A meaningful life in a just and caring society

Research Program of the University of Humanistic Studies
Adopted by the Executive Board on 17 September 2020

Introduction: our research mission

The University of Humanistic Studies is an independent, government-funded university. Inspired by the worldviews and traditions of humanism. Our research focuses on *public problems with a normative component*, oriented towards building humane societies in which all people can lead meaningful lives. Our *transdisciplinary* approach integrates philosophy, history and the social sciences. Philosophical perspectives inform our conceptual and ethical analyses of public problems; historical study traces how problems emerged and evolved; empirical social scientific research examines how contemporary public problems are framed, understood and acted upon by individuals and institutions. By critically analysing current practices, we seek to contribute to practical improvements that foster meaningful living in a just society.

We typically pursue our research together with stakeholders—clients, students, professionals, managers and others—and seek to improve research methods as well as communication, evaluation and monitoring tools to study public problems with a normative dimension, including research on hard-to-reach populations. Our empirical research often makes use of qualitative or mixed methods. We privilege interpretative approaches including narrative research, shadowing, focus-groups, photo-voice and in-depth interviewing as well as responsive and participative approaches such as action research, participative interviewing and flexible surveys—all tailored to specific populations and their concrete circumstances.

Our research program, outlined below, is built around three themes that animate our mission: humanism, meaningful living and a humane society. Within these perennial themes, we pursue quality transdisciplinary research on contemporary social and scientific challenges.

1. Humanism

For the University of Humanistic Studies, humanism is both an object of study and a frame of meaning. As an object of study, we analyse how humanism—with special attention to Dutch humanism—has developed as a social and intellectual tradition. We study the foundations of humanism, its core concepts and values, its historical manifestations, and its significance for the present and for our common future. Drawing on insights and expertise from philosophy, history, and the social sciences, we critically evaluate humanism and its constituting concepts and ideals.

Humanism as a *frame of meaning* upholds standards for human welfare, human progress, social justice, dignity and relational autonomy for all. Humanism holds that life is shaped by both human agency and by social, political and ecological circumstances. We therefore understand autonomy as relational and relative. We further distinguish between humanism as moral agency and humanism as a moral-political endeavour to contribute to humane institutions.

Humanism as *moral agency* is guided by the key values of liberty, responsibility, human flourishing and openness (or scepticism towards all dogma). All people must enjoy the freedom to choose their own goals in life, to develop themselves and to flourish—a freedom that comes with responsibility for the consequences of one's decisions. We must be open to new knowledge and insights, while rejecting dogmatism that blocks the advancement of knowledge. Humanism welcomes fundamental uncertainty and disagreement over knowledge and values, and thus places great value in scientific methods and argumentation.

Humanism as a *political and social endeavour* is guided by the values of social justice, equality, solidarity, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, human dignity and equal participation in society—values crucial for the creation of just institutions that safeguard moral agency. To enable human flourishing, we need institutions that strive for social justice and give people equal access to knowledge and services. To contribute to personal freedom and responsibility, we need institutions that foster openness and anti-dogmatism, respect for the rule of law and free democratic public debate. To guarantee personal freedom for all, we need institutions that protect this freedom and promote active tolerance and solidarity with members of outgroups and which encourage people to champion the freedoms of others, including the freedoms of people who hold different values and opinions as ourselves. Finally, human flourishing requires possibilities to be full, empowered members of society and local communities.

A key concept in contemporary humanism is *social resilience*, understood as the individual and collective capacity of people to permanently realise dignity and relational autonomy in thinking and acting, with oneself and others, when facing vulnerability, adversity and social pressure. We understand humanism as a moral responsibility to use our freedom to further personal development—our own and that of others—and to shape our world together. Our research program aims to advance our understanding of the complex interplay between the humanist ideal of being an autonomous person, gifted with moral agency, and being part of social, political, cultural and organisational structures. We are conscious of the tensions between these agential and institutional aspects of humanism: personal fulfilment can clash with moral-political aims such as social justice; equality can clash with individual freedom. Our research includes the study of such clashes and concomitant dilemmas.

Challenges to contemporary humanism

We discern three pressing contemporary challenges to humanism. The first concerns globalisation and the concomitant diversity of and confrontation between worldviews. Humanism can be studied as a worldview among other worldviews, but also as a mediator between them. We ask how humanism as a worldview is related to other worldviews: what is the meaning and value of an inclusive humanism that strives for reciprocal respect and dialogue between different worldviews? How can humanism engage in constructive dialogue with different worldviews and traditions such as Islam, Buddhism and animism? What can humanism, with its primarily white roots, learn from Afro-American black humanism? Should humanism join forces with world religions to criticize transhumanism, or should transhumanism be understood (and maybe even welcomed) as a form of humanism?

As a mediator between worldviews, what can humanism with its values of anti-dogmatism and dialogue contribute to respectful exchange in a globalizing world? What visions of a desirable shared future are at stake in dialogues between different (religious and secular) groups? What would a constructive and respectful dialogue between different worldviews—concerning for example human rights and the rights of sexual minorities—look like?

The second challenge concerns criticisms of anthropocentrism in the face of the ecological crisis. Is a non-anthropocentric humanism desirable or even conceivable? And if so, how? Can we (re)interpret humanism and humaneness in ways that acknowledge other animals and plants as equally valuable forms of life? How can we develop an ethics of care that includes other species? New technologies raise new questions. How should humans relate to robots? Do robots and artificial intelligence transform our understanding of what it means to be human? What are the consequences for our understanding of human dignity?

The third challenge concerns social resilience in the face of societal forces that isolate people and pit them against each other. What can individuals and communities do to become more resilient? Can humanism encourage resilience in the face of growing loneliness and isolation, for instance among the elderly? How can social resilience be promoted in the face of growing discrimination, intolerance and anti-democratic tendencies that trample on the key humanist tenets of rationality, logical reasoning, reasonable doubt and self-criticism? What resources are available in humanist traditions for promoting social resilience in the face of adversity?

2. Meaningful living

Our second research theme revolves around *meaningful living* in a just society. By meaningful living we refer to the moral dimension of the good life, distinct from social-psychological constructs such 'well-being', 'quality of life' or 'happiness' that shy away from normative

theories about the good life. Meaningful living in our view necessarily has a moral dimension: it requires active engagement in 'projects of worth' (Wolf 2010: 53).[1]

We seek to understand meaningful living conceptually and theoretically as well as empirically: how people pursue meaning over their life course and how meaning is lost and found through major and minor experiences and through life's transitions. We explore through an empirical ethics of care how meaning in life changes through life events such as pregnancy and birth, ageing, loss and dying. Is there an art to dying? What can meaningful living be at the end of life?

Humanism has traditionally attached great importance to finding meaning in life through the arts and in rituals. In line with this tradition, we explore the relationship between meaningful living and the arts and other aesthetic resources, as well as how rituals for birth and death can contribute to meaningful living.

Our research also focuses on situations in which meaningful living is threatened, including situations of moral distress, moral injury and trauma. We ask how meaning is lost and how it can be regained, and how social resilience plays a role in regaining meaning in life. How can social practices such as civic participation, civic friendships and community building, organised or informal encounters, contribute to meaningful living? To what extent does a good, meaningful life presuppose participation and engagement in society? We strive to understand and strengthen the contributions of (humanistic) chaplaincy and other healthcare practices to find meaning in life for individuals, groups and communities.

Challenges to meaningful living

Our research focuses on three major contemporary challenges to meaningful living. First, rising life expectancy in the affluent world is raising questions about meaning in old age. While more and more people continue living for many years in relative health following retirement, they also often have to contend with loss—of their social roles, of loved ones, of their health, of control over decision-making and their own lives. These losses can lead to social isolation, feelings of loneliness and loss of meaning. The pressing question is how to age well and to retain or rediscover meaning in life in the face of these challenges. While academic research and public opinion often equate successful aging with remaining healthy and active, our research adds a humanist perspective to the largely biomedical and sociological debate by focusing on meaningful ageing.

There is a further dimension to meaningful ageing. A growing number of older adults are reporting that their lives are effectively over; without sufficient meaning to continue living, many wish to end their lives. Our research seeks to understand the stories behind such

[1] Wolf, S. (2012). *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

assessments. Are they related to social circumstances? To how our society understands and organises meaningful ageing? Our research aims to contribute to an inclusive society in which older people can continue to meaningfully participate in society for as long as possible.

A second pressing issue concerns rediscovering meaning in life in the wake of social injustice, moral injury, or social trauma. While the past decade has witnessed growing interest in recovery and repair following social injustice, research has largely addressed psychological and legal issues without a focus on meaning. How can colonial wrongs be repaired in a way that grants proper recognition to victims? How can people live meaningful lives after postcolonial trauma? How can people rediscover meaning after experiencing ecocide, war crimes or sexual assault? What is the role of mourning, shame, and guilt in restoring meaning to life? How can communication about traumatic or otherwise far-reaching life experiences be improved? How can narratives and rituals support repair?

A third contemporary challenge concerns constraints on meaningful education due to how schooling is organized. Education can be a significant source of meaning in life and plays a crucial role in children's opportunities to flourish, now and in the future. Yet, how schooling is currently organized—with an emphasis on testing students and holding teachers accountable for meeting bureaucratic goals—is neither attentive nor conducive to the pedagogical dimensions of education. What does meaningful education entail? Where do pupils find meaning in life? Does it include (the well-being of) others, fulfilling civic roles and engagement in society? Do teachers believe they can contribute to students' possibilities to lead meaningful lives? How do teachers perceive their pedagogical roles?

A similar challenge to meaning in life is at stake in other public service organizations, in for example (health) care, welfare, social support, and prisons, where questions of meaning in life have been marginalized by bureaucratization, marketization and growing workloads. This in turn has undermined finding meaning in work for many professionals. How can we place questions of meaning back on the agenda? Chaplains working in public services are well-placed for this task. How they do so—and how their work could be rendered more effective—is an urgent question in our research.

3. A just and caring society

Our third research theme addresses issues surrounding the creation of a socially just and caring society. We approach social justice through the lenses of redistribution, recognition and representation. *Redistribution* concerns the fair distribution of, and equal access to, goods and services. *Recognition* concerns being seen and treated as full citizens with equal rights, deserving of dignity, respect and social inclusion. *Representation* involves having a voice and being listened to. We understand *care* as the response to the acknowledgement of vulnerability in human life, and *caring* as an organised institutional and professional activity that involves ways of addressing this vulnerability.

Combining the ideals of care and social justice, we seek to advance knowledge about how best to promote caring, quality public services that contribute to social justice. We do so in three ways. The first strand of research is conceptual: the historical and philosophical study of how understandings of care and social justice have changed over time. How does recognition relate to human dignity? How have conceptualisations of recognition evolved over time? What can an ethics of care mean for understanding sustainability and democracy?

The second strand of research addresses the role of institutions and public organisations in promoting a just and caring society. How do our institutions and organisations contribute to and/or undermine social justice? How can (humanist) chaplains contribute to more humane interactions within public organisations? We pursue both social scientific and empirical ethics research on how ideals of (humane) public services work out in practice.

The third strand of research focuses on the role of public professionals in promoting a just and caring society. In contrast to most social scientific studies of professionals and their interactions with the public, we privilege the moral dimension. How can professionals contribute to a just and caring society? What does ethical professionalism entail? How can it best be promoted? We empirically study the ideals and practices of professionals working in public services including in healthcare, long-term care, welfare, social work, public administration and (humanist) spiritual chaplaincy. We study how professionals cope with conflicting values and discourses, moral dilemmas and moral injury.

Challenges to a just and caring society

Our research focuses on two obstacles to achieving a just and caring society. The first is how to best respond to the deepening divides between groups in society: between the rich and poor, between the formally more and less educated, between the securely and precariously employed or unemployed, between young and old, between the healthy and sick or disabled, and between people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. As social inequality has risen over the past decades, contacts between unequally positioned social groups have withered. How do people experience these pervasive inequalities? What supports or hinders people in regaining dignity? What does ethnic and religious diversity imply for professionals in public organisations? How can teachers prepare children for a multicultural society? Can (humanist) chaplains play a bridging role? If so, how can this role be researched, evaluated and nurtured?

People from different walks of life hardly share social space anymore. They increasingly live in their own bubbles—in separate neighbourhoods, attending separate schools, being informed by different media. Membership in institutions that previously provided opportunities for contact between different groups—so-called 'bridging social capital'—such as churches, political parties and trade unions has plummeted. Do we witness new, emergent forms of

bridging social capital and solidarity? Can public professionals play a role? Can humanist chaplaincy be developed to promote understanding and dialogue across groups in contemporary society? And if so, how?

A second challenge concerns the future of public organizing in the post-neoliberal era. Public services over the past three decades were organised around the principles of marketization, output-steering, retrenchment and 'personal responsibility'—often lumped together under the banner of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism in turn was based on an image of humans as self-interested, competitive, independence-seeking and motivated by (financial) incentives. In education, neoliberalism has consigned pedagogical concerns to the backseat.

Criticisms of neoliberal theory and practice—of seeing humans as primarily competitive, money-driven and self-reliant—have prompted demands for alternatives more in line with a view of humans as cooperative, community-seeking and moved by aspirations and ideals. What this means for how we organise the promotion of social justice is an urgent question in our research. What might post-neoliberal ideals of professionalism and citizenship look like? Can an ethics of care offer a compelling alternative? How can we develop moral deliberation within multidisciplinary healthcare teams? Or strengthen the pedagogical dimension of education? What strategies and methods would strengthen moral competence and development? What kind of citizenship education could we all support despite our different worldviews?

We also study practices that aim to promote civic engagement and citizen participation in society—from local governments promoting participatory democracy to care organisations promoting societal participation and the social inclusion of people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. In contrast to much research in this field, the moral dimension that underpins our research informs normative questions such as on the conditions under which participation can contribute to a just and caring society. How does the pursuit of (conflicting) