

HUMANISM AND HOPE: (BAGGINI'S ERROR)

Much has been written about the idea of hope. The book *Living Humanism*, however, does not spend much time tackling the idea of hope. In retrospect, perhaps I should have given this idea much more attention. I believe now that hope is fundamental to our living, even if we aren't always so consciously aware of its presence.

For our hope sits there, somewhere inside us, metaphorically in our hearts, no doubt in terms of its real existence, in some part of our minds. It serves to help us get through our days and helps us to feel positive and 'hopeful' about the future.

Indeed, it's clear to me that hope is fundamental to our human selves. Evidencing this, it has been recognised by health practitioners as of importance to our health and well-being, underpinning strands of credible, medical treatments known as 'hope interventions.' These interventions are supported by some empirical evidence¹, and have been used to help those with serious medical conditions including mental health challenges.

And of course, emphasising the importance of hope is its counterpart of hopelessness, a feeling tied to despair, an intensely negative and destructive feeling which we would all 'hope' to avoid and that we would associate with severe pain and anguish, with suicidal thoughts and feelings.

The Humanist Philosopher Julian Baggini in a 2012 article in *New Humanist* (*Hope against Hope*,

Monday July 12th 2012), argues that we should move beyond hope and that we should focus more on the now, with such an approach superseding hope. This is an argument which misunderstands the nature and importance of hope to us all.

One important aspect of his critical argument about hope is that it is an emotion that can be unconnected to action. He uses the well-known expression "all we can do now is hope" to show this disconnection and undermine the ideas of hope.

Unfortunately, firstly this expression is often used after we have taken action so hope remains associated with action, and secondly there are many uses of hope which *are* tied to action. For example, I think it's fair to say that we Humanists hope for a better future, and we tend to take action in our lives to make that future happen.

As a more prosaic example, we might say in an ordinary situation something like "if you hope to be successful in your career you'll need to [insert action]". Again, hope linked to action. And there are many more real examples like this.

This view of hope being strongly associated with action is supported by theoretical approaches to defining hope from psychology, importantly from the renowned psychologist Charles Snyder² who conceives three elements of hope, namely goals (approaching life in a goal-oriented way), pathways (finding ways to achieve your goals) and agency (the belief that you can achieve your goals).

¹ e.g. Howell, A.J. et al., *The counseling psychologist*, Vol 43 (4) 586-613; 2015 Chan, K. et al., in *SAGE Open Nursing* (article about hope intervention with cancer patients), 2019; Salamanca-Balen, N. et al., in *Palliative Medicine*, Vol 35, No. 4, 2021; Weiss, R. and Speridakos,

E.C. in *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 1, article 5, 2011;

² See Snyder, C. *Psychological enquiry* 13, 4 (2002), Snyder, C. et al., in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, 257-276, 2002.

As Humanists, taking Snyder's conception, we have hope for the future, we have goals, broad and specific, we look for pathways to achieve our goals. And while we understand the challenges we face, we believe we can achieve these goals and we take action to achieve them.

It seems to me that hope is undoubtedly fundamental to our Humanism and, as Humanists we should cultivate, be aware of our hope, its role in our personal well-being and our Humanism and we should look to promote hopefulness in others where and when this is needed and appropriate.

A world without hope would for me be a world without our humanity, and to my mind a world full of pain. Feelings of hope and hopefulness are surely not only fundamental to our human well-being and happiness, and represent core human feelings central to our humanity, but also are fundamental to our Humanism. We should be happy and proud to live with hope and hopefulness.

Brutality on the march: Hamas, Israel and Palestine

I write this bulletin two days after the horrific attack by Hamas on Southern Israel with the horrendous murder of hundreds of young people attending a peaceful music festival, unarmed civilians machine gunned by callous, evil individuals, lives taken away and families in grief. Unarmed civilians, children, in settlements, murdered, beaten and reportedly raped. These were violent acts with no legitimacy, acts of evil, and that is the only word I can find that can reflect how appalling this is.

As Humanists we cannot ignore these acts, fearful as being seen as taking sides. We have a side and that is justice, peace, humanity, love, freedom, care, kindness and more. The murdering of people in such ways is far beyond what we can accept, whatever the acts of the Israeli state.

