

# An introduction to Humanist Beliefs, Values, and Actions

A discussion document produced by

## North East Humanists

### Background

Stimulated by the a bold attempt in the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 to capture the essence of Humanism, a number of members of North East Humanists formed a working party in 2004 to consider their own understanding of Humanistic ideas.

The Amsterdam Declaration has clearly met a need among humanists for a succinct statement of basic tenets. However, it seemed to the members of the working party that a broader approach could be useful which included observations about where the beliefs and values come from that underpin Humanist thinking.

The working party, therefore, set out to work on the following objectives.

**To provide an introduction to a range of humanist thinking for those enquiring about the nature of Humanism.**

**To provide a series of assumptions against which individual Humanists may compare their own beliefs, values, and actions.**

The outcome is in two parts:

- 1. An introductory statement about Humanistic beliefs, values, and actions.**
- 2. Specific Humanistic beliefs, their accompanying values, and possible associated actions.**

It is a part of the essence of Humanism that it has no unalterable core of laid-down beliefs or orthodox expressions of its values. Therefore, we see this as an evolving project in which the content may be added to and modified from time to time in response to criticisms and suggestions made by both Humanists and non-Humanists.

Opinions on what follows are invited with particular reference to

- The extent to which the work is helpful/useful in thinking about Humanist beliefs and values.
- Clarity of presentation.
- Any suggested modification of any item, its content or wording.
- Any suggested additional beliefs/values/actions.
- Any other relevant comment

Please address your comments to John Hodge at [northeast@humanists.net](mailto:northeast@humanists.net)

***Members of the working party:*** Jack Grassby; Grace Hodge; John Hodge (Convenor); Gordon Houlby; Roger McAdam; Jack Sibson; Peter Warburton; Geraldine Wilkes. *The thanks of the working party are due to Jim Herrick, Neil Jenkins, and members of North East Humanists for their comments at the draft stage.*

## Basic assumptions

The beliefs and values that we are concerned with here have to do with human nature, the nature of society, and the meaning of life. The position taken by the working party is that, where there is a choice of how to behave, the actions of an individual are in large part dictated by his or her values, that these values arise out of his or her beliefs, and which, in turn, arise out of life experience.

The following statements are generalisations, nearly all of which require more space to validate them than is appropriate here. Our aim is to paint a broad picture of where we are coming from in compiling our suggested lists of Humanist beliefs, values, and actions.

In its simplest form the sequence is:

Common human needs + experience → beliefs → values → actions  
(nature) (nurture)

## Human needs, experience, and beliefs

Humans are born with the genetic potential for the unfolding of a range of needs. Many needs, such as for food and comfort, are manifested at birth; other needs, such as for autonomy and achievement, emerge a little later in childhood. Inborn needs stay with the individual throughout life but evolve in their form during each life-stage through to old age.

The manner in which these needs come to be satisfied, or not, is dependent on the physical and social environment and the degree to which it facilitates or inhibits personal growth, (e.g., with regard to the kind, quantity, and quality of the food received, the kind of care given, whether living is harsh or easy, the opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfilment). Beginning in early childhood, according to how his or her needs are met, alongside beliefs implanted in him or her by carers, the individual develops beliefs to do with what people and life are about, all of which beliefs are gradually organised into a coherent whole.

With regard to the beliefs set out below:

- They are thought likely to be held by many humanists but it is recognised that not all humanists will agree with them.
- There is no attempt to establish an orthodoxy of Humanist beliefs. The beliefs below are mostly working assumptions, not hard and fast facts, and they should be modified as new knowledge or valid alternative understandings emerge.

## Values.

Values are preferences for particular forms of behaviour and are the principles by which we conduct our lives. By the time adulthood is reached we have acquired a hierarchy of values from the mundane or not very important to the highest and most significant and, to which, some individuals might give up their life to preserving, such as freedom of speech. Within this hierarchy we will have political, economic, social, aesthetic, religious, and other values, *which develop out of our beliefs*. If, for example, we believe that human beings are basically self-centred and untrustworthy, our values are likely to include protecting ourselves from exploitation. Values do not exist in isolation from each other but form a values system, that is, we each hold clusters of values which are integrated together and in an intimate relationship with our system of beliefs.

Values are an integral part of personality; they are rooted in the needs system of the individual and are embedded in the belief systems that give meaning and coherence to his or her life and which sustain his or her sense of identity. Beliefs/values systems are dynamic, that is, a change in one area has a knock-on effect on other areas. Hence, the tenacity with which people may hold on to certain of their beliefs for fear that a change in one sphere may invalidate all of the beliefs which give them a sense of being in control of their lives. Thus, statements of value in themselves may have little meaning without knowledge of the beliefs and attitudes of those who are propounding the value.

With regard to the values set out below:

- We are not suggesting that we have discovered fresh values. Most of the values we have identified will be familiar to humanists. What we have tried to do is to link the values to the beliefs which might lie behind them.
- There is little or no difference between a number of these values and those of many Believers. They are basically the beliefs of someone who values the democratic ideal. The difference for a humanist is that the actions which follow from his or her beliefs and values are unencumbered by the constraints of religious ideology, by the need to pray for guidance, by considerations of punishment and reward in the next life, or by the requirement to follow edicts set out in ancient manuscripts or obtained from supposed divine revelation.
- These values are ideals. Their practical application is not always so clear-cut as the wording may suggest.

