

## ***Sample Chapter: Jen Hancock's Handy Humanism Handbook***

### **Chapter 2: What Is Humanism And Why Should I Care?**

To put it simply, Humanism is one of the most powerful forces for positive social change on the planet. Some of the most famous and influential people in our society have been and continue to be Humanists. The Humanist philosophy provided the foundation for most of the social and civil justice movements of the past century as well as providing the philosophical foundation for democracy and science.

Quite literally, if it weren't for Humanists, Europe would still be in the Dark Ages. America would probably have not been "discovered" by Europeans and everyone everywhere would still be trying to cook with fire. And no, I'm not exaggerating.

The modern world has been shaped and made possible by the dominance of Humanist ideas. Which is exactly why it's so stunning that most people have no idea what it is.

#### ***So What Is Humanism?***

One of the main reasons Humanism is so poorly understood is that it has no standard definition. Yet, it is instantly recognizable once you grasp its central ideas. It is a very simple philosophy that has some very profound implications for how you view your place in the universe. As one of my friends in Saudi Arabia once pointed out, it isn't rocket science. If you spend just a little bit of time thinking about what morality and ethics mean to us as humans without the prescriptions of religion and divine revelation, Humanism is probably what you are going to come up with.

Regardless, this is a book about Humanism so perhaps I should provide you with something more concrete to wrap your mind around.

#### ***Defining Humanism***

The American Humanist Association defines Humanism as "a progressive philosophy of life, that without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of Humanity."

In other words, it's a way of thinking about ethics that emphasizes both our personal development and our moral obligations. As I like to say: live life, love other people and leave the world a better place.

#### ***Or To Put It Another Way***

According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union's Amsterdam Declaration of 2002, "Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself." According to the IHEU there are seven fundamental elements of Humanism:

- **Humanism is ethical.** Humanists have a duty to care for all of humanity including future generations.
- **Humanism is rational.** Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare.
- **Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
- **Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society.
- **Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** Humanism recognizes that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
- **Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination.** Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfillment.
- **Humanism is a life stance aimed at maximizing our personal fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living.** It offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our time.



### ***Keep It Simple Stupid***

By now your head is probably spinning. One of the problems we Humanists have in explaining our philosophy is that it is deceptively simple, yet wonderfully complex. There is no easy way to describe it.

Regardless, I will give you a synopsis in plain English, understanding that we will be going into more detail on these basic elements in the following chapters.

Humanism is a philosophy that is primarily focused on how we as individuals can be good human beings. We seek to be ethical, moral and compassionate people in all that we do. However, we also understand that good moral reasoning requires us to think clearly and rationally about the problems we face. So Humanists are as much concerned with how we think, as we are concerned with what we think about. To that end we practice the related skills of freethought, critical thinking and logic.

Humanists are firmly convinced that we are in control of our own destinies and that we can choose to act in a way that will improve our lives and the lives of others. In other words, we

refuse to be victims of fate. For this reason, Humanism is a philosophy that focuses on the future. We are not content with the status quo as we are always pushing ourselves to make things better.

How we define “better” is critical to understanding the philosophy of Humanism. Humanists judge outcomes using a compassion-based morality and we are totally unapologetic about that. If it helps humans, it is a good outcome. If it hurts, it is bad. Absent from our thinking and reasoning is anything that could be considered supernatural or religious.

We do not consider religious or supernatural ideas to be a sound basis for moral reasoning. Our concern for the welfare of others is sufficient and we have no need for any external or supernatural sanction for our moral values. We are, in fact, convinced that religious reasoning, however well intentioned it may be, tends to cause more harm than good because it encourages dogmatic adherence to a set of rules instead of acknowledging the necessity of judging each situation on its own merits.

In other words, without supernaturalism, Humanists seek to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity. And we do this by applying reason and logic to our feelings of compassion with a determination to actively work to make things better not just for ourselves, but for everyone.



This sample is from Jen Hancock’s Handy Humanism Handbook, available in both ebook and paperback form. For more information visit <http://www.jen-hancock.com/>

Jennifer’s other books include: The Humanist Approach to Happiness: Practical Wisdom.

Jennifer also has a variety of online resource and training materials available at her website.



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