Perhaps you, like me, have always supported the rights of Palestinian people, their claim to their own state; supported equal rights for those within Israel while perhaps also recognizing the vast suffering and pain that led to the creation of a Jewish state, and so recognizing the need for and importance of Israel. Perhaps you, like me, have felt disgust and condemnation of the acts of Israel in its oppression of Palestinian and Arab peoples. Yet these acts

against the festival children and other civilian Israelis, threats to murder hostages, are abhorrent, unjustifiable under any circumstances. Those who committed these acts have evil hearts and minds, are to all intents and purposes psychopathic. Many Palestinian people will be revolted by these evil acts too.

Of course, Israel is now retaliating, and its powerful army is about to enter Gaza with the aim of rooting out and destroying the power of Hamas, likely entering a possible military quagmire.

They have implemented an illegal blockade against Gaza which threatens the lives and well-being of the population there, denied water, electricity and food, and tonight, as I write, it is announced that the Israeli Defence Minister has released all restraints on Israeli soldiers, wittingly implying that they will be able to do what they like and murder, kill and perhaps rape whoever they wish.

As I say, Humanism cannot be far away from this. We cannot ignore this. Our concern for all others, as human individuals, both Palestinian and Israeli must be expressed and acted upon. We as Humanists must, as far as we can, oppose, act to oppose and voice our opposition to all those who meet out callous, vicious violence against the innocent (and indeed the guilty). Those who commit atrocities must be disempowered and brought to justice. And we must, of course support human rights for all, support all those acting to bring a just peace to the region. We must oppose the callous religious extremism, hatred and violence of Hamas, its fellow travelers, as well those extreme anti-Arab, racist groups within Israel.

Against the background of tit-for-tat revenge, with words like retaliation being used, and in such a violent environment, it is likely to be difficult to achieve immediate progress. But we must try to support progress. Powerful forces hopefully have the potential to temper Israeli government actions. Hamas's callous violence must not win in this conflict. Violent, intolerant, racist, Israeli extremists who wish to deny Arabs and Palestinians their fundamental rights must not win either. There is no certainty that a positive, just outcome will win the day. Indeed, that seems unlikely in the near future, but that is what we, as Humanists must aim for. Violence can be tempered, and a just peace must be won, for the benefit and well-being of all involved in this conflict and for the benefit of us all.

DEMOCRACY, EPISTOCRACY, AND HUMANISM

At a recent Humanist meeting in Newcastle, UK, I posed the following question. I asked, “When was the last time you were consulted by Humanists UK for your opinions and judgments on Humanist UK policies and actions”.

The response of the meeting seemed clear. Not only could these Humanists (admittedly not all Humanists UK members) not recall the last time that they had been asked for their views on Humanism and Humanist issues, but many seemed to feel that they had probably never been asked for their views and opinions by Humanists UK. Even given the vicissitudes of memory, this kind of observation is concerning when Humanists UK and Humanists in general argue for the importance of democracy and see democracy as an important value.

Of course, I asked the question because of my own sense of not only a lack of clear mechanisms for internal democratic expression and discussion within Humanists UK and Humanism on a more worldwide basis, but also a lack of consultation or apparent interest from those running Humanists UK in empowering Humanists generally and involving them in decision and policy-making. Indeed, to my mind, there is a lack of practical interest and action in actually putting into practice the important democratic ideals that Humanism claims to support, and this is concerning and raises questions for me about the real and complex identity of modern Humanism.

But firstly, perhaps its unnecessary, but from the perspective of modern Humanist beliefs and in order to support the argument here that Humanism and Humanists UK promotes principles which ought to lead to some clear and democratic mechanism within Humanism itself, I put forward below the Copenhagen Declaration on Democracy from this year’s world Humanist congress, which states:

1. Democracy is a universal fundamental value that is essential to the realization of humanist principles worldwide.
2. Democracy must be broadly inclusive, transparent, accountable, and secular, with institutions and practices that are responsive to the changing needs and aspirations of citizens.
3. Citizens must be empowered and the right to exercise citizenship must be protected without prejudice.
4. Democracy as a culture must be actively defended against all threats, including those from regimes, movements and political parties that embrace authoritarian principles, from those with unaccountable economic and social power, and from all other forces that seek to undermine democratic values and institutions.

