite view – the lack of an external purpose to existence did not mean that we needed to bring God back into the equation. For him, the need for meaning to existence meant that we had to look elsewhere.

The atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, writing two generations later, also acknowledged that appeals to an external purpose to existence was no longer valid, pointing out that,

*“Even if I think it is God that I obey, it is I who decided it was God who spoke to me.”*

He therefore took on Nietzsche’s existential struggle for meaning within an indifferent cosmological void, concluding that,

*“Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world,  
he is responsible for everything he does.”*

Because any external purpose to the universe – any knowledge of the transcendent; any knowledge of God – is, by its very nature, unknowable, we are forced to choose. In our search for meaning, we are forced back upon ourselves for whatever meaning there is in existence. Ultimately, therefore, the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras got it right in saying:

*“Man is the measure of all things, determining what does and does not exist.”*

This, then, forms the backdrop to our modern ideological dilemma. It is important to note, however, that this position does not mean that we have the answer to our dilemma. What this position does mean is that all presumptions about an innate purpose to existence must be rejected as unfounded assumptions - they are based upon purely non-falsifiable claims. It does also mean that appeals to “indirect evidence” are not valid – this is inference, not evidence. What it does mean is that Judaic, Christian, Islamic, monarchical, and any other appeals to divine authority can and must now be explicitly rejected.

Such claims belong to a time when people “knew” that God existed – a pre-modern age where people also “knew” that the world was flat – meaning simply that the leading paradigm of their age took the existence of such things for granted. Such claims belong exclusively to that pre-modern consciousness. They no longer belong in the modern world of today.

What this position does not mean is that the loss of one external purpose to existence requires another external purpose to bind us. This is the issue which Sartre struggled with his entire life. He recognised that while we are forced to choose for ourselves, while we are forced to be free, he could not accept that the values he then chose for himself could contain absolutely no meaning or relevance for others. He could not, in essence, accept that there is no objective validity to anything that any one of us does and, in the end, he fell back on Kant’s categorical imperative, unjustifiably positing that what one chooses for oneself, one must simultaneously choose for all of humanity. He fell back on an unfounded assumption.

This was Sartre’s mistake, and I believe it was the reason that he ultimately failed in his endeavours. He could not accept that a fundamental shift in philosophy itself has taken place. He could not

accept that there are, in actual fact, no objective values whatsoever; that there really is no objectivity at all. That, ultimately, objectivity itself is impossible.

So, after Nietzsche had proclaimed the king dead, Sartre still sought a new king. He still looked to reason to provide an answer to the question of why people do what they do. He still looked to reason alone. He did not look to simple belief for an explanation, did not heed Hume's insight that reason is the slave of the passion. Unfortunately, he remained trapped by the Western Enlightenment urge for rational objectivity. Today, however, the fundamental shift that has occurred within philosophy requires us to give up those attempts entirely.

There is, in short, no knowable ultimate purpose to the universe. It is a phantom. We live within a vast, unfathomable void. If we are to remain true to the scientific method, it is not possible to not know if there is any other purpose to our existence than mere existence itself.

Human subjectivity is inevitable. All that we have is ourselves: our beliefs, our experience, our ability to reason, and our ability to choose. Nothing more. We must, in our desire for meaning, accept that a fundamental shift in philosophy has taken place, make a clean break with the past, and move from the external to the internal.

## The Meaning of Life: Fulfilment

Being forced into a position of absolute freedom does not mean that we should despair. It does not necessitate nihilism. It furthermore does not mean that there is no meaning to be found in life.

What it does mean is that we need to make a fundamental change in our approach to life and its purpose. It means that we need to begin to view life in very simple, practical terms. As Wittgenstein realised, solving complex philosophical issues does not have much actual relevance to the burning quest for meaning in our lives:

*“What does all my talent do me if, at heart, I am unhappy?  
What help is it to me to solve philosophical problems,  
if I cannot settle the chief, most important thing?”*

This very practical approach to the meaning of life is, aside from being extremely straightforward, also immensely powerful. It not only acknowledges that an ultimate, external purpose to life is by definition unknowable, but confronts this fact in a way that lets us move beyond it and get on with living a meaningful life. This approach is described in very simple terms by one of the most insightful teachers of our time:

*“What is the purpose of this life?”*

*At a deeper level, I don't know.  
At the philosophical level, I don't know.  
In the normal sense, it doesn't matter.*

*There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies.*

*We are all the same. We are all human beings.*

*Mentally. Emotionally. Physically.*

*We are the same.*

*The immediate purpose of our life is existence.*

*Everyone wants a happy life. Everyone does not want suffering.*

*Everyone does not want problems.*

*The purpose of life is, naturally, a happy life. A meaningful life.*

*From the very core of our being, we desire contentment.”*

The primary desire that drives all human beings is contentment. As Aristotle noted over two thousand years ago, we desire fulfilment for its own sake, and everything else for the sake of fulfilment. Regardless of people’s beliefs, as the Dalai Lama states above, this is a human trait that we all share.

