

UNITED WISDOM

Secular humanism: foundations for value without religious agreement

Meaning and Direction

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Epigraph

“Morality, therefore, is more properly felt than judged of”

— David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, III.I.2, the opening clause of the first sentence, ending before the semicolon. Original English; punctuation outside the quotation is editorial.

What this article is about

People can agree to help another person while understanding the value of that person's life in very different ways. For one, the answer involves faith; for another, human vulnerability and mutual responsibility. How can they cooperate without turning assistance into a worldview test? This article considers secular humanism as a particular position that proposes discussing dignity, freedom and well-being without requiring religious agreement. We trace the distinction between facts and foundations for value, between compassion and accurate attention to someone, and between freedom of conviction and the consequences of shared action. Alongside the discussion are Mill, Hume, a contemporary humanist declaration and a Christian formula of reciprocity. Their texts do not form a single doctrine. Comparing them reveals both a space for cooperation and the limits of resemblance: a shared action may be possible even where a shared answer about life's ultimate foundation remains absent.

I. Agreeing to help without agreeing about the world

Consider a hypothetical scene: several neighbours gather to help someone after a fire. One regards care as a religious duty, another speaks of solidarity, and a third simply cannot walk past. While they are bringing clothes, their different reasons scarcely matter. The difference becomes sharp when someone proposes making a sermon part of receiving help, while another demands the removal of every religious symbol. The dispute now concerns more than assistance. Each side is making its own explanation a condition of participation. The person they gathered for gradually disappears from the conversation, although the need remains. This invented situation shows that agreement about an action does not guarantee a fair way of working together.

Secular humanism proposes discussing the value of life through accessible human experience, without requiring prior agreement about the supernatural. Here, “secular” describes the grounds of public discussion; it does not authorise anyone to control another person's faith. A

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religious person can still participate in discussing particular harms, needs and responsibilities. Yet humanism itself is a philosophical position, not an empty space from which convictions have vanished. It chooses to treat human dignity, freedom and well-being as important. That choice should be stated openly. Otherwise, one's own philosophy quietly becomes the supposedly neutral voice of every reasonable person, and disagreement acquires a suspicious status before discussion has begun.

The first question is therefore modest: what decision can we discuss with someone without requiring them to become like us? In the neighbours' example, this means separately agreeing on necessary assistance, the recipient's wishes and whether additional conversations are voluntary. Nobody must abandon their explanation of kindness. But that explanation stops serving as a ticket to help. This arrangement does not prove humanism true or settle the debate about religion. It establishes a limited shared space in which participants can ask who decides, who benefits, who bears the cost, and whether refusal remains possible without humiliation or concealed punishment.

II. Human value is more than usefulness

The American Humanist Association's Humanist Manifesto III, published in 2003, connects dignity with human needs, interests and responsibility. This is a movement's declaration, not an experiment establishing morality's ultimate origin. For our question, the important shift is towards the person whose life a decision affects. Someone need not first demonstrate the correctness of their worldview before their pain or limitation deserves consideration. Concrete ways of acting still have to be worked out. The attractive word “dignity” does not tell us who should receive the last available hour, how assistance should be distributed, or what to do when requests are incompatible.

It is tempting to explain human value by the usefulness a person provides. This makes rankings straightforward: a productive employee, a dependable friend, an independent relative. Yet a hypothetical situation involving care for someone temporarily unable to work exposes the weakness of that basis. If attention depends entirely on returns, a person loses their claim to it precisely when they need it. We can value contributions without making them the sole ground of a relationship. This distinction does not abolish limited time or money. It changes the discussion: allocating resources requires an explanation, but it should not become a verdict about who deserves to exist beside us and who fails to repay the cost of their presence.

In practice, this distinction appears in language and arrangements. Instead of saying “you give us nothing,” we can identify the actual constraint: this much time is available, we cannot perform that task, or another kind of assistance is needed. The limitation remains unwelcome, but no longer adheres to the recipient's identity. An honest refusal can respect someone

without requiring them to acknowledge their worthlessness. Conversely, respect does not oblige any particular person to provide everything indefinitely. Mutual vulnerability means considering the helper too. The humanistic challenge here is not endless self-sacrifice, but finding a relationship in which insufficient resources do not become a convenient excuse for humiliation.

III. Facts help, but do not choose for us

Knowledge of consequences matters when we want to act responsibly. If a promised method does not work, good intentions do not make it reliable. If someone dislikes our chosen way of communicating, calling it beneficial does not erase that testimony. Yet facts alone do not supply the whole moral framework. Greater efficiency does not mean that every cost is acceptable. We must ask efficiency at what, whose losses were left out, and why this particular aim took priority. Without those questions, rational language can conceal the unreasonable conviction that our criterion is the only possible one and needs no discussion.

In David Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature, III.I.1, the move from description to obligation calls for an explanation of its own. We can preserve that question without presenting Hume's entire philosophy as a consensus. Imagine a meeting arrangement that saves most participants time but prevents one person from attending. The saving does not settle whether the outcome is acceptable. Accepting it requires additionally preferring efficiency to another value, or finding an adjustment that preserves both. Participants can reasonably disagree at this point while understanding the same timetable and accepting the arithmetic. Their difference need not reveal inadequate education or concealed hostility.

This suggests a discipline of explaining two layers. First, state the available information: what is happening, how confidently it is known, and what remains unchecked. Then state the value premise: what we want to protect and which loss we consider particularly important. For a shared decision, others should be able to challenge either layer. Consequences may have been estimated incorrectly. Alternatively, they may be estimated correctly while the ordering of priorities remains unacceptable to someone else. Discussion becomes more demanding, but objections acquire an address. Instead of repeatedly accusing one another of irrationality, we can examine a particular fact, value or alternative, without presenting our position as an automatic deduction from the structure of the world.

IV. Compassion needs scrutiny

The absence of shared religious foundations does not mean replacing care with cold calculation. We can be moved by another person's difficulty, notice injustice and want to make amends without agreeing about rewards after death. Yet strong feeling does not give us infallible access to someone else's needs. In a hypothetical example, a friend organises a public fundraiser, convinced they are being generous. The recipient would prefer privacy and the opportunity to explain what happened themselves. The assistance is real and the intention may be kind, but its delivery has appropriated someone else's voice. Preserving care now requires restoring the affected person's participation and acknowledging that the original approach was questionable, rather than demonstrating the depth of our compassion.

Another problem is less visible: someone whose story resembles ours may be easier to sympathise with. Similarity makes a situation understandable; it does not make the distribution of attention fair. Our proposed exercise changes the question. Instead of asking who evokes our strongest feelings, we can ask which need we overlook because it is expressed in an unfamiliar way. This is neither a promise to eliminate bias nor a diagnostic test. Sometimes the answer is an admission of insufficient knowledge. Sometimes we need to ask the person, without turning them into a representative of an entire group. Sometimes we discover that the gratitude we demand concerns agreement with our image of a deserving recipient rather than the assistance itself.

Compassion becomes more responsible when correction is possible. A person needs a way to say that assistance is unsuitable; a helper needs a way to change course without staging a drama about their own moral failure. We can accept criticism of a particular method without concluding that care is pointless. We can also decline unsuitable assistance without declaring the other person wicked. This arrangement involves small but significant concessions: speaking less on someone else's behalf, checking sensitive details beforehand, and refusing to make agreement the price of support. Reason works alongside attention here, examining an action's form rather than replacing a living relationship with impersonal indicators.

V. A shared ethical gesture and different foundations

Matthew 7:12 considers treatment of another person through the treatment one would want oneself. This is a particular Gospel text, not evidence that all religions agree completely. It can be compared with humanistic attention to reciprocity. The Christian context of the law and the prophets remains intact: secular reasoning does not become a disguised account of Christianity, and a religious passage does not become an illustration of a supposedly finished modern theory. The intersection is limited: turning towards the position of the person affected by an action. Even this gesture requires thoughtful application, because identical treatment can have different consequences for different people.

Imagine a hypothetical disagreement about a gift. One participant would enjoy public praise and therefore regards it as an excellent way to express gratitude. Another would prefer a private message. If the first simply transfers their own wish, reciprocity becomes a convenient name for inattention. It is more useful to distinguish shared vulnerability from different particular preferences. I may suppose that respect matters to another person, but should not decide without checking which form suits them. This preserves the ethical intuition without turning it into an instruction to copy oneself. When preferences are unknown, we can choose a less intrusive form or ask beforehand, leaving someone free to answer without having to justify their character.

A shared action therefore does not require a shared ultimate explanation. People may protect privacy for different reasons: religious respect, a secular account of dignity, professional responsibility or personal experience. Those differences cannot be declared irrelevant forever; they can affect other decisions. But in a particular matter we can record agreement honestly, without inventing a philosophical union. This matters especially when one side tries to prove that the other secretly always belonged to its tradition. Such appropriation undermines cooperation. A mature relationship can sustain a more precise formulation: here we act together, here we explain our action differently, and here we have not reached agreement and do not pretend that the difference has disappeared.

VI. Freedom of conviction and the cost of a shared decision

Protecting freedom of conviction is insufficient when someone retains it only in name and participation in shared life requires concealed agreement. Imagine a hypothetical workplace where coercion about beliefs is expressly prohibited, yet every important connection develops during a manager's spiritual sessions, which are effectively compulsory. Formal voluntariness does not explain the whole situation. We need to examine how opportunities are allocated, who can refuse, and whether refusal becomes a separate loyalty test. Yet every difference in habits is not coercion. The distinction concerns consequences: must a person pay for disagreement by losing access to something that should be governed by other, previously understood criteria, such as the quality of their work?

Mill places the defence of individual freedom alongside the question of harm to others; his argument is not a simple permission to do whatever one wishes. This matters for a secular shared space too. Calling a practice a personal conviction does not close discussion of its consequences for others. Conversely, displeasure at another person's opinion does not establish a harm warranting control. Mature discussion distinguishes an unwelcome difference from a particular breached agreement. Someone may dislike my position without thereby gaining the right to silence me. My position may matter deeply to me without giving me the right to compel someone else to enact or publicly affirm it.

The boundary becomes clearer when we discuss a particular action. We can request that personal information not be shared without consent, without banning anyone's thoughts about privacy. We can agree on rules for a meeting without requiring identical attitudes towards every religion. Sometimes compromise is impossible because the matter genuinely concerns incompatible foundations. It is then more honest to identify the difference and its consequences than to make one side invisible. A secular agreement is valuable precisely because it is limited. It should not secretly decide a participant's entire life. Its purpose is to make a particular shared decision discussable, while keeping responsibility for consequences from dissolving into the claim that sincerity automatically justifies one's treatment of another person.

VII. When human experience is imperfect too

A serious objection to secular humanism concerns more than the absence of an ultimate religious guarantee. Human experience can itself be incomplete, partial and organised around the interests of the powerful. If decisions are made only by those who can conveniently participate, discussion of needs may exclude precisely the person in need. If only familiar ways of speaking count as evidence, someone else's difficulty may remain unnoticed. Recognising these problems does not mean abandoning scrutiny. It means asking who was absent when we formed our conclusion. Even an accurate description of one group's experience cannot silently be renamed everyone's experience. The word “human” should not render differences between people invisible.

In a hypothetical example, residents discuss a new arrangement for entering their building. Those present agree quickly because they can all easily use the chosen communication system. An absent neighbour faces a limitation nobody considered. The problem is not that majority agreement is always wrong. It is the rapid move from “this suits us” to “this suits human beings in general.” Correction may require additional information, another form of participation or a fallback arrangement. The newly heard participant need not immediately offer a perfect alternative. Reporting an overlooked cost already changes the picture. It returns something removed from discussion by its organisation rather than by an explicit argument.

This implies keeping our conclusions open to revision within suitable limits. When a decision permits a short trial, a scheduled discussion of consequences and a route to correction, that is more useful than confidently promising that everything has been considered. But revisability does not justify foreseeable serious or irreversible harm. Such cases require prior caution and appropriate competence. The procedure proposed here is an editorial discipline for discussion, not a universal management technology or an established effective intervention. Its purpose is to keep information, constraints and affected people visible. An error can then remain an error that can be identified and corrected, rather than becoming a threat to the whole identity of someone who thought themselves rational and kind.

VIII. Well-being need not look the same for everyone

A shared language of human value becomes poorer when it quietly includes a single image of a good life. One person values sustained work, another quiet presence with loved ones, another exploration of the unfamiliar. We are not establishing psychological types or claiming that every desire is equally justified. The narrower point is that an example convenient for the person discussing it cannot automatically become obligatory for someone else. We can examine the consequences of a choice without demanding an identical form of success. Otherwise, care becomes a manual for the correct biography, leaving a person only the freedom to choose how to carry out an assigned aim. The right to discuss that aim disappears while the conversation still calls itself humanistic.

Consider a hypothetical conversation between friends. One treats development as a continuous increase in achievements. After a demanding period, the other wants to preserve a stable, modest way of life. The first sees stagnation and offers unsolicited help; the second hears a denial of their choice's significance. The solution need not be to declare both unquestionably right. We can ask which obligations are affected, what the person wants to preserve, and whether a convenient explanation conceals an important problem. But the questions must allow answers that do not confirm our original judgement. Otherwise, this is not inquiry but a gentle form of persuasion arranged in advance to lead the other person towards our preferred conclusion.

A secular ground for value therefore does not imply worship of constant productivity, pleasure or social usefulness in a prescribed form. People encounter loss, uncertainty and obligations that bring no pleasant state. Well-being cannot be read entirely from outward cheerfulness. Yet discomfort does not prove a path profound or correct either. For a particular decision, it is more useful to learn what a person is protecting, which consequences they see, and at what cost they act. If the cost is understood and voluntarily accepted, our disagreement can remain disagreement. It need not become a campaign to rescue someone from every life that seems insufficiently successful to us.

IX. Disagreement tests our respect

Declaring everyone's value is easier when nobody obstructs our plans. The test begins with disagreement, especially sincere, argued disagreement. In a hypothetical charitable project, one participant rejects the proposed image of a future society but reliably performs a particular task. Others may decide that this makes them an inadequate ally. The question is whether their position actually breaches the agreement or is merely unwelcome to the group. If the task requires agreement with a particular aim, that condition should be stated. If it requires only an agreed action, adding a hidden worldview test after participation begins is unfair. Clear conditions protect both the work and a person's right to choose where to participate.

Respect does not require pretending that every belief is equally convincing. We can criticise an argument, identify overlooked consequences and refuse to support an action. The distinction is between objecting to a position and claiming permission to humiliate its holder. Basic attention need not be earned by complete agreement with our ideals. Serious differences can nevertheless have real consequences: people sometimes cannot continue a shared project. The task then is not compulsory reconciliation, but an honest account of why cooperation ends and where responsibility stops. Leaving does not establish the other side's moral inferiority. Staying does not require concealing a difference that can again affect the result or participants' trust.

We can ask ourselves a useful question: what circumstances would make me acknowledge that I am treating someone less well than I suppose? If no answer is possible in principle, talk of checking experience loses its meaning. We have built a system in which every objection confirms the objector's error. Both religious and secular people can defend themselves this way; a worldview label provides no protection. Allowing a response does not make discussion endless. Sometimes an argument must stop, cooperation must end, or an established procedure is needed. Even a stopping point can remain precise: this is what I cannot accept, this is my boundary, and this is what I do not know about your motives.

X. A foundation that does not release us from responsibility

Secular humanism can offer a language of shared responsibility, but does not remove the need to answer for one's actions. We cannot delegate that task to the word “humanity,” any more than we can replace a particular person with an abstract good. In the opening scene, the neighbours still need to ask what the recipient needs, allocate available effort and keep their promises. Kindly explanations do not deliver clothes on time or repair breached privacy. Yet a clear foundation helps us notice when assistance begins serving another aim: proving a group's superiority, enhancing a helper's reputation or demanding gratitude. The observation is unwelcome, but returns attention to the person the action was for and whose freedom to choose should remain visible.

We can retain several layers without completing the whole philosophical debate. There is a worldview's explanation of why human life matters at all. There is a limited shared principle: agreement with another's faith or unbelief should not be the price of respect. There is a particular arrangement: what we will do, for whom and how. Finally, there is scrutiny of consequences: whether the promise was fulfilled, whether unanticipated harm appeared, and what needs changing. These layers connect without being identical. Agreement to act does not imply agreement about metaphysics. Successful action does not establish the infallibility of every belief. Failure does not automatically cancel the original value, although it can require serious revision of the method and our previous understanding of the situation.

The article's result should therefore not be a compulsory new label. A reader may avoid calling themselves a humanist yet recognise a useful distinction between a conviction and a condition for a shared decision. They may identify with humanism and notice that they used it to justify intolerance. They may remain within a religious tradition and find a precise space for cooperation without abandoning it. The central movement is from appropriating another's life towards accountable action alongside it. A person remains someone with their own history, wishes and limitations, rather than convenient evidence for a philosophical thesis. A foundation for value becomes stronger when it helps us remember this in a disputed situation, where intentions are good, resources limited and agreement far from complete.

What this means in practice

If the topic speaks to you, choose a small instance of shared help or discussion involving different convictions. You need not begin with the most painful conflict. Write down four things separately: what the person needs, the explanations participants offer, the conditions they impose, and who can freely decline. Separating them does not determine the correct worldview. It helps reveal whether accepting someone else's explanation has become a hidden price of participation. If only helpers have described the need, mark that gap and ask the person themselves where possible and appropriate.

Then try making a concrete offer without requiring agreement with your view of the world. For example: “We can bring the things you need; tell us which are suitable and when would be convenient.” This is an editorial example, not a universal formula. Limited resources, safety or earlier arrangements may require changes. Do not promise more than you can deliver. State the limits of assistance separately from optional conversations or events. The person should understand that declining these does not make them less deserving of the help already agreed.

Finally, ask what feedback could actually change the way you act. If none could, perhaps you are checking whether the person fits your idea instead of whether the assistance works. Feedback nevertheless does not require accepting every demand or surrendering your boundaries. You can recognise another's experience, explain what is possible, and leave disagreement open. This voluntary reflection is not a psychological test, a proven technique for improving relationships, or a substitute for necessary legal and professional decisions.

Key quotation

> *“Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”*

— John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, chapter I, p. 18 in the 1901 edition. Original English.

Connections between traditions

Question	Comparison	Limit of the resemblance
Why consider the person?	The humanist declaration relates ethics to human needs; Mill defends an adult's sphere of independence.	A programme of values and a boundary on social coercion address different tasks.
How should we treat another?	Matthew 7:12 and the declaration can be compared through their attention to relationships.	The biblical rule has a Christian context; the declaration requires no supernatural foundation.
Are facts enough?	Hume asks us to explain a transition to what ought to be; the declaration openly states values.	An analysis of moral reasoning does not validate every point in a programme.
Where does influence end?	Mill distinguishes one's own life from harm to others; reciprocity concerns treatment of a person.	An ethical appeal does not replace a legal criterion for intervention.
What does sympathy mean?	Hume connects moral discrimination with feeling; Matthew 7:12 offers a reciprocal perspective.	These are different explanations and genres, not a unified theory of emotion.

Primary sources

1. John Stuart Mill. On Liberty (1859), Walter Scott edition, 1901. Chapters I and III: adult liberty, harm to others and different modes of life.

2. David Hume. A Treatise of Human Nature (1739–1740), III.I.1–2: fact and obligation, and moral feeling.

3. American Humanist Association. Humanist Manifesto III: Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003): a movement’s declaration of values.

4. Gospel according to Matthew, 7:12, King James Version (1611): reciprocity within a particular religious context.

The identified passages were read; the short humanist declaration was read in full. Russian quotations are United Wisdom translations; English quotations were checked against the identified texts. All neighbourhood, workplace and charity scenes are invented for analysis.

Tags

secular humanism, humanism, values, dignity, freedom, convictions, religion, worldview, cooperation, responsibility, ethics, compassion, reciprocity, respect, boundaries, well-being, human experience, facts, obligation, moral sentiment, John Stuart Mill, David Hume, humanist declaration, Gospel of Matthew, shared assistance, voluntary participation, disagreement, coercion, plurality, philosophy of life

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