

In Defence of Humanism

Why humanism is a solution, not the problem

Paul Harrison



The purpose of this short article is twofold. Firstly, to challenge the idea that one of the root causes of our current problems is the humanist perspective - and by extension that it is necessary to ditch that perspective by adopting a 'post-humanist' approach; and, secondly, to put forward the argument that in fact the humanist worldview (as currently and - the author would argue - correctly understood) offers the best opportunity for solving our current problems.

The invitation to contribute to this edition of the journal set out the idea this article is intended to challenge, and it is worth summarising that provocation as follows. The full text of the invitation can be found [here](#).

The following is intended to be a fair summary of the text in that invitation:

The problem statement

Major changes are required to the ways we live to avoid destroying the planet along with every living thing, including ourselves. Human habits must change radically, especially in how we organise businesses, communities, societies and economies.

This seems relatively uncontroversial and, for the purposes of this article, is accepted as a reasonable statement of the problems we face. They are serious, existential and require radical change.

The suggested root causes

Our view of the world is humancentric, focused on ourselves. A belief in humans and their existence as the most important central fact in the universe (referred to as 'Anthropocentrism') can be seen as a legacy of the Humanism which emerged during the Enlightenment. Whilst adoption of this perspective led to dramatic progress in many fields it has, in part at least, led to some very undesirable things: exploitation of the planet, subjugation of other forms of life, dangerous separation of people by race, gender, sexuality, religion, ability etc.

The suggested solutions

We need to move towards a post-humanist perspective which places people back together with the rest of planetary life. In doing so we can better address not just the environmental dangers we all face but also the pernicious effects of e.g. patriarchy, racism, classism, and inequalities in power, income, wealth, property, well-being etc.

In other words, a humanist perspective is the root cause of the problems we face and, by implication, those with a humanist perspective should change their worldview in order to be part of the solution.

Defining what a humanist believes (and seeks)

To defend Humanism in the context of the above it is first necessary to be clear as to how being humanist should be defined and described; and, in particular, how components of that definition and description link to the implications referred to above.

The Amsterdam Declaration, first published by Humanists International in 1952 and updated in 2002, represents the fullest definition to have a measure of international agreement.

The full text of the Declaration can be found [here](#):

The Declaration includes the following statements insofar as it connects to the issues raised above (author's emphases):

Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity **including future generations**.

Humanism seeks to use science creatively, **not destructively**.

Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society and **recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world**.

If these statements can be interpreted to imply that humans are considered as somehow separate from the natural world (which, it is suggested, would be a very strained interpretation) then there can be little doubt that humanism thus defined incorporates clear obligations towards sustainability.

Humanists UK, affiliated to Humanists International, is a charitable body which campaigns for humanist causes and represents humanists in the UK. Humanists UK recognises that 'definitions abound' and summarises its own definition as follows (<https://humanists.uk/humanism/>) (author's emphases):

Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals

believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Implications of being humanist (equality, animal welfare & the environment)

It seems clear that defining what it means to be humanist in this way leads to certain concrete consequences for the kind of society a humanist would prefer to see. For example, [Humanists UK](#) states the following (author's emphasis):

We are a human rights charity bringing together tens of thousands of people with a shared humanist outlook on the world to influence public debate and policy, **in support of human rights, democracy, and equal dignity and treatment of everyone** – including those with whom we disagree. **That includes being committed to ending racism, sexism, and LGBT discrimination.**

Further, Humanists UK states the following in relation to animal welfare ([full text here](#): author's emphasis):

Sometimes people think that because humanists are called humanists that they are unduly or narrowly concerned with the rights and welfare of human beings. But this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the word 'humanism': **most humanists are strong supporters of animal welfare and recognise the necessity of sensible policy that respects and acknowledges animal sentience and their capacity to suffer. Humanists are called humanists because as human beings we try to make ethical decisions on the basis of our human capacity to reason**, rather than looking to sources outside of human experience for guidance about what is right and wrong (in this sense, humanism contrasts with theism).

In relation to the environment and sustainability, Humanists UK recently launched a climate action group, led by [Richard Norman](#) (Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Kent).

The rationale for this group and how its aims are grounded in humanism are explained in a statement issued by the group which includes the following. The full statement for the group can be found [here](#):

Humanists are in a position to present insights into the interdependence of humans and the natural world in clear and compelling ways, drawing on scientific knowledge of the climate and ecosystems and on people's shared and well-attested experience of what makes our lives go well.

