Positive Humanism

A Primer

By
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Positive Humanism:
A Primer

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This book is dedicated to all our religious friends and family who may not agree with us, but care enough to try to understand us.

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Table of Contents

Preface

POSITIVE HUMANISM: A PRIMER

Positive Humanism 2.0: Living the Good, Secular Life

The Morality of Positive Humanism

Religion: A Middleman to Well-Being

Making Sense of Reason

Exploring the “F” Word: Freewill

“Balance” Does Not Have To Mean Being Irrational

On Dying and Living

About Me (the Author)

References

Preface

Positive humanism is an applied secular humanistic philosophy based on the scientific findings of positive psychology that focuses on personal, professional, and societal flourishing. As an *applied* philosophy its focus is on ideas that lead to increased well-being. As a *secular humanistic* philosophy, there are no appeals to the supernatural, the magical, or the mystical. The philosophy is founded on reason and critical thinking. The philosophy is *science-based*, meaning it is void of the unsupported and/or exaggerated claims and the constant confusing of correlation with causality often found in the self-help genre. The philosophy is grounded in the theories of *positive psychology*, which is the study of the positive side of the mental health spectrum—*human flourishing*.

Positive humanism is not anti-religion; it is however anti-anti-humanism. There are many aspects of religions that are anti-humanism, such as denying gays' rights to marry, the belief that humanity is sinful and worthy of eternal punishment, the denial of science on religious grounds, and several others. However, it would be fallacious and unreasonable to be against an entire religion or worse, against religion itself, because of its anti-humanistic elements without considering its pro-humanistic elements, as well. There are many atheistic philosophies that take a hard approach by attacking religion and calling attention to its harmful elements. This approach has its purpose, but this is simply not what positive humanism is about. Positive humanism's focus is almost entirely on promoting positive humanism and defending it when necessary, but avoiding "attacking" religion (i.e., avoiding making aggressive arguments against religion). Abstaining from all arguments against all aspects of religious belief is not always possible, especially when such arguments are necessary to understand arguments for positive humanism. As a positive humanist, when I do make such arguments, I am committed to representing the religious argument as accurately as possible, and avoiding ridicule or other rhetorical devices that might otherwise reasonably offend.

Positive humanism is not for everyone. Having been a believer for the first 38 years of my life, and a non-believer going on five years now, I can say from personal experience that my overall well-being has increased significantly in that time. There are countless others with similar experiences who have celebrated their new life of reason. However, from a sociological and psychological perspective, it is clear that not everyone can benefit as I and others like me did from such a life change. For

example, people from highly religious families or communities can be ostracized by intolerant family members and friends, lowering their well-being significantly.

My goal is to provide an evidence-based, secular philosophy of well-being for the rapidly growing number of people leaving religion and embracing reason, or just contemplating a more secular worldview, who want a higher quality of life than they had under their religious world view.

Positive humanism is not the same as positive psychology. In the simplest terms, there are parts of positive psychology that overlap with humanism. However, there are also parts of positive psychology that are not only outside of humanism, but also quite contrary to humanistic values. For example, Martin Seligman, considered the founder of positive psychology, stresses the importance of personal agency and responsibility. While this is certainly important, this focus greatly underestimates and undervalues the biological and social factors that influence behavior. Critics of positive psychology (of whom I am one) argue that this focus on personal agency leads to a "blame the victim" mentality. Essentially, it is the issue of free will—perhaps the most complex philosophical issue of the last couple millennia. Positive psychology also fails to "secularize" the well-being benefits that arise from religious and spiritual practices, and keeps them in a religious or spiritual context. This is understandable considering positive psychology is an American initiative, and an estimated 90% of Americans work within these contexts. Positive humanism translates these benefits to the secular.

Positive humanism is not the same as humanism. Positive humanism is different from humanism; however, unlike with positive psychology, there is nothing fundamentally at odds with humanism within positive humanism. Positive humanism takes the subset of humanism where the focus is on living a great life within a secular context. Positive humanism does not focus on *what is wrong* with religions, the supernatural, government, and society; it focuses on *what is right* with positive humanism. Let me be clear in saying that these more "negative" aspects of humanism are in no way unimportant or destructive; they are necessary to provide the foundation for positive humanism just like war is necessary to ensure the continued freedom of a (free) country.