[\(https://humanists.international/policy/copenhagen-declaration-on-democracy-a-humanist-value/\)](https://humanists.international/policy/copenhagen-declaration-on-democracy-a-humanist-value/)

These, to my mind, and no doubt to you as committed Humanists, are admirable and inspiring principles that I passionately believe in. However, these principles do appear to be incomplete in that they do not detail what democracy means, in particular within Humanism itself. How do these principles apply to our Humanist organisations? Presumably if this refers to one-person one-vote, the universal franchise, then, at least to my mind, that form of participative democracy is not occurring in any great sense amongst Humanist members within the UK and within Humanism itself.

Yes. Humanists UK members every so often have the opportunity to vote for trustees and may have voted on an occasional motion at the Humanist convention, but for me this represents an insufficient offer in terms of participatory democracy. It seems to me that members are not generally asked to debate key Humanist UK policies and ideas and moreover controversial subjects (economic policy for example) are avoided rather than being subject to open, participatory, respectful, democratic debate. Moreover, there is no simple route, to be involved in policy making and contribution aside from attendance at the AGM at the annual Humanists UK convention, attendance at which can be very expensive for members and take up substantive time.

It seems to me to be the reality of the role of Humanist members, in the eyes of the leadership is at least in part that we should be passive listeners, listening to and supporting the work of the great and the good, leading scientists, academics, top celebrities, not rocking the boat and doing good in defined roles. There is not much sense of a grassroots, democratic, empowering bottom-up impetus within the organization, and perhaps unsurprisingly, as a consequence, it can be difficult to sustain those roots. Other views from ordinary members are not, it seems to me, in reality, solicited or particularly wanted, (and if solicited may still not be wanted) with debate and democratic consensus building, seen as awkward and troublesome unless involving elite members and the debate and discussion managed and kept under control.

At a recent Humanists UK online talk that I attended on the subject of Human morality, all questions from participants were vetted by the chair. The only voices actually heard were those of the chair and those of the assembled three experts. Now it's highly understandable to manage such a discussion as there may be some in the audience who are against Humanism, who might wish to promote religious agendas who may sign up with the purpose of disrupting such a session.

However, in support of participation, debate and discussion and contribution those attending could, for example, have been divided into groups for discussion, with some group chairs selected for feedback and perhaps issues taken up for discussion at the Humanists UK convention. But there was none of this. Grouping people would have brought people together and might have led to new friendships and contacts. But in fact, there was almost no substantive acknowledgement of those several hundred of us who were attending the online debate. And personally, as a passive participant who has read much about these subjects, I didn't feel I learnt much if anything. It would have been good to have talked to someone!

To take a further example, a number of years ago, Humanists UK organized its convention in Newcastle. I was a member of North-East Humanists management committee at the time, and of course the major city in our region is Newcastle. No efforts, as far as I am aware, were made to consult with North-East Humanists, to bring us on board with the conference, to emphasise in promotion that there was a regional Humanist organisation in the North East, that people could join, perhaps to give North East Humanists a platform at the convention. And yes - we were offended and felt rather demeaned by this. This event could have served as a recruitment platform for North-East Humanists, but this was not important to the national organizers and the local organisation was effectively sidelined. (I and others from NEH did attend the conference and I certainly had a wonderful time).

For me, this kind of approach and the lack of concern for encouraging participation and what I see as a lack of internal, participatory democracy reflects what is probably a true element of the nature of organized Humanism and Humanists UK. That is, in essence they are what is known as *epistocracies*, that is they are organisations which are based in and give power to, or indeed defer to, those deemed experts. And, unfortunately epistocracy in some respects can stand significantly in opposition to being truly democratic in nature.

Unfortunately, of course, and certainly in the UK, that epistocratic approach is not only undemocratic but in practice and reality privileges certain groups in society and certain kinds of experts,. And by that I do mean those from public schools, Oxbridge, university professors, who seem to populate the higher echelons of modern Humanism and Humanists UK. Importantly, experts as they are, worthy of respect and frequently kind and decent in nature, I would say nevertheless, despite their often concern for others, their experiences of life and as a consequence their perceptions and priorities may be different from those of many other Humanists, as well as the many in the general population, leading them to different moral positions and differing statements and actions based upon their priorities compared to others. Thus, economics, social organisation in terms of wealth generation and distribution does not seem to be a high-level issue for Humanism, while other key issues like the environment, can be high on the list of priorities.