## Actions

As noted, above, values may be seen as statements of policy, i.e., the principles governing action across a variety of situations. Actual `right behaviour` depends on the totality of the circumstances applying at the time. Therefore, the statements in the `Actions` column are intended to be indicative only and are just a few of the actions that could be identified as having a Humanist base.

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Humanist Beliefs/Assumptions	Humanists value:	Compatible Humanist Actions
<p>1. There is no discernible purpose to the universe.</p> <p>2. Life forms on earth have evolved over billions of years. As for the universe as a whole, there is no discernible purpose in this evolutionary process, nor plan or prescribed goal for humankind.</p> <p>3. Irrational explanations for natural phenomena such as, in earlier times, the attribution of floods, famine, and disease, to supernatural intervention, arise in part from the need of individuals to reduce uncertainty in their lives. Such explanations impede the development of a common understanding of the human condition and diminish our ability to deal cooperatively with the causes and consequences of natural events.</p> <p>4. There is no evidence of an afterlife, and no supernatural agency to whom we can turn for instruction, confirmation, validation, justice, comfort, or support. Feelings of awe at the complexity of the Universe, admiration for the beauty of natural phenomena, and deeply satisfying emotions in personal relationships, are not evidence of the existence of a deity any more than are the experiences of pain and despair.</p>	<p>1. and 2. The spirit of enquiry that seeks to explain the nature of the universe and of the diversity of life on earth.</p> <p>3. Explanations of human behaviour and of natural phenomena based in reason and on scientifically verifiable evidence. In the absence of such evidence, the acceptance of the simplest and the most likely explanation free from superstition, ideology or religious dogma. An openness to new knowledge and the acceptance of uncertainty.</p> <p>4. The acceptance that the solutions to human problems lie in the imagination and actions of humans alone.</p>	<p>1. The pursuit of knowledge which furthers our understanding of the nature of the physical universe</p> <p>2. The construction of our own purposes and goals as in 5, below.</p> <p>3. To continually modify our beliefs in the light of new knowledge. The rejection of, and opposition to, religious fables such as that of the Creation, and spurious concepts such as `Intelligent Design`. The encouragement of free-thinking.</p> <p>4. To behave with the recognition that we are responsible for our own destiny. To make the best of our life now rather than preparing for some imagined future existence.</p>

<b><u>Humanist Beliefs/Assumptions</u></b>	<b><u>Humanists value:</u></b>	<b><u>Compatible Humanist Actions</u></b>
<p>5. Taken with 6., below: The proper concern of humans is with the well-being of the whole of humankind.</p>	<p>5. Self-reliance and independence of thought within the recognition of the ultimate interdependence of humanity. Concern for the well-being of the whole of humankind. Compassion and concern for all humans who, in varying degrees, are deprived of the opportunity for self-fulfilment.</p>	<p>5. The promotion of ethical scientific research which has the potential for improving the well-being of the human race. Support for aid without religious or ideological strings to help poorer countries improve the ability to meet their own needs. Support for, e.g., all measures to improve education and health care. Support for actions which enhance the living of those who, in varying degrees are deprived of the opportunity for full self-development. In relation to the Third World, opposition, for example, to a crude market-forces approach to the provision of essential services, to economic exploitation, and to pollution by the toxic waste of richer nations.</p>
<p>6. The future of the human race rests on the recognition by its members of the interdependence of the humankind and its ecological environment</p>	<p>6. Respect for other species and the non-human world. The promotion and preservation of an ecological balance.</p>	<p>6. To inform everything we do with care and consideration for humanity, the physical environment, and the natural world. Support for behaviour and laws which promote global and local sustainability and the conservation of scarce natural resources. Support for all humane measures which are intended to reduce the expansion of the world population.</p>
<p>7. Humans are born with common needs, such as for food, shelter, love, and creativity. However, both within and between societies there can be wide individual differences in how people learn to satisfy their needs and develop their beliefs.</p>	<p>7. An approach which seeks to understand the beliefs and values of others.</p>	<p>7. Except where democratic values are threatened, to show tolerance to difference and to use difference constructively. Nurture and develop freedom of speech, thought, and action, consistent with the safety and well-being of others. Work in cooperation with those organisations and institutions in those areas of their activity which coincide with Humanist values.</p>