The fundamental importance of this cannot be overstated, as it allows us to finally escape the quagmire of cultural and moral relativity. Despite demonstrating previously that evidence and experience are all that we can ever rely on, here we have a principle that forms a valid provisional truth.

It is for this reason that this universal human desire for fulfilment forms the first principle of formal theoretical Humanism. It is valid both from an intuitive perspective – every one of us knows from our own experience that we desire contentment and the avoidance of suffering – as well as from a falsifiable point of view. It is a falsifiable, testable fact that human beings universally desire this, regardless of age, sex, cultural background, or status. We are all the same in this desire – it forms part of our nature as sentient beings.

## Nothing Above the Human Being

*“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.  
We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.”*

*Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to  
embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.”*

As children growing up, we inherit a wide variety of conceptual conventions from both those closest to us and our wider society at large. We are taught that we are members of this or that nation, this or that religion, this or that race, creed, or culture. We learn that corporations are normal and necessary, and that if we join these institutions later in life, we should act on their behalf, aligning ourselves with their goals.

The question that is so seldom asked, however, is at what point we need to free ourselves from our inheritance. As Albert Einstein realised above, our inherited conventions create bias. They make us feel compelled to hurt other human beings. They cause war, destruction, and exploitation. They clash directly with human contentment. In short, they cause misery.

However, as we are trapped within the realm of our experience, human beings are the sole arbiters of their own destiny. There are no absolute morals. There is no irrefutable reason to act in any way. As such, therefore, each and every one of us is left with the full and sole responsibility for our actions. We are forced to be free, and have no choice but to choose for ourselves. Ultimately, we are now forced to look upon ourselves as the sole and ultimate judge of our own morality. We are, in the truest sense, our own masters. As the Buddha said,

*“We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts, we make our world.”*

We must, therefore, ask ourselves both who we want to be, and what kind of world we wish to create. Collectively, humanity creates its own destiny. And this begins with each and every one of us as individuals. We have the freedom to choose.

As Humanists, we recognise this freedom and, as fully free individuals, we choose to commit to the principle of universal human well-being and justice. We explicitly and clearly set universal peace, liberty, justice, and human fulfilment as our ultimate goal. We therefore subscribe to the belief that

the human being must be taken as the central value in any and all cases. This forms the second principle of Humanism.

We consider ourselves to be a human being first, above “American”, “Muslim”, “rich”, or “a member of the Coca Cola corporation”. We recognise that all of these concepts are inherited conventions, constructs of the human mind, and nothing more. Money, nations, corporations, religions, or whatever else; none of these things exist independently of the human being. And thus we arrive at the second principle of Humanism: that nothing is above the human being.

At first this principle appears simple and unremarkable. This principle, however, revolutionises how we view the world and our place within it. Under this principle, we begin with the human being. Under this principle, we begin with the global. Under this principle, war is murder. Poverty is inexcusable. Exploitation is universally illegal. There is no justification for causing suffering. Ever.

The human being comes first, above the interests of nations, corporations, religions, or any other consideration. The Humanist cry in the face of oppression, exploitation, and greed is:

*“Nothing above the human being, and no human being above any other!”*

## No Human Being Above Any Other

*“A war is never won. Never mind that history books tell us the opposite.  
The psychological and material costs of war are so high that  
any triumph is a pyrrhic victory.*

*Only peace can be won and winning peace means not only  
avoiding armed conflict but finding ways of eradicating the causes  
of individual and collective violence:  
injustice and oppression, ignorance and poverty, intolerance and discrimination.*

*We must construct a new set of values and attitudes to replace the culture  
of war which, for centuries, has been influencing the course of civilization.  
Winning peace means the triumph of our pledge to establish,  
on a democratic basis, a new social framework of tolerance  
and generosity from which no one will feel excluded.”*

The second part of our ethical principle stems from the recognition that none of us is any more or less human than anyone else. We are all equal members of humanity. We all share a common humanity, and each one of us – without exception – is intuitively capable of recognising the humanity in others.

