

**IT'S ONLY NATURAL: HUMANISM'S
HIGHER PURPOSE**
John Shook

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It's only natural to wonder about the higher purposes in one's life. Religious people sometimes argue that because they discover and enjoy a higher purpose to life, then religious beliefs appear quite natural and reasonable. This argument can be turned around, to make humanism look unnatural and unreasonable, if humanism denies any higher purpose to life. Either way, humanism seems inhumanly cold towards the very notion of 'higher purpose', but is this matter really so clear-cut and simple? Religious humanists stand as counter examples to the notion that a religious life is incompatible with a humanistic philosophy. Secular humanists might be said to enjoy a spiritual aspect to their lives as well, if that aspect simply means devoted pursuit of higher purposes in this life. The confusions in these sorts of arguments probably originate in the ambiguous phrase, 'a higher purpose to life', which can be understood in several ways. If we discriminate between the more common meanings, and consider them separately, then any real disagreement between religion and humanism should begin to emerge. People can be heard to talk about 'having a higher purpose in life'. Some say that they seek a 'purpose higher than life'. Others talk about wanting a 'higher purpose for life'. In which ways can humanism endorse such talk of a 'higher purpose'?

Humanism agrees that people can find plenty of higher purpose *in* life, but humanism cannot see any higher purpose *than* life, and denies any higher purpose *for* life. It is easy to find a higher purpose *in* life. In fact, humanists are eager to show how there are many higher purposes in this life, purposes which elevate us above the tedium of

ordinary existence. People naturally seek and find many higher purposes in their lives: all the entrancing, engaging, empowering, and ennobling things that make life truly worth living. People should want to have a higher purpose in life – indeed, many higher purposes – because mere life, merely surviving by materialistic means, is not a path towards human dignity or excellence. People like having a purpose-driven life, and they know that they weren't meant to live degrading and disposable lives. Humanism is about the search for what makes life great and what makes for great lives, and humanism principally wants to extend the opportunity for a purposeful and worthy life to everyone.

Humanism would be absurd if it meant that there are no higher purposes in this life and no ethical principles for this life. Humanism is not nihilism. Nihilism is a radical way of rejecting religion, by going to the opposite extreme of declaring life to be meaningless, lacking any purpose, and devoid of moral principle. If humanism were a kind of nihilism, then it too would require obsession with the existential question of 'why bother to go on living?' However, humanism does not begin from any abnormal point of anxious despair; humanism instead starts from life's natural joys. When someone does feel hopeless and adrift, humanists don't see an opportunity to make another humanist convert – we see someone who needs our help rediscovering the reasons to live. We need not doubt that there are worthy purposes and ethical principles; so many, in fact, that humanists can disagree about which are most important. Furthermore, there are reasonable ways for people to compare, evaluate, and adjust purposes and principles; so humanists encourage free thought, free inquiry, and free societies. Life is not merely purposeful, but life is also 'purpose-full' – abounding in worthy purposes – and furthermore, life is 'purpose-thoughtful' – requiring careful management of our purposes.

Humanists celebrate the plentiful things that make life worth living, and encourage the principled expansion of these things to all. We now come to the next issue: Is there

any higher purpose *than* life? This is a separate question. Why can't the answer be 'yes', too? When people sacrifice themselves for others, or for social causes, or for moral ideals, aren't they pursuing a higher purpose than life? Well, yes, they are pursuing something higher than their own life, but not something higher than life itself. We sacrifice for love, or duty, or principle – but these things are ultimately meaningful and truly worthy only in service to something alive. Other people and living things around us, and our causes and ideals, are part of life as a whole. What could possibly have priority over life itself? Humanism recognizes how life depends on such things as hospitable planets, natural laws, and the basic energies of the universe. We owe our lives, in a sense, to the physical environment, but humanism cannot see anything having priority over life. We should revere and protect our planet, and whatever else upon which we may depend for our existence, but we do these things for the sake of life. Humanism holds that it is a mistake to credit life's sustainers with a higher purpose than life, or to suppose that life's sustainers have higher purposes. Religious naturalisms and pantheisms, like supernaturalisms before them, attempt to grow the spiritual life from awe and reverence towards whatever we are ultimately dependent upon. Humanism would not object to incorporating awe and reverence towards life's sustainers into the worthy and excellent life. However, humanism is unable to grant a higher purpose to anything just because it may be responsible for life.