<b><u>Humanist Beliefs/Assumptions</u></b>	<b><u>Humanists value:</u></b>	<b><u>Compatible Humanist Actions</u></b>
<p>8. Although conflicts of interest are an endemic feature of human nature, most humans do not manage conflict well. Conflict frequently leads to aggressive behaviour which, though sometimes unavoidable, is rarely an ideal solution. However, properly managed, conflict is a force for new ideas, growth and constructive change.</p> <p>9. Individuals acquire their moral values initially from the groups and society that they grow up in. Moral or ethical codes arise in part from the need of individuals and groups to co-operate if they are to survive, and in part from the attempts of each group or society to regulate behaviour which is thought to be threatening if given free rein. It is probable that there are common human moral and ethical values but the understanding of what constitutes moral and ethical behaviour may vary considerably from society to society and vary within the same society from time to time. Humanist ethics fit well with the democratic rights and values outlined in 11, below.</p> <p>10. Humans are capable of acts of the highest self-sacrifice and altruism but also, individually and collectively, of acts of great cruelty and of disregard for the interests of others. The causes of doing harm to others are multiple and require multiple responses.</p>	<p>8. A co-operative and problem solving approach to differences of interest.</p> <p>9. An approach to morals and ethics which takes account of the complexities of modern living and has as its starting point that moral and ethical behaviour is that which, except in self-defence, does no harm to the well-being of others. In situations of moral dilemma, the choosing of solutions which do least harm to the participants.</p> <p>10. Social attitudes which militate against the exploitation, or physical or psychological abuse, of humans by humans. A society which educates its members in tolerant, co-operative living.</p>	<p>8. Support for the solving of person to person, societal, and international conflicts and problems by negotiation rather than by power play or the use of physical or psychological force. The preference for reasoned argument as opposed to dogmatic assertion.</p> <p>9. To continually check, and if necessary challenge, traditional values. To promote, and practise personally, the highest standards of individual behaviour and communal care. To resist all attempts to impose a morality on society based on archaic injunctions or ideological rules. To oppose bigotry, intolerance, and prejudice, wherever it is found.</p> <p>10. The urging of politicians to create structures which minimise the opportunities for acting with brutality or harassment. Support for the United Nations and for voluntary organisations that seek to help people such as e.g. Amnesty International, The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. Urging the importance of international agreements which seek to prevent state-sponsored physical and mental abuse. Support for the Campaign Against Arms Trade. The offering of moral support to Humanists living under corrupt regimes.</p>

<b><u>Humanist Beliefs/Assumptions</u></b>	<b><u>Humanists value:</u></b>	<b><u>Compatible Humanist Actions</u></b>
<p>11. There are no natural or absolute rights. As with morals and ethics, the interpretation of rights differs from society to society and in the same society from time to time. The rights which, if adopted would lead to a just and healthy society are rooted in the democratic ideal, i.e., that all members of a society should be treated as equals irrespective of race, gender, ability, or disability. Rights and duties are co-relative. Those who enjoy rights have a duty to uphold the same rights for others.</p>	<p>11 Impartiality towards, and equal treatment of, individuals and groups whatever their religious and non-religious beliefs. The separation of religion and state. Laws free from the encroachment of religion.</p>	<p>11. To protect and promote the rights conferred on each other by members of a democratic society and which include those of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- equality before the law,</li> <li>- liberty,</li> <li>- free association,</li> <li>- freedom of speech,</li> <li>- a livelihood,</li> <li>- participation in choice of government,</li> <li>- equality of education free from indoctrination, and</li> <li>- equality of health care.</li> </ul> <p>To urge the development of social, economic and political systems capable of delivering the above rights. To urge equal representation with religious bodies wherever such bodies are involved in social policy making To oppose those who would seek to impose their own creeds on others, including inappropriate forms of democracy. To support the efforts of Oxfam and other NGOs to bring about a genuine reform of international trade which could lift millions of people in developing countries out of poverty.</p>
<p>12. Many sentient beings, especially the higher primates, experience fear, pain, frustration, depression, and the need for freedom (autonomy) in much the same way as humans.</p>	<p>12. A humane approach to all actions involving non-human sentient beings.</p>	<p>12. Urging freedom for animals from physical and psychological abuse. Support for organisations which are concerned with the welfare of animals. Opposition to factory farming and to other forms of confining animals in unnatural and stressful conditions such as limited space. Urging the legal requirement that the killing of animals for food should be done in the most humane way possible irrespective of the creeds of orthodox religions. The showing of respect for the environmental needs of animals and, where possible, the protection of their habitat.</p>

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<p>13. The arts, in all their forms, and the development and exercise of physical skills meets the innate need in human nature for creativity and self-expression. They are a major source of pleasure. In plain or symbolic form, the arts express human desires and needs, triumphs, sorrows, the universal problems of living, and explore the essence of being human,</p> <p>14. There is a deep need in humans for opportunities for meeting with others of like-minded belief, for rites of passage, for communal celebrations of happy events, for opportunities for collective grieving following natural or other disasters, and for ceremonies and gatherings which offer comfort and support for the bereaved.</p>	<p>13. The creative and artistic potential of human nature. The capacity of the arts, literature, and recreational activities for expanding perceptions, for increasing the awareness of self, and for illuminating the human condition. All those circumstances that enable humans to be free to experience the physical and mental joys of living.</p> <p>14. The marking of happy, sad, and life-stage, events in ceremonies or gatherings free from religion.</p>	<p>13. Working to nurture creative and artistic expression. Encouraging the provision of opportunities and facilities for the development of physical skills and for the enjoyment of sport.</p> <p>14. To make better known the Humanistic alternatives to religious ceremonies. Again, to urge Humanist representation at all ceremonial occasions where there are customarily representatives from religious bodies.</p>