Why respect equality? Because we are committed to peace and creating a framework for fulfilment for all members of humanity. Peace is not the absence of war but the presence of justice. And the basic principle of justice is the equality of treatment before the law, as Eisenhower recognised,

*“Though force can protect in emergency, only justice, fairness, consideration  
and cooperation can finally lead men to the dawn of eternal peace.”*

Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin. There can be no peace without law.

As Humanists, we decide to commit ourselves to the principle of universal equality, which forms the third principle of Humanism. This therefore forms the final part of the Humanist ethic, that there should be no human being above any other. Humanists are committed to establishing universal peace through the establishment of universal justice and law.

We furthermore contend that all power, to be exercised legitimately, must be exercised with explicit consent. Be it political or economic power, the principle remains the same. Humanism condones the exercise of real, direct democracy at every opportunity. Humanists believe that nothing less than direct democracy can lead to the legitimate use of power or force. Again, therefore, the Humanist cry in the face of injustice and inequality is:

*“Nothing above the human being, and no human being above any other!”*

## Why Human Rights?

*“Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned, everywhere is war.*

*Until there are no longer first-class and second-class citizens of any nation, until the color of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes.*

*And until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race, there is war.*

*And until that day, the dream of lasting peace, world citizenship, rule of international morality, will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained.”*

We must be clear about what human rights are and what they are not. Following the scientific method, it is clear that human rights do not exist in a Platonic sense. They are not inherent, god-given, or innate. Nor are they “out there” somewhere, waiting for us to reach out and reach them with our rational minds. Human rights do not pass the test of falsifiability. They are a belief. An ideal. Nothing more, and nothing less. Human rights are frail.

Once we are clear on this point, we can begin to move forward. To repeat again, there are no absolute morals. There is no irrefutable reason for any human being to act in any way. Each and every one of us is left with the full and sole responsibility for our actions. Ultimately, we are forced to look upon ourselves as the sole and ultimate judge of our own morality.

So, again, as we exist in a state of absolute freedom, we are forced to stand and look at the array of ideals and conventions before us. Nations, corporations, money, religions, and human rights. We have to choose.

As human beings, we intuitively recognise the capacity for contentment and suffering in other human and sentient beings. When I see another in pain, I know how it must feel. We also recognise that others desire fulfilment in precisely the same way that we do. We are naturally endowed with a capacity for compassion and empathy.

But at this point our “nature” stops. At this point we must choose for ourselves what values we will commit ourselves to. If there is no duty placed on us by God or a categorical rationality, it becomes even more important that we bring ourselves back to the reality of the here and now, and take

personal responsibility for the welfare of others. But not because we have to. Because we want to. As the Dalai Lama points out, this need not be a complicated matter,

*“A good motivation is what is needed: compassion without dogmatism,  
without complicated philosophy; just understanding that others are human brothers  
and sisters and respecting their human rights and dignities.  
That we humans can help each other is one of our unique human capacities.*

*We must share in other peoples' suffering; even if you cannot help with money,  
to show concern, to give moral support and express sympathy are themselves valuable.  
This is what should be the basis of activities;  
whether one calls it religion or not does not matter.”*

Human rights are no more metaphysically “real” than Santa Claus. But neither is the nation state. Nor the corporation. None of these things exist independently of human beings. They are ideas. However, what we can do is look at the falsifiable end effects on human fulfilment and suffering. With this as our yardstick, we find our way out of the quagmire of relativism. Human rights simply promote fulfilment and the avoidance of suffering, and we should personally commit to them for this reason.

As Martin Luther King put it,

*“Whatever career you may choose for yourself – doctor, lawyer, teacher –  
let me propose an avocation to be pursued along with it.*

*Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights.*

*Make it a central part of your life. It will make you a better doctor,  
a better lawyer, a better teacher. It will enrich your spirit as nothing else possibly can.  
It will give you that rare sense of nobility that can only spring from love  
and selflessly helping your fellow man.*

*Make a career of humanity.*

*Commit yourself to the noble struggle for human rights.”*

## The Purpose of Global Law

The clearest way to show what the rule of law means to us in everyday life is to recall what has happened when there is no rule of law.