So far, we have exposed a disagreement between religion and humanism, if a religion credits anything with a higher purpose than life. Humanism is therefore incompatible with any supernaturalism which believes that a god provides a higher purpose than life. Why can't humanism and a supernaturalism, such as Christianity, join harmoniously together? Christian humanism offers assurances that a god, who is ultimately responsible for life, guarantees that human life has a higher purpose: to fulfil this god's plan for

the universe and all life it. Christian humanism therefore implies that human existence apart from god would appear to be pointless. Any non-supernatural philosophy would then seem to be nihilistic, too. That is why Renaissance and Enlightenment humanists over the past 500 years, despite their sincere efforts to reform and transform Christianity, have been branded as heretical and nihilistic by their more conservative Christian brethren. However, a genuine humanism cannot view life's meaning and purpose as utterly dependent on something else, even a god.

For humanism, life is its own justification and has independent value. Some twentieth-century Christian humanists have agreed with humanism here, by more moderately arguing only that their god greatly increases the worthy purposes available in people's inherently valuable lives. A humanist cannot rule out the possibility that a Christian lifestyle can enhance the worth and excellence of some people's lives. Such a possibility is now appropriately expressed as an empirical question, open to observation and testing. Humanism strongly encourages the exploration and evaluation of the consequences of belief systems for life. Humanism is itself a belief system, and can claim to be among the more reasonable, because it is willing to be judged by the same standards by which it judges others. Humanists believe that humanism is more reasonable, and more successful, in application for people's lives.

So far, we have found that humanism is dedicated to a purpose-full and purpose-thoughtful life for all. One more variation on the question of having a 'higher purpose to life' remains: can humanism help those who want a 'higher purpose *for* life'? If people who want this simply seek a 'higher purpose *than* life', the preceding explanation deals with them. But many people who seek a higher purpose for their lives are not just seekers but also choosers. They want to be respectfully persuaded, and they want to be responsible for judging for themselves. If people want to be persuaded by reasonable evidence before them, if they want to judge the effects of a belief system on themselves

and others, and if they want to choose the better path to human worth and excellence, then such people can be humanists. These people will also be questioners of authority, deviants from tradition, disturbers of peace, and often reformers of society.

No one can say what sort of belief systems may long survive sustained investigation by large numbers of sober thinkers. No type of humanism consists of dogmatic conclusions. Humanism consists, at minimum, of a statement of fact, a principle of commitment, and a method of inquiry. The statement of fact is that this life has plenty of meaning and purpose, and ample possibilities for worthy higher purposes. The principle of commitment is that worthy purposes should be expanded and opportunities for excellence should be extended to all. The method of inquiry is that people should be able to freely and effectively deliberate about how to fulfil that commitment.

Perhaps in the final analysis humanism is about responsibility. Life is responsible for the plenitude of meaning and purpose. People are responsible for the human impact on not just humanity but also on all other life. Humanists take responsibility for the human impact on all life and for enhancing the worth and excellence of all people's lives. We are responsible for life – no one or nothing else can be burdened with the responsibility. Any belief system that tries to deny these responsibilities or shift these responsibilities elsewhere has an opponent in humanism. Indeed, from humanism's perspective, taking these responsibilities seriously is a worthy purpose in life. Humanism is a responsible way, perhaps the most responsible way, to find higher purpose in this life.

John Shook is Vice President for Education and Research and Senior Research Fellow at Center for Inquiry Transnational, Amherst, New York.