Considering democratic mechanics, I'm reminded of an eminent fellow Humanist who argued to me that there should have been no vote on membership of the EU because voters didn't know what they were talking about. Well, personally I think the decision to leave the EU was profoundly wrong and misguided, being economically and otherwise damaging. Moreover, there may be some good arguments for generally avoiding referenda. Nevertheless, on the other hand, tens of millions took an active part in a democratic vote – they participated in democracy and they exercised power and could see the outcome of what they did. And it seems to me they are now looking at the consequences of their vote. And that participation must represent to some extent an important positive in strengthening our community and society. And the Scottish referendum too, of course. Participation requires thought from participants, which I believe that people gave to the issues on both of these referenda even if I personally voted to stay in the EU.

It's not simply a matter of democratic principle, important as it is, for Humanists UK and wider Humanism to be democratic and to be seen to be so. We have to recognise, as leaders, as people who support democracy, that people, that most Humanists, like others, want to have a voice, they want to speak, they have views and opinions, and they need to feel that their contributions are wanted and will be listened to. That is a fundamental of our human character. To leave people feeling ignored and sidelined does not bode well for the solidity and sustainability of an organisation in terms of grassroots support.

History shows that when Hitler shut down the Freethinkers centre in Berlin in the 1930s, there were no crowds to protest, no political uproar. There were no thousands affiliated to the centre and to non-religious outlooks available to protest. If a church had been closed down, there would likely have been much greater force of opposition (though of course religions are not democratic, but they heavily involve their adherents). Humanism is growing and hopefully becoming more influential in the UK, perhaps significantly because of the excellent work of Humanists UK. That being said, it seems to me that at the local level and in terms of national support and grassroots membership we could be doing better. I worry that without strong roots the wonderful flower that is our Humanism may easily and quickly be pulled up by those with malintent.

I understand, and also hope that we all understand the need to be pragmatic, the need to be effective and achieve appropriate goals for Humanism. We do need to be effective in challenging and opposing the domination and oppression of the religious. Humanists UK needs to be successful, and seeking and being open in democratic and participatory terms has its challenges. Our Humanist UK leaders are burdened with ensuring such positive outcomes. Yet enhancing our participatory democratic practices needs to be seen as part of the route to achieving our Humanist goals.

We, Humanists, myself and others, will of course have wrong views, maybe outlandish views (though this never stopped the human-induced climate-change denying and Northern Rock associated Lord Ridley from being a Humanist UK trustee – of course he can argue his case). I know that I personally may be stupid but then, like lots of others, it may be that I am not stupid, and if I am stupid or unwise or wrong, I feel that I and others need the space in which to express our stupidity, lack of wisdom and wrongness (hence this magazine though I do wish for other contributors!) and perhaps have the opportunity to learn from engaging with others, from listening to others and from our errors. This is part of our well-being. Our human needs in respect of democracy and participation are considered in detail in the guide, Living Humanism.

To my mind, it is essential for the future of Humanism that we Humanists, those of us who are members of Humanist UK and Humanism beyond the UK, have the opportunity to engage actively in policy making and action within the Humanist organisations to which we belong, something which is of much greater ease and simplicity in the modern age. Simple measures such as enabling votes on some key questions and issues, opening up the Humanist UK convention to online attendance, ensuring some convention debates, promoting participatory thinking and discussion activities, and having an attitude which clearly values local groups and members, would all serve to enhance participatory democracy in our Humanist organisations. Such ideas focused on enhancing participatory democracy and meaningful engagement in Humanists UK and Humanism globally are in my view essential to the sustainable success of Humanism.

If you have any comments on the articles in this magazine or would like to write and contribute an article, please contact info@livinghumanism.com

HUMANIST UK CONVENTION REPORT

I was lucky enough to be able to attend the Humanists UK conference in Liverpool this year which was thoroughly enjoyable and blessed with warmth and sunshine.

The Friday night comedy was enlivened by excellent performances by the local comedian Hannah Platt whose jokes about mental health and counselling went down well with the audience ("My counsellor didn't like me so we had something in common") with Robin Ince telling excellent and warm stories about his comedy career and those he'd encountered along the way (the Goodies, Stuart Lee and more). It was lovely to see him and hear him perform.

This was all the better as the first half of the comedy night was to my mind disappointing with the first comedian Lee Peart asking "What are Humanists?" at the start of his performance. Could he not have found out who we were before his performance and made jokes about us? Perhaps with more experience he will be able to tailor his performances, but personally I found his comedy was conventional, unadventurous and not my cup of tea. For me, it felt like he'd been to a comedy course sometime and was repeating some formula.