Humanists look to scientific enquiry to understand the causes and consequences of natural processes. We do so not from an uncritical acceptance of scientific authority, but on the basis of an understanding of how the scientific method works, appealing to evidence and the experimental testing of explanatory hypotheses. As humanists, we have a duty to defend the scientific consensus on the human causes of climate change against the so-called 'sceptics' who are motivated not by intellectual rigour but by wishful thinking and vested interests.

Humanists know that we cannot look to a higher power to solve our problems for us. We have to take responsibility for our own lives, for the lives of others. We believe that this life is the one life we have, and similarly, this is the one planet we have. We are therefore all the more keenly aware that our finite human lives are given meaning and purpose by our membership of an ongoing human community and the legacy we bequeath to future generations.

One important aspect of this statement is that it recognises the true position of humans in the ecosystem. We are not given power over the natural world by some supernatural being but we do occupy a unique and undeniable place within the natural world – one which places a significant obligation on us to behave in ways which are grounded in reality, which accepts our role in creating the problems we face and the imperative that we as humans must be the driving force of the solutions.

This is distinct from a more passive view of our future role – where we merely place ourselves alongside other animals, plants and the rest of the natural world. Such a passive view would deny our active role in creating the problems we face and undermine our agency now to do something about it.

Humanism in the workplace

The notion that a humanist worldview is in part responsible for inequalities in business organisations and cannot therefore be part of how we address such inequalities is not borne out by evidence; nor can it be supported by reference to the statements made by Humanists UK and their emphasis on human rights.

Much has been written about the role of humanistic management in promoting fairness and dignity at work: readers are referred to the work of the [Humanistic Management Network](#) as a ready source of material in this regard.

Whilst there may be room for debate about whether ‘humanism’ as defined in this article is exactly similar to ‘humanistic’ as that term is used in the humanistic management literature, one need not look much further for more explicit examples of how a humanist worldview is applied in practical ways in the workplace to reduce inequality – notably in the burgeoning field of inclusion and diversity.

For example, in her book ‘Applied Humanism: How to Create More Effective and Ethical businesses’ (Business Expert Press, New York, 2019), Jennifer Hancock addresses how it is necessary to combine humanist philosophy, science and education to create more diverse workforces. Hancock proposes that since the humanist philosophy positions people as members of the same ‘tribe’ it provides a framework that minimises the negative impact of ‘othering’, which can manifest itself through conscious and unconscious biases in e.g. recruitment and reward systems, and also in workplace behaviour more generally; that looking to the scientific method (a key tenet of humanism) is most likely to provide evidence-based methods of reducing biases and therefore provides the soundest foundation for choosing strategies in the workplace for optimising inclusion and diversity; and that providing the necessary education and training around the humanist outlook and the evidence based solutions is required, especially to those individuals in positions of responsibility (leaders and managers).

Conclusion

This article is unashamedly a defence of humanism against the notion that it is a root cause of our current problems and cannot therefore be part of the solution. The article has set out how the humanist worldview as currently understood by organisations that represent humanists around the world and more particularly in the UK sees humans as not only part of the natural world but under clear obligations to act to preserve the natural world for future generations; to behave responsibly and with compassion towards other living things; and to fight for human rights and equality, including in the workplace. In particular, the article makes the case that a humanist worldview demands practical action by us all, working together, to address the serious problems that we face, combining our unique agency as humans on this planet with a worldview that values reason, logic, compassion and kindness.

Web site references

The Amsterdam Declaration: <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

Animal welfare: <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/animal-welfare/>

Climate action <https://humanists.uk/humanist-climate-action/why-humanist-climate-action/>

Ego to Eco Call for contributions e-O&P journal:

<https://storage.ning.com/topology/rest/1.0/file/get/9740181666>

Humanistic Management Network publications: <https://humanisticmanagement.network/publications>

Humanist view of society: <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/humanist-view-of-society/>

Professor Richard Norman: <https://www.kent.ac.uk/european-culture-languages/people/1673/norman-richard>

About the author

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A note about AMED

Sadly, so far, nobody has expressed a willingness to take over from the outgoing AMED Council. So in the circumstances, the EGM on 26 May is likely to confirm that AMED will finally cease to operate as an educational charity by the end of 2022 at the latest.



AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, www.amed.org.uk. We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations.

Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

Through AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover at a significant discount, free copies of the quarterly journal *e-O&P*, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of **knowledge**, **innovation** and **networking** in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations to generate synergy and critical mass for change. www.amed.org.uk, or contact **Linda Williams**, our Membership Administrator, E: amedoffice@amed.org.uk, T: 0300 365 1247