The following sections are a collection of essays that provide the foundation for positive humanism and address some of the most frequently asked, yet rarely satisfactorily answered, questions about a secular

philosophy. Whether you adopt this philosophy as your own, incorporate parts of it into an existing philosophy, or just gain a better understanding of one example of a secular worldview focused on good, this short read will be well worth your time.

POSITIVE HUMANISM: A PRIMER

Positive Humanism 2.0: Living the Good, Secular Life

The first known usage of the phrase "positive humanism" that resembles its modern usage can be found in a 1956 article, in the *Journal of Religion*, where the author was describing religious philosopher Albert Camus as a "non-Christian thinker" who is preoccupied with "questions of the nature and meaning of men, their hopes, their possibilities, and their destiny" (Hanna, 1956, p. 224). From 1956 to the late 70s, the phrase appeared sporadically in writing until in 1978 when Gerald A. Larue, published an essay simply titled, "Positive Humanism," in which he eloquently illustrated the joy, freedom, and meaning in life that he largely credits to his humanistic values. In June of 1989, Dr. Larue expanded his views on positive humanism and compiled them into a short book called *The Way of Positive Humanism*. Since then, there has been very little mention of positive humanism.

Much has changed since 1989.

My goal is to pick up where the late Dr. Larue left off by focusing on where the findings of the area of psychology known as *positive psychology* overlap with the values of humanism (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Venn Diagram

Why Positive Psychology?

In 1998, the then president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Martin Seligman, chose positive psychology as his theme, using the *humanistic psychology* of Abraham Maslow as the foundation. After a

long career focusing on mental illness, Seligman realized that academic psychology was ignoring the other half of the mental health spectrum where we find well-being and human flourishing. Many self-help gurus have written about some aspect of human well-being (e.g., wealth, relationships, success, etc.) since early recorded history, and an explosion of the "self-help" genre was seen in the early 20th century. However, this genre has a questionable reputation at best given the countless unsupported and/or exaggerated claims made by the authors, the heavy use of anecdotal "evidence," the constant confusing of correlation with causality, and the annoyingly frequent references to the mystical and supernatural. Positive psychology uses the scientific method, based on *methodological naturalism* (i.e., no supernatural), to understand human well-being and flourishing. Similarly, a goal of humanism is to promote human well-being and flourishing without appealing to the supernatural. The union of the two seems almost "natural."

Why Positive Humanism?

In the past 15 years, researchers have found demonstrable ways to help individuals live better lives, most recently measured by human *flourishing,* or experiencing a high level of well-being. Flourishing is defined as living "within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience" (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678). A recent large-scale study measured the flourishing of over 43,000 Europeans in 23 countries. Denmark, consistently ranked as one of the least religious countries in the world, ranked the highest with 41% of its citizens surveyed qualified as flourishing (Huppert & So, 2013). While no causality is implied, this indicates that positive psychology and humanism are certainly compatible. But humanism also extends beyond one's own well-being. Positive humanism recognizes that one of the best ways of achieving a higher level of well-being is by helping others through concrete, prosocial acts (Rudd, Aaker, & Norton, 2014). Through a combination of humanistic, evidence-based self-improvement and prosocial efforts, positive humanism lives up to the aspirations of humanism.

I can think of no better, worthwhile goal in life than contributing to human well-being and flourishing. While I am confident that fellow humanists will embrace positive humanism, I can only hope that these ideas will also resonate with our theistic brothers and sisters who believe that priority should be given to serving a deity, even at the expense of humanity. For this to happen, I believe that we need to lead by example. When others are amazed by our passion for life and our contribution to

humanity, it will be a testament to the efficacy and practicality of the philosophy known as *positive humanism*.

End of the free sample

You have just read the preface and the first essay of *Positive Humanism* by Bo Bennett, PhD.

The complete ebook (EPUB and PDF) is available direct from the author at

bobennett.com/bookstore