Is there any need to repeat the horrors of not only the 20th Century wars, but all of the wars that came before? At what point will humanity say “enough is enough!” and decide to join together to establish peace? Unfortunately, we cannot rely on nations to establish universal law on our behalf, as it goes against their national interests. Corporations will likewise fight against the establishment of global law as it curtails their powers. In short, universal peace and justice will only come about when enough people demand it.

Firstly, the purpose of world law. To quote John Locke,

*“The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.  
For in all the states of created beings capable of law,  
where there is no law, there is no freedom.”*

Let us be perfectly clear on this point. The purpose of law is directly linked to the purpose of life: to bring about a framework for the avoidance of suffering and the pursuit of fulfilment. The purpose of global law is therefore very simple: to guarantee the rights to universal life, liberty, and the pursuit of fulfilment.

Global law would act to stop nations acting against the interests of human beings. It would stop corporations acting against the interests of human beings. Bear in mind that human rights only exist in reality when we decide to enshrine them in law. Without law, they are no more than a belief. Human rights only exist in law.

The purpose of law, therefore, is the establishment and maintenance of peace, security, and justice for all of humanity. Its purpose is to form a framework for fulfilment for every human being. Why should we do this? As Martin Luther King put it,

*“It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me,  
but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important.”*

Given that the capacity for violence exists within all human beings, the only way to guarantee peace and universal justice is with universal law. We live in the atomic age. Our species is able to destroy its own civilisation in its entirety. War must be made illegal. John F. Kennedy, having come face-to-face with nuclear war, was very clear about what direction is best for humanity:

*“We prefer world law in the age of self-determination to world war  
in the age of mass extermination.”*

## Global Government; Direct Democracy

*“The United Nations now and world Government eventually must serve one single goal – the guarantee of the security, tranquility, and the welfare of all mankind.”*

As we can see, Albert Einstein was very clear in his conclusions. With the new danger of atomic weapons and the nascent lessons of World War II in mind, he wrote an open letter to the United Nations. He demanded that permanent peace required states relinquish their claims to absolute national sovereignty and establish world governance. He believed that people’s consent was now required at a global level. A directly elected General Assembly should be placed at the helm of world affairs, signaling an end to the absolute rule of nations over the destiny of humankind.

While thinking of this, it is worth bearing in mind that,

*“As recently as A.D. 1500, less than 20 percent of the world’s land area was marked off by boundaries into states run by bureaucrats and governed by laws.”*

All that divides humanity exists solely within the human mind. The modern nation state has only existed since the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. We are aware, therefore, that the current state of affairs is neither final nor inevitable. To Humanists, the ultimate goal of politics is to bring about a universal framework for fulfilment.

If we truly endorse the fundamental maxim of Humanism – that the immediate needs of all of humanity be placed before God, the state, money, or any other consideration – then such a conclusion is inevitable. Humanism is unavoidably political. To be Humanist is to move beyond a nationalist interpretation of the world and endorse democratic and open global governance, which would itself be governed by a global constitution.

As Einstein put it in his letter to the U.N.:

*“Security is indivisible. It can be reached only when necessary guarantees of law and enforcement obtain everywhere, so that military security is no longer the problem of any single state. There is no compromise possible between preparation for war, on the one hand, and preparation of a world society based on law and order on the other.”*

The United Nations cannot be blamed for its failures. No international organization can be stronger than the constitutional powers given it, or than its component parts want it to be.

If every citizen realizes that the only guarantee for security and peace in this atomic age is the constant development of a supra-national government, then he will do everything in his power to strengthen the United Nations. The only real step toward world government is world Government itself.

Only with global government can global security be established. Only once the threat of war has been removed can it conceivably be in nations' own interests to reduce the size of their military forces and eventually disarm completely. Nation states are legal, bureaucratic institutions and thus inevitably act according to their design.

We cannot expect nations or corporations to behave responsibly to the whole of humanity when they are explicitly required to act in their own narrowly defined interests. Neither can we expect national leaders to act on behalf of humanity as a whole. Their roles explicitly demand that they act on behalf of their citizens.