The second comedian Alison Spittle felt similarly unadventurous and in fact I left after a few minutes and went to read some of the books available on the stall in the foyer. Life is short. Time has to be used well. That being said, my impression was that many of the rest of the audience laughed and enjoyed these two comics, but for me I was grateful for the second half of the show!

On the Saturday, after a parkrun in the morning, I saw the excellent Susie Alegro talking about her book "Freedom to Think - Promoting Human rights in the digital age. A fascinating, engaging talk so I went off to buy the book, which had unfortunately sold out. Others clearly felt the same way about this talk as I did.

Then in the afternoon it was Robin Dunbar on the evolution of religion. I'd been worried about this talk as, having browsed his book at the bookstall, I was unable to find a definition of religion in his introduction or elsewhere which to me would seem to make discussing the evolution of religion rather difficult. But perhaps I needed to read his book in more depth. Anyway, I really enjoyed his talk. It proved fascinating and clear, and felt informative with amusing descriptions of cults and religions, and rightly arguing that for Humanists, we need to be sure we understand religions.

I do enjoy these conventions but my constant feeling is that I am there as rather a passive audience member, learning passively from the experts rather than as being seen as an active and valued agent of Humanism. I do feel there need to be more opportunities for attendees to contribute and participate rather than simply being listeners to the excellent speakers brought to the occasion.

Of course, it would be undemocratic for just those of us who can afford a weekend in Liverpool to be determiners of Humanist UK policy. However I would like to see greater efforts to facilitate interaction between attendees (Andrew Copson said I missed the 9am Saturday morning - talk to someone your left, and on your right - but people often stick with those they know so this activity might not achieve much) and to seek contributions and opinions from those who do attend.

Finally I would add that the whole occasion was organised with consummate efficiency, the talks were really interesting (Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson were excellent too on the Sunday) so thanks to the Humanists UK team for all their efforts and for the successful delivery of an excellent convention.

Living Humanism Daily

A core and central idea set out by the book Living Humanism is that Humanism comprises a life stance which can be applied to our daily lives. Of course, there may be other ethical ideas, thoughts frameworks and philosophies which influence the ways we think and how we behave.

But once we have decided, as Humanists, to place our own humanity and the humanity of all others at the centre of our lives, and once we have also accepted, as also

advocated in Living Humanism, that our own well-being and the wellbeing of all others should also lie at the centre of our thinking and actions, then these ideas provide a basis around which can start to build a rational way of living through our daily lives.

So, what should we be doing in our daily lives? A wide range of things that support our own well-being and the well-being of others is the answer, to some degree based in your own interests, character and

preferences but within the framework of aiming to optimise your own well-being and the well-being of others.

So if you like to sit in your garden or go to a park to relax and enjoy the sunshine on a sunny summer's afternoon, then of course you should, in the main and dependent on circumstances, probably do so (but if, for example, an ill relative needs your company then perhaps you should see them, then enjoy and relax in which way you will be supporting both your own well-being and theirs).

If you want to sit in a café talking to friends, you may be keeping yourself happy, keeping your friends happy. By buying a coffee perhaps this will help keep someone else in work, they then pay taxes and so forth, so we have positive effects for ourselves and others in this case.

Then through our daily paid work (if we have some) we will hopefully be supporting others in our communities in many ways, too numerous to list in a short article like this. Through our spirit of generosity and care for others we may give to charities, support friends, give of our own time to help others as a volunteer, or in other ways.

And hopefully, we will be loving and supporting of our young children, friends and partners as best we can, not only being giving to them through our actions but also benefitting our communities through our actions.

Of course, we should be aiming to optimise the degree to which we support our own well-being of others. I don't have a mathematical formula for this, and maybe doing this is too complex to be manageable.

Yet, through the days we can be aware of the actions we are taking in terms of supporting well-being for ourselves and all others, and do our best to optimise what we do in these respects.

In this way we will also benefit community and society .

Your articles and your thoughts

This magazine invites your contributions that deal with Humanism, living a Humanist life and contemporary issues tied to Humanism.

If you wish to send in an article on your thoughts and ideas then please send these to the editor at info@livinghumanism.org.uk marking your email with HCM in the subject line.