

RATIONAL Realm

Exploring a rational approach to knowledge and life

Why I Am a Humanist

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In this address, Leslie Allan shares his early experiences and how they shape his humanist outlook today. He then outlines what he considers to be the three core principles underlying the humanist world view: reason and evidence, compassion and equality, and autonomy and dignity. Allan illustrates the application of these principles with historical and contemporary examples. He concludes by drawing upon each of these principles to tease out what it means to live a good life; a life of meaning and purpose.

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1. My Early Life



Presenter: Leslie Allan

Thank you for inviting me and for your warm welcome. Today, I want to share with you three things. First, I want to say a little about how I became a humanist—about what attracted me to humanism. Next, I will share a little what humanism means to me. I will outline what I think are the three guiding principles of humanism. Finally, I want to explore briefly a humanist view of the good life; what are the things that give our lives meaning and purpose.

So, let me start by saying a little bit about my background and my upbringing. Sharing my story will illuminate how I came to see myself as a humanist and an atheist. I was born in Budapest, the capital

of Hungary. My mother fled Hungary with me as a refugee in 1957. I grew up with my parents and my two siblings in a poor northern suburb of Melbourne. Even though life was a struggle, I always found solace in books about the natural world. What first piqued my curiosity were the stars and the planets. What were they made of? How many are there? Even today, I'm still fascinated by this mysterious world of galaxies, neutron stars and supernova.

After a while, I found there were other interesting things to learn about. I got enthralled by the science of chemistry. What are atoms made of? How do these atoms combine into the endless array of molecules that make up our ordinary day-to-day objects? Even though my school was not well resourced, I was fortunate enough to be taught by some wonderful and highly-committed teachers who encouraged me to go on with my studies.

In my teens, I casually picked up a magazine on electronics. I quickly became fascinated with how transistors, diodes, and other components combine to make up a radio or a television. That led me to study electronics at RMIT (now called RMIT University), with electronics becoming my first career. What intrigued me then and still intrigues me today is how only four fundamental physical forces combine with the properties of an unseen but small number of fundamental particle types to create the



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dazzling complexity of the world we see. In all of my studies, what really stood out for me was one key lesson: that by using the scientific method, we *can* make sense of the world. We *can* understand what causes disease, what makes bodies attract and how humans evolved on this planet.



Anti-Vietnam War demonstration at Phillip Street Court, Sydney, NSW

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As I found out later, it's this approach to understanding ourselves and our world that characterizes a humanist approach: this idea that the universe in all its majesty and mystery *is* understandable through rigorous scientific enquiry.

At High School, I was also interested in Politics and Social Studies. This was in the days when our Prime Ministers included John Gorton, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser. These were times of great political upheaval. Great controversies at that time included our participation in the Springbok tour:

whether we should compete with a nation that practices racism in sport. There were also massive demonstrations about our involvement in the Vietnam War. Was this a just war? And should we be spending billions of dollars on the space race to the Moon when children are dying from want of food and medicine? These big moral and political questions of the day occupied my thinking. Here again, I was taught by a couple of great teachers who probed and challenged us to ask and try to answer these hugely thorny questions.

This active interest and participation in the great social issues of the day was another early marker for my latent humanist attitude. Humanists encourage all of us to play a positive part in the social groups to which we belong; our local communities, our state and our nation. But more than that, humanists impress on us that we are global citizens and that what we do at the local level impacts people in faraway lands that we will never see nor meet. For example, how we eject pollutants into the air, manufacture and dispose of plastics and buy more clothes from the fast-fashion industry than we will ever wear impacts the child growing up in Somalia and Bangladesh.

