

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION

Humanism, Meaning, and Wonder

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“Let passion fill your sails, but let reason be your rudder,” Sherwin Wine wrote. With its rudder and sails working synergistically, this essay will explore an understanding of human meanings in the context of a naturalistic worldview. Human meanings, understood in a humanist framework, provide alternatives to supernatural narratives on one side and a sense of despair at a meaningless universe on the other. The hope is to win the hearts as well as the minds of those seeking a worldview that encompasses “the big picture” by framing a positive, life-affirming understanding of human meanings in the context of our commitment to naturalism, secularism, evidence, and reason.

HUMAN MEANINGS AND NATURALISM

When the human mind evolved, an entirely new level of organization emerged. Humans create their own meanings. Meanings come from us—from the human realm—not from something external, universal, absolute, or supernatural. Some may find the lack of ultimate meaning discomfiting or demeaning. But the humanist worldview shows that a deep understanding of humans as meaning-makers in a meaningless universe can be both intellectually credible and emotionally compelling.

If the idea of no absolute meaning has a negative value, then the idea that there is meaning at all, or rather human *meanings*, has a corresponding positive value. And if there are no supernatural implications for human meanings,

the existence and uniqueness of the meanings we create become even more profoundly significant.

Human meanings are worthwhile regardless of long-term, universal, final consequences, because they’re meaningful *now*. The sum total of positive meanings is additive over time. They are not judged by some final score millions of years from now. In this view, human meanings do not bring us closer to some absolute state—they can only bring us up to the highest level of which humans are capable.

Each of us is a work of art, our general form sculpted first by millions of years of evolution and then by the details of individual acts, thoughts, and experiences that derive from human meanings.

Rather than focus on the meaningless void in the middle, we can form links of human meanings *around* the void to form structure, like a wheel that while continually in motion is solid, useful, and significant. If we primarily focus on the empty hole in the middle rather than on the links of human meanings that provide the wheel’s tangible structure, our victory would not be complete. We would be fixated on the “holy.”

A cosmic, universal meaning would not be ours anyway. It would be an outer, neutral thing in which we merely play a role. Human meanings, in contrast, can be supremely personal and open up almost infinite possibilities rather than one single significance that was chosen for us.

Our human meanings are bountiful and multifaceted—falling in love, expe-

riencing intense satisfaction over an accomplishment or visceral emotion while gazing at our children, feeling the sudden insight that comes with comprehending extraordinary knowledge, helping another person in a meaningful way. In one sense, the universe cannot be meaningless as long as there are creatures capable of experiencing such meanings. Billions of minds are continually adding their meanings to the world and each other. Not only can we find meaning within our own lives, but we can help make it easier for others to experience significant meanings of their own.

For those with a naturalistic worldview who still long for meaning “out there,” human meanings can be looked at this way: our minds, which create meaning, evolved and emerged from the universe and are therefore part of something greater than us. Toward this greater world from which we spring—whether it be the universe as a whole or the potential inherent in natural laws—we can feel in our beings a deep bond and a profound sense of awe for the opportunity to experience our world. While human meanings require no external justification, this view may help those committed to naturalism who feel a need to relate the meanings we experience to something more universal.

Self-creation of meaning is a basic wonder of being human. We are the agents in the cosmos of conscious meaning, and there is nobility and inspiration in that idea. The accumulation of varied human meanings—past, present, and future, each unique, personal, infinite in potential, and overflowing in number and linkage—can form a more magnificent vision (and certainly a more interesting one) than that of a single, unchanging, impersonal set-in-stone meaning.

HUMAN MEANINGS AND ACTION

The fact that we can experience some of the spark of the cosmos through consciousness is extraordinary in itself, but human meaning, through action, engages and transforms the world from which we emerged. It is through meaningful action that we bridge a gap and connect our meanings to the greater world and to our fellow humans. Seen this way, human meaning, through action and achievement, is *relational*: it changes our relationship with the

world and with each other.

Human meanings, then, are emergent natural realities that in turn can create new emergent realities through action. It is through meaningful human action that a block of stones can become a castle, inert musical instruments can become a symphony, a blank computer screen can become a love poem, slavery can become freedom, discrimination can become equal opportunity, and that alluring person standing across the room at a party can become a life partner.

HUMANISM AND WONDER

Science reveals a universe that is unfathomably immense and mind-numbingly old. In response to this immense, cold reality, there is great variation in how a humanist committed to naturalism can respond emotionally. But planting our roots firmly in impersonal scientific soil does not mean that our flowers must be colorless. One affirmative and potentially fulfilling outlook we can take, one fully consistent with the humanist framework above, is to understand our world and our sense of meaning with an attitude of wonder.

Wonder is stepping back, looking at the big picture, and saying “Wow!” It is taking that second or two now and again to appreciate the larger perspective. It is true that time after time, human experience is tragic and agonizing. It is true that the world is filled with unreason and misfortune, both of which humanists are committed to confronting. But there’s a positive side as well. Humanism, more than any other worldview, is uniquely poised to celebrate the glories of human meanings while maintaining an unwavering commitment to naturalism.

“Just as the hand, held before the eye, can hide the tallest mountain, so the routine of everyday life can keep us from seeing the vast radiance and the secret wonders that fill the world.” This eighteenth-century Hasidic saying is as insightful now as it was then. But since it was first uttered, science has shown that matter is energy, that space itself can bend, that the universe is expanding and accelerating, that video and text can be communicated almost instantaneously across the globe, that we can travel by plane and rocket, that all life on Earth has a common origin, and that, thanks to modern medicine

and public health, the average human's life expectancy has nearly doubled. Then, as now, knowledge about the world as it actually exists makes the "radiance" even vaster and the "secret wonders" more, not less, extraordinary.

To be conscious, to experience life as a human, to create our own meaning—these are unparalleled wonders. As Richard Dawkins wrote, "After sleeping through a hundred million centuries we have finally opened our eyes on a sumptuous planet, sparkling with color, bountiful with life. Within decades we must close our eyes again."

What a privilege it is to be alive, to be able to experience and understand our world with meanings that as far as we know are unique in the universe. We can understand nature and love, help others, harness technology, aspire to goodness, and experience beauty. Human meanings are the objects and the vehicles of our deepest passions, our cultures, our beliefs, our strivings, and our creations. The understanding of human meaning in this humanistic context is an optimistic theory of human life in a naturalistic world that can be seen as creative, personal, and hopeful. The existence of human meaning, and the nonexistence of ultimate meaning, can be a cause for celebration, wisdom, and wonder. ■■

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PULL QUOTES

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