It is only with global government that universal justice can become more than the vague hope of well-wishing people. Only with global government can global law ever become more than mere words on paper. Law is not law unless it is supported with the power to enforce, and without global law universal justice will forever remain merely an idealistic aspiration. Therefore, to quote Einstein again:

*“The authority of the General Assembly must be increased so that the Security Council as well as all other bodies of the United Nations will be subordinated to it.*

*Second, the method of representation at the United Nations should be considerably modified ... The delegates [must be] elected directly by the people.”*

## Open Society; Universal Tolerance

*“We have done the most terrible harm for thousands of years.  
Mass murder in the name of an idea, a doctrine, a theory, a religion  
– that is all our doing, our invention.*

*If only we would stop setting man against man  
– often with the best intentions – much would be gained.  
Nobody can say that it is impossible for us to stop doing this.”*

This quote stems from Karl Popper, the philosopher whose concept of falsifiability was adopted previously to distinguish between views which reasonable (i.e. which accept they may be wrong) and those which are fundamentalist (i.e. which claim they are infallible and therefore universally valid).

His arguments for the scientific method and the rejection of absolute truth also had important consequences for his social theory, which forms the second part of his contribution to contemporary thought.

In essence, he made a distinction between two kinds of society: one which is open and one which is closed. An open society is one that is tolerant. It is based on the realisation that no single person or group can ever claim a higher authority for his or her opinion than anyone else. In short, it recognises that intolerance and claims to absolute truth are harmful to the peace and well-being of others for the simple reason that,

*“You cannot have a rational discussion with a man who prefers  
shooting you to being convinced by you.”*

Popper argues that, since it is foolish to believe that all people can or will ever agree with each others' views, tolerance must be enshrined in enforceable law that stands above the authority of any one person. And this, he argues, forms the basis of an open, peaceful society:

*“For we may distinguish two main types of government.  
The first type consists of governments of which we can get rid of without bloodshed  
– for example, by way of general elections.”*

The second type consists of governments which the ruled cannot get rid of except by way of a successful revolution – that is to say, in most cases, not at all.

No individual or group can claim absolute authority over their fellow human beings. Nor can anyone ever claim that they have more of a right to contentment than anyone else. It is a principle of universal justice – of universal tolerance and complete equality of treatment before the rule of universal law. As such, therefore, it forms the fundamental principle of Humanist governance.

## A World Constitution

*“The Constitution is not an instrument for the government to restrain the people,  
it is an instrument for the people to restrain the government  
– lest it come to dominate our lives and interests.”*

Let us be perfectly clear, law is not the same thing as government. And let us therefore be perfectly clear that governments must be always be constrained by law. The reason is simple:

*“Politics itself is not bad. Politics is necessary as an instrument  
to solve human problems, the problems of human society.  
It itself is not bad; it is necessary.*

*However, if politics are practiced by bad persons,  
out of cunning and lacking the right motivation,  
then of course it becomes bad.”*

Universal, global governance is necessary. But it is profoundly dangerous. If we have learned anything from history, it is that if governments are not constrained by law, human suffering occurs.

A world constitution is the only possible answer. It is the only way to ensure that universal human rights become universal human realities. It is the only way to ensure that governments will be freed from a permanent state of insecurity. It is the only way to guarantee that peace, security and justice will reign. It is, in short, the only possible way to a Humanist world.

It is, incidentally, also the only way to ensure that power is never owned, but is only ever held in trust. Terms of office would be limited. All would be bound to give up power the moment that the people withdrew their consent. Power would reside in the people: a people’s government for a world of human beings. Government for the people. By the people. For universal human justice.

## The Risk of Global Tyranny

*“Power is always dangerous. Power attracts the worst and corrupts the best.”*

Power of a global magnitude would hold the potential to destroy entire peoples and civilizations, possibly even human civilization itself. Such power would require the fullest possible separation of powers at the global level. Virtually no manner of checks and balances could be too stringent, short of making governance unworkable. A global government must, therefore, be designed with cross-functional constraint in its foundation. Or, to put it simply, each branch of government must act as a counterweight to all others with the rule of law, enshrined in a World Constitution, standing above them all.

Would a directly elected President, directly elected World Parliament, independent judiciary with powers of impeachment, full transparency, and so on be enough to protect humanity from the dangers of tyranny? Perhaps not, but taking the best from the tried and tested experiments with our democratic history would at least minimise the risk. As Churchill said,

*“No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise.  
Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government  
except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time;*

*but there is the broad feeling that the people should rule, continuously rule,  
and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means,  
should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers  
who are their servants and not their masters.”*

I subscribe to this view. No one has any more right to rule than anyone else, hence the power of government ultimately rests with all of us. But we need governance. It is a practical necessity because, quite simply, the alternative is a permanent state of potential or actual war. This principle applies at the global level no less than it does at the national. Mortimer J. Adler, in *How to Think About War and Peace*, clearly identifies that,

*“The only cause of war is anarchy.  
Anarchy occurs wherever people or nations try to live together  
without each surrendering their sovereignty.*

*A society or community cannot normally exist without government.”*

We live in a state of global anarchy. Nations remain sovereign, refusing to give up their rights to a higher supranational body such as the United Nations. This situation is both morally and practically wrong. This is clear.

Humanism should explicitly aim at full human unity and the establishment of a universal framework for fulfilment for all. It should aim for the creation of a permanent peace. It should be seen as a realistic possibility for the future. Although it is certain that we will not reach this goal within our lifetimes, it does not mean that the goal is unreachable.

The alternative, as Peter Singer recognises, may be fraught with difficulties. As he says in *One World*,

*“It is widely believed that a world government will be, at best, an unchecked bureaucratic behemoth that makes the bureaucracy of the European Union look like a lean and efficient operation.*

*At worst, it will become a global tyranny, unchecked and unchallengeable.”*

We cannot avoid this. Government is concerned with power, and power is always a highly dangerous thing. The potential for tyranny cannot be removed from government completely – the potential for tyranny inherently exists within government itself.

Despite that, regardless of the risk, the task will come to confront humanity sooner or later. We are a single species living on a single planet. We must live together. Is it not far better to seek to bring about universal justice and a permanent peace than resign ourselves to the inevitability of human suffering at human hands?

*“The twentieth century’s conquest of space made it possible for human beings to look at our planet from a point not on it, and so to see it, literally, as one world.*

*Now the twenty-first century faces the task of developing a suitable form of government for that single world.”*

Ultimately, we must choose for ourselves. We are absolutely free to choose how we live and how we treat others. We must choose whether we care enough about the suffering of others to commit to political change. We must decide whether we wish to make others more content. We must at least try.

## Conclusion: Unified Humanism

Let us be absolutely clear: there is nothing at all wrong with an individual choosing to believe in a transcendent, external purpose to the universe. Each of us is entirely free to decide to do so. As far as others are concerned, these views fall within the realm of private belief and are not the concern of others. As a human right, personal beliefs and belief systems **MUST** be respected.

As discussed previously, being forced into a position of absolute freedom by the lack of an external purpose to existence does **NOT** mean that we can not or should not believe. Furthermore, it does not mean that all theistic religions should be rejected. This is a point upon which, again, we must be utterly clear.

What it does mean is that understandings of theistic religions should evolve from their heritage so as to become more nuanced and self-aware. It does also mean that its adherents must become clearer in their thinking and utterly explicit in where their priorities lie. In short, a new distinction of critical importance must be made within theistic religion itself. As Einstein clearly understood,

*“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”*

If the choice to believe in God(s) or a transcendent purpose external to human beings is made, there must be a clear and explicit understanding that it is belief in something which is an entirely unfounded, non-falsifiable assumption. If we choose to believe in God, therefore, we must inevitably recognise that it is **us** who decides that it is a God that **we** are choosing to believe in. We are, inescapably and absolutely, the measure of all things.

The implication of such a position is obviously profound for all theistic religions. It demands that the relative importance of human beings to God must irrevocably change from the situation of the past. It is no longer a valid assertion that God can or should ever be of more importance than a human being. The immediate needs and well-being of the human being is now to be placed above God in **ANY** and **ALL** circumstances. This point is explicit. This point is essential.

Incidentally, this is where the dividing line between religion and fundamentalism is to be made. Fundamentalism places God above the human being. Fundamentalists do not accept the scientific method. They make claims to truth that they hold to be absolute, and the scope of their beliefs includes the potential to cause harm to another human being due to a belief in divine authority for their actions. This view is invalid. It is pre-modern. This view is simply not acceptable.

Humanism explicitly and openly rejects fundamentalism, its methodology, its views, and its conclusions. Fundamentalists should be resisted by Humanists in a non-violent way if they attempt to impose their beliefs on others. This, I believe, is the inevitable conclusion that comes of adopting the scientific method and placing the human being as our central value. As Popper argued, we need not tolerate the intolerant.

If, on the other hand, those with religious or spiritual beliefs place the real world needs of human beings as their central value, then they are Religious Humanists. As such, they are very much Humanists and Secular Humanists should accept and welcome them accordingly. Excluding others because of their personal beliefs goes against the ultimate purpose of Humanism itself: human unity.

As Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Baha'i Faith put it,

*“When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, there will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles.”*

I believe this unifying force is Humanism.