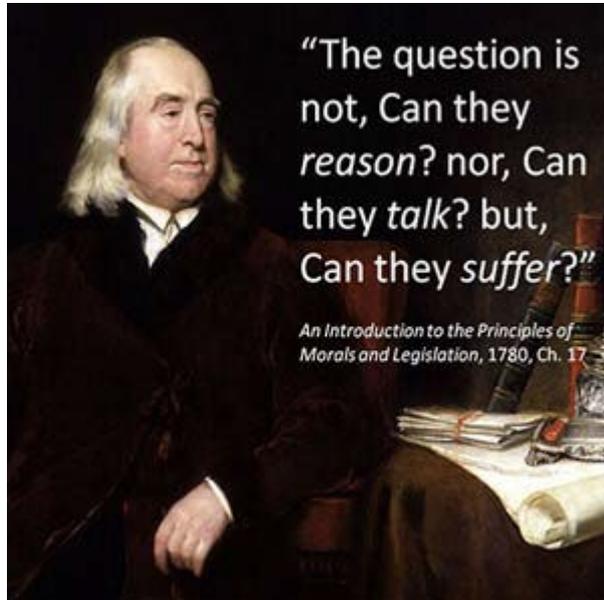
I'm so pleased to see how this humanist respect for truth and science on the one hand and our recognition that we are truly living in a global village in which we are all responsible for each other has been picked up by the young people of today. I'm thrilled that millions of people all over the world are taking the lead from 16-year-old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, and other great young leaders. Through the United Nations and Humanists International, humanists



Greta Thunberg school strike for climate
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are campaigning for much greater international co-operation and collaboration to meet the very real threats to human existence and human welfare.

But don't think for a moment that humanists are only concerned about human welfare. Don't be fooled by the name, 'Humanism'. From the Enlightenment, leading



Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

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humanists have been advocating taking into account the welfare of animals in our decision-making. You may have heard of these seminal early humanist thinkers; Henry Sidgwick, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The person who started off the modern animal rights movement in 1976 with his book, [Animal Liberation](#) [1976], is humanist Peter Singer. Peter Singer is an Australian philosopher and ethicist who now teaches at Princeton University in America. When it comes to how we treat animals, what matters for a humanist is not whether they can think, but whether they can suffer. You may recognize that insight as being formulated by that great Enlightenment Utilitarian philosopher, Jeremy Bentham.

Here again, the young people of today are taking the lead. I speak with many under-thirties who are taking an active role campaigning against the suffering of livestock that we see happening on an industrial scale. This is the humanist attitude in action. I see these same young people actively working in the Effective Altruism movement. A humanist recognizes that in trying to do the most good that we can do—trying to minimize the suffering of humans and animals as much as possible—our resources are limited. With this humanist approach, we are applying scientific principles and methods in working out where we should spend our altruistic efforts for maximum impact. (See, for example, GiveWell at www.givewell.org.)

I hope you are getting a flavour for why I'm attracted to a humanist approach to life. I want to change gears a bit now and talk a little about my life after school. But to make sense of that I need to say a little about my church life while at school. When I was 12 years old and after an eight-week course of lessons, I received the Eucharist at our local Catholic Church, St Christopher's. Now, I can't remember what led me to do that. Perhaps my devout Catholic Aunt had a hand to play in that. I do remember, though, that after I received my confirmation, I did not return to the Church.

Also, in my late teens, my step-father suddenly decided that our family is going to attend the local Protestant Church, St Philip's. I quiet enjoyed my time there, especially the Sunday School lessons that were run by a delightful young lady. As suddenly as my step-father decided we were starting at the church, he just as abruptly decided we were no longer going. My step-father showed signs of various kinds of mental illness. One mental malady was that he was paranoid, thinking at times that people were after him. I suspect

that it was some minor action by a church member that led him to abruptly cut all ties with the church.

In all of this, as much as I liked the people in the church, I never really bought into the key Christian teachings; that the world was created in six days, that Noah saved a select few after a world-wide flood, that Jesus died for our original sin and rose from the dead on the third day. For me, these teachings just plainly contradicted what we knew was possible given our scientific view of the world and also just did not make philosophical sense.

In my late teens, I also started reading some of the seminal atheist and humanist writers, such as Kit Mouat, Hector Hawton, Margaret Knight, Julian Huxley (grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, friend of Charles Darwin) and Bertrand Russell. That reading, along with my interest in science, primed me for what was to happen next. Following High School, I enrolled at RMIT. There I studied electronics for four years. In my class was a very committed Christian, Gary. Gary and I were friends and we got on very well. During lunch times and other breaks, we would get into some very vigorous discussions about religion. So much so that it piqued my interest enough to enrol at La Trobe University for a degree part-time. My main interests were philosophy and the history of religions. I studied there for nine years while I worked full-time and started a family. I became interested in two key areas in philosophy. Firstly, epistemology; that is, the philosophy of knowledge and ethics, or moral philosophy. With the former, we ask questions such as: how do we know what we do know and how does the scientific method work? In moral philosophy, we enquire into the nature and foundation for ethics, and how we decide rationally the key moral questions of our time. These questions still interest me today.



La Trobe University

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It was when I began my studies that I first joined our local humanist society, Humanists Victoria. It was called the 'Humanist Society of Victoria' back then. We've only recently changed our name. In the last four years or so, I've become active again. And that's because I'm passionate about getting our law makers to use reason and evidence when deciding public policy and framing legislation. I'm also passionate about creating a society where every human being can reach their potential. Humanists act to defend those who do not have a voice, including the poor, our indigenous peoples and factory-farmed animals. As a humanist, this is what gets me out of bed in the morning.

2. The Humanist Approach

OK. That's a little about my background and what attracted me to humanism. You may be asking yourself: 'but what exactly is a humanist approach to life and living and how does it differ from other approaches?' I think the humanist approach can be summed up in these three themes or principles.

1. reason and evidence
2. compassion and equality
3. autonomy and dignity

Let me expand on each of these three dimensions.



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Reason and Evidence

The first thing to note is that humanists respect reason and evidence. But what does that mean? Humanists think that it is through the use of logic and reason that we reliably arrive at truths about ourselves and the universe. Conversely, we don't consider intuition and faith as reliable guides to knowledge. We think that our personal beliefs should align with the evidence put to us. In the social sphere, we think that public policy should be informed by the best scientific evidence we have available. Applying this principle puts into serious question the effectiveness of pseudo-medical treatments such as iridology and homeopathy. It also encourages us to get acting on climate change before it's too late.

Applying the scientific method leads us to a naturalistic view of humans and the universe. Science teaches us that the visible universe is some 14 billion years old, that there are four fundamental forces of nature and that life evolved over some 3.5 billion years of evolution on earth, with Homo sapiens first appearing some 200,000 thousand years ago.

That doesn't mean that we know everything and that there are no deep mysteries yet to be solved. Scientists are working on figuring out what happens inside a black hole, how quantum entanglement is possible and what is the nature of dark matter and dark energy. Perhaps the biggest and most elusive mystery is the nature of consciousness; how do the 80 billion neurons that make up a normal living human brain give rise to the feeling of love and the sensation of a red rose?

Humanists and atheists are sometimes thought of as joyless worshipers of cool, hard reason with no appreciation of love, wonder, music and art. Nothing could be further from the truth. Humanists stand in awe at the magnificent complexity of the universe, the beauty of nature, the all-consuming power of love and the inspiration that drives art and music.

Compassion and Equality

The next humanist principle is compassion and equality. Regard for other human beings and all other sentient creatures stands at the centre of the humanist outlook. Our feelings of empathy and our drive to act altruistically are encoded in our genes and reinforced through our upbringing. As Harvard University psychologist, Steven Pinker [[*The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, 2012](#)], described it, our desire to help those who are suffering reflects the better angels of our nature.

But to whom ought we show our compassion? To our family? To our friends? Of course. But who else? For a humanist, what marks a truly moral act is one in which we treat people as equals; that is, where we treat people impartially. So, for a humanist, you ought *not* get special treatment just because you are white, wealthy, heterosexual or male. Treating people as equals is fundamental to what it is to act morally.

For humanists, this imperative to treat people with compassion and as equals did not come from above or beyond. It is the result of our long evolutionary history in which we evolved to form co-operative social groups. Let me illustrate this idea.

Imagine for a moment all of you here going on a holiday by sea. Your ship becomes stranded on a desert island with none of the crew surviving. You are left with some food, materials to make some shelter and the natural resources on the island. To survive individually and as a group, what rules would you make to govern your behaviour? Would you decide on the rule, 'Kill your fellow survivors when you can get away with it'? Would you choose, 'Steal from the food store when no one is looking'? Would you decide on, 'Break your promises when you can't be bothered keeping them'?



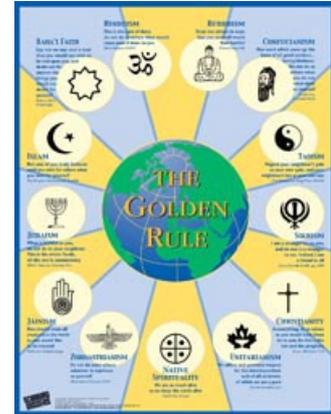
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Of course, the answer is obvious when you think about it. See, for a humanist, there is nothing mysterious or out-of-this-world about the moral rules that we want others to live by. They are simply the rules that we must all conform to if we are to get the mutual benefits of co-operation; for us to survive and thrive.

As civilizations have progressed, the range of people to which we show compassion and equal regard has expanded. Slaves, women, gays and lesbians and our indigenous peoples are more and more treated as equals. This universalist ethos is best expressed in the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', and in the Utilitarian principle, 'Act so as to bring

about the most happiness and the least suffering'. Since the 1970s, this feeling of universal regard is continuing to expand bit by bit as we include non-human animals within our circle of care.

At their noblest, the world's religions actively promote this idea of compassion for all, regardless of a person's religious belief, ancestry, gender and sexual preference. The Golden Rule can be found in the holy texts of all of the major world views. This is wonderfully illustrated in the [Golden Rule Poster](#) [McKenna, 2001]. Unfortunately, as history teaches us, many of these world views have also divided us into an in-group and an out-group; the sheep and the goats, the saved and the infidel, the chosen race and the outcast. Humanists actively work to reduce this blind prejudice—this sectarianism that divides us—to build strong bridges between community groups and nations.



Autonomy and Dignity

The third humanist principle that I want to outline here is autonomy and dignity. With this principle, we affirm that everyone should be able to go about their lives without unnecessary restrictions by the government and other people. We ought to be given our autonomy—the freedom to do what we want—to the maximum extent possible. Constraints on our freedom should occur only when our actions restrict the freedom of others or cause them harm. For example, it is this principle that motivated humanists for many decades to campaign against laws that criminalised homosexuality.

Humanists regard human freedom as an ideal because each of us is different. Each of us has our own unique talents and dispositions, drives and values. Global research by Ortiz-Ospina *et al* [[Happiness and Life Satisfaction](#), *Our World in Data*, 2017] shows that it is only by exercising our freedom that we can fully put our special capabilities and plans towards creating our own happiness.

It is this capacity for happiness and suffering that also gives us our inherent dignity. Each of us is a unique sentient being; a universe in our own right. Each of us is a locus of consciousness. One person's pleasure and pain is of no greater or lesser value than any other's. It is this belief in the inherent dignity of each person and of their worth as autonomous agents of their own future that humanists have campaigned hard for various legislative reforms. A recent example here is our fight for a person's legal right to die if they are suffering from intolerable and unavoidable pain. In a similar vein, humanists the world over campaigned for gays and lesbians to have the freedom to marry whomever they chose.

It is in the name of this principle also that humanists historically campaigned against slavery and, much later, for full civil rights for women and blacks. For a humanist, even if there is no higher power looking over us, fighting for freedom and the inherent dignity of all, regardless of race, gender, social position and sexual preference, is worth doing.

3. The Good Life

I now want to say a little about the humanist conception of the good life. What is a worthwhile life and how ought we live it? The three humanist principles I've just described, I think, give us a way to think about what it is to lead a good life. First, let me distinguish the humanist view of a good life from other ways of looking at the question.

What is a good knife? What is a good life?



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You could think that asking the question, 'What is a good life?', is like asking, 'What is a good knife?' How do we answer, 'What is a good knife?' Well, by first asking, 'What is the function of a knife?' It's to cut. A good knife, then, is a knife that cuts well. That is, it has an easy to grip handle, has a sharp blade, and so on. The salient point here is that what makes

for a good knife is determined by the purpose of a knife. And a knife's purpose is not given by the knife itself. The purpose of a knife is external to the knife itself.

Now, you may think that humans are like that. You may think that a good human life is determined by the function—the purpose—of a human. And like knives, the purpose of a human is dictated *to* humans from outside.

In contrast to this way of thinking, a humanist thinks that human beings determine their own purpose; that humans have no function that is dictated from above or beyond. This thinking is in line with the humanist principle of autonomy and dignity that I shared with you. Each of us has plans and projects that we wish to pursue. Some embark on a lifetime of service to the poor and dispossessed. Some want to build the best model railways ever. Some devote their lives to finding a cure for autism or to discovering what's inside a black hole or to bringing pleasure to others through music. Global studies by Ortiz-Ospina *et al* [[Happiness and Life Satisfaction](#), *Our World in Data*, 2017] on happiness and well-being show that the happiest, most contented people are those who can determine their own life trajectory without it having dictated to them. So, for a humanist, this is part of what it is to lead a good life.

The second principle I mentioned, compassion and equality, complements the value of a life that is lived pursuing one's own plans and interests. To live a 'good' life—that is, a life that has moral value and not simply one that satisfies its owner—is to live a life of compassion and justice. For a humanist, though, living a good life *does not* require you to live like a saint, sacrificing your happiness and well-being entirely for the benefit of others. That would be to deprive yourself of your own dignity and value. To live a good life, however, *does* mean alleviating the sufferings of others where you can and fighting for justice—the equal treatment of others—where you see people being treated unfairly. Again, research by Ortiz-Ospina *et al* [[Happiness and Life Satisfaction](#), *Our World in Data*, 2017] and Helliwell *et al* [[World Happiness Report 2019](#), 2019] shows that for people whose lives are

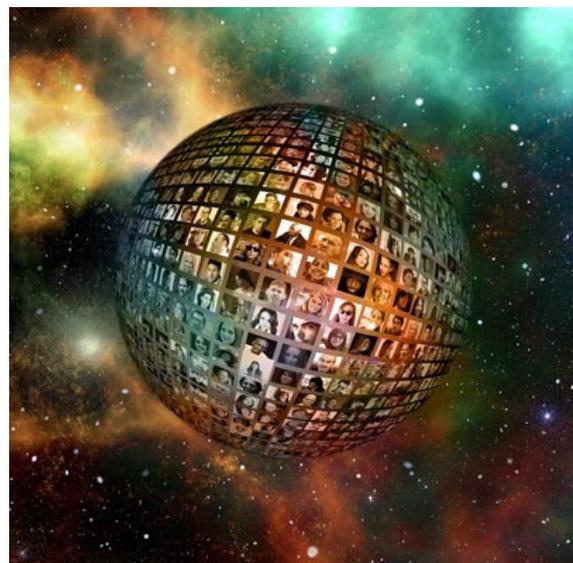
deeply embedded within their families and communities, they live more fulfilling and satisfying lives. Living in service to others not only enriches their lives, but also your own.

The first humanist principle, reason and evidence, also plays an important role in living the good life. This may sound counterintuitive. What has reasoning correctly got to do with living a moral life? Let me give you an example. In 2017, BBC [[The Dying Officer Treated for Cancer with Baking Soda](#), Yeo *et al*] reported on what happened to Naima, a cancer patient. Naima foregoes cancer treatment for an expensive quack cure. She dies prematurely, robbing her of another few years of productive life and robbing her parents of their daughter. Her untimely death was good for no one; not for her, not for her family and not for all of her friends who cared about her. [See also [Alternative Medicine Kills Cancer Patients, Study Finds](#), *Real Clear Science*, Pomeroy, 2017]

Here is another example of how ignoring reason and evidence detracts from living a good life. I run Humanists Victoria's [Ex-Religious Support Network \(ESN\)](#). In my work, I hear all too often stories from people who left a very strict and controlling religious sect. To their deep regret and sadness, they feel that much of their life had been wasted. Within the sect, they were not allowed to have birthday parties, to dance and sing, search the internet and to go to university. The imposition of these irrational religious constraints, they felt, stole from them their childhood and early adult years.

Perhaps the most alarming example on a global scale of how turning a blind eye to reason and evidence can rob us of a good life is our current climate catastrophe. If the world's governments continue to ignore the scientific evidence, with the inevitable result that our climate passes the global warming tipping point, billions of people will suffer. Billions will be impacted by increased storms, bush fires and floods, food and water shortages, rising sea levels and wars over scarce resources.

To finish up on a more positive note, I want to emphasize that for a humanist, there is not one way and one way only of living a good life. We each have our own talents and drives to make this world a better place and in a way that is uniquely ours. Humanism is a truly pluralist world view that cherishes diversity, both in thought and action. Humanists are striving for a more tolerant world in which all of us can reach our potential while respecting the rights and freedoms of our fellow world citizens.



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So, today I shared with you what attracted me to the humanist outlook; principally, its respect for reason and science and its deep engagement with the world. I outlined what I see as the three key principles of humanism—reason and evidence, compassion and equality, and autonomy and dignity. I ended with the humanist conception of what it is to lead a good life. At its heart, it's a life in which we continually search for the truth and strive to enrich the lives of others. Thank you.

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