

# **Socrates Endowed Chair International Humanism and the Art of Living**

## **Contextualised Post Description**

This report provides a brief contextualised description of the Endowed Chair International Humanism and the Art of Living, established by the Socrates Foundation at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands (*Universiteit voor Humanistiek*; UvH). First, the report concisely describes humanism and the art of living from a humanistic perspective. Then, it describes the academic institutional context in which the chair is established: the university, the field of Humanistic Studies, and the current research program. Finally, it arrives at a profile for candidates for the Chair.

### **1. Humanism and Humanist Traditions**

Although humanism is often taken as opposed to religions or other worldviews, UvH sees its humanistic foundation and inspiration in a more inclusive light. Humanism is also present, usually as a critical counterforce, in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other philosophies of life. Seen in this light, humanism refers to traditions that are critical of the culture or religious context in which this humanism occurs and is itself rooted. In this critical relationship, humanism passes on meanings and values that belong to the culture but were neglected or 'forgotten' (tradition literally means 'pass on'). Humanism comes up when necessary for the sake of humanity, in the sense of humaneness. In the Renaissance, for instance, humanists propagated – using sources from Antiquity – the meaning and beauty of man in specific and historical contexts, to counter the dominant thinking of abstract and theocentric medieval Scholasticism. Likewise, Enlightenment humanists championed the individual's ability and right to think for oneself (autonomy) in the context of various heteronomies. And today, humanism must pass on values such as mental resilience in a culture overrun by media and consumerism.

While the humanist tradition is plural and the meaning of humanism varies through time and across cultures, certain values can be seen as the building blocks of this tradition. Humanism stands for values such as liberty (understood as autonomy), responsibility (understood as the duty to care, for which one is answerable), justice (understood as upholding institutions and arrangements that protect people from exploitation and humiliation), solidarity (understood as spiritual and material care for one another), diversity (understood as the right to individual and group identity), art of living (understood as refined moral conduct towards oneself and others), and sustainability (understood as long-term care for the inhabitability of the planet). These values make up humanism as an open worldview, characterized by critical thinking, self-reflection and dialogue, which acknowledges and promotes the autonomous and responsible role of individuals in shaping their existence. In this view, the self is profoundly social and persons are, both physically and mentally, worthy, unique, vulnerable and irreplaceable.

## 2. Art of Living

As an intellectual tradition humanism is akin to – and works like yeast in – literature, philosophy, and science. Since the Renaissance, however, (some say: since Antiquity) Western humanism also occurs as an artistic tradition of visual and performing arts, and music. Numerous paintings and architectonic buildings, sculptures, pieces of theatre and music bear witness of both the grandeur and beauty of human being as well as the vulnerability and transiency of human existence.

Humanistic art of living unites both intellectual and artistic humanism. Basically, both derive from Cicero's concept of *humanitas*. Humanistic art of living combines intellectual-reflective meanings and values with practical-moral and aesthetic-stylistic acting. It can be understood as *practical* humanism, as a practice of thinking, investigating, showing, celebrating, and eventually furthering (enhancing, humanising) human existence from the philosophical, moral, and aesthetic values listed above (§1). Although individual freedom, responsibility, and self-development are important values in a humanistic way of life, humanistic art of living is well aware of the relationality of human beings, and of the social, political, historical-cultural, economic, and evolutionary-biological situatedness and dependency of human existence. This awareness is awakened, nourished, and expressed both in the arts and in the art of living. In turn, the artistic part and tradition of humanism feeds the open dialogical orientation and the educational-formative role of humanism in contemporary society.

## 3. University of Humanistic Studies

The academic institution that hosts the Socrates Endowed Chair International Humanism and the Art of Living is the University of Humanistic Studies (UvH). UvH is a renowned academic centre of knowledge inspired by the humanist body of thought.<sup>1</sup> As a university rooted in and devoted to humanist thinking, UvH provides Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degree programmes that train students for a humanist profession or position. It is also a centre of scholarship in humanistically relevant areas, training students for careers in academic research and transferring knowledge to society at large (societal relevance). In addition to the Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees in Humanistic Studies, UvH also offers a Master's programme in the Ethics of Care and Policy.

UvH's academic focus is on contemporary social, ethical and philosophical issues, with a special emphasis on fields and professions where ethics and existential questions are part and parcel of daily practice. UvH alumni work as humanist spiritual counsellors, teachers of worldviews and morality, individual and organisational coaches and consultants specialised in integrity and policy formulation in the care sector, and as academic researchers.

Humanistic Studies is a multidisciplinary and practice-oriented field, based on humanistic principles, that takes meaning in life and humanisation as its central concepts. Humanistic

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Humanistic Studies (*Universiteit voor Humanistiek*; UvH) is a so-called religious or philosophical (worldview) university as defined in the Dutch Higher Education and Research Act (2010).

Studies is a confluence of various disciplines that are used in conjunction whenever appropriate. These disciplines are philosophy, ethics, psychology, education, sociology, history, religious studies, and philosophy of science and scientific methodology. Among these, philosophy has a connective and integrative function. Based on its humanist approach, all teaching and research at UvH is aimed at fostering the development of a more meaningful and humane existence. For example, the Humanistic Studies-related field of Ethics of Care focuses on the issue of what constitutes good care.

At their core, humanistic education and research at UvH are concerned with developing and interlinking knowledge and values. This search for connection is the humanistic principle behind UvH and the university's main task. By taking on this task, UvH places itself in the humanist tradition in Western culture, both in its intellectual and in its artistic sense.

#### **4. The Socrates Endowed Chair's Position within UvH**

The Socrates endowed chair International Humanism and the Art of Living belongs to the UvH's chair group Humanism & Philosophy (chair: prof. Joachim Duyndam), which closely collaborates with the chair group Research Methodology & Theory of Sciences (chair: prof. Gerty Lensvelt).

The Socrates chair participates both in the education program of the chair group Humanism & Philosophy and in the shared research program of the chair groups Humanism & Philosophy and Research Methodology & Theory of Sciences. The research program can be summarized in its three focus-points: meaning in life, resilience, and ageing well – as follows:

##### *Humanism as a Meaning Frame*

Human beings strive for meaning in life. A meaningful life can be conceptualized as a life in which basic needs for meaning are jointly fulfilled, such as: purpose, moral legitimization, self-worth, competence, comprehensibility, connectedness and excitement. The humanist way of making meaning is characterized by four core convictions: all human beings have human dignity and therefore should treat each other as equals; each and every meaning frame is a product of human culture in a particular context; each human being should develop him or herself, his or her capacities and talents; and ultimately human life is about the destiny of specific, unique, vulnerable and irreplaceable persons, loving and being loved by others and aspiring to a meaningful life.

##### *Humanism and Resilience*

A hypothesis of our research is that the (humanist) experience of a meaningful life is related to people's spiritual, mental and even physical resilience. Our hypothesis says that a humanistic meaning frame – including a worldview, values and acquired virtues – enhances resilience. Resilience is fundamentally connected to the human condition of dependency (rooted in natality) and vulnerability (rooted in mortality). Resilience is taken to mean the – individual and collectively shared – capacity to uphold humanity, i.e. principles of human decency (being humane) or to promote these principles, in thought and action, in oneself and in oth-

ers, when (1) faced with vulnerability or specific adversity; or when (2) under heteronomous pressure from one's culture or group (e.g. consumerism, xenophobia, fashions, media hypes, moods, mimetic desire, etc.)

#### *Humanism and Ageing Well*

As everybody is ageing during one's life course in one way or another, ageing *well* is considered to be an appropriate case to study humanism, meaning in life and resilience. In contemporary Western societies 'ageing' mainly refers to people labeled by society as 'elderly' because of their chronological age or on the basis of biomedical pathological processes. In our research the focus lies on how 'ageing' people continue experiencing and making sense of their lives. These ways of making sense and experiencing life are regarded as existential and socially situated processes, which we can study in view of a meaningful and dignified life course. As life expectancy in Western countries is still increasing the growing number and proportion of 'elderly' persons raises urgent questions on how to age 'best' – of which the meaning ranges from healthy to meaningful.

### **5. The Socrates Endowed Chair's Profile**

In short, the Chair focuses on humanistic art of living from the perspective of both the intellectual and artistic humanist traditions and from a pluralistic international orientation.

The holder of the Chair will fulfil the obvious academic duties of education and publishing in international peer-reviewed journals, supervising PhD students, raising external research funds, making UvH research accessible to the wider public, and representing both the Socrates Foundation and UvH.

The Socrates Foundation and the University of Humanistic Studies are looking for candidates for this chair position, who

- a. hold a PhD in the humanities; and
- b. are either young, talented, and professorable scholars, or renowned scholars with a track record accordingly; and
- c. have an explicit international orientation in humanism, testified by publications and other records; and
- d. are familiar with the field of humanistic art of living, and its cultural and academic resources; and
- e. do not belong yet to the existing UvH faculty; and
- f. are willing to occupy the endowed chair without salary, but with a compensation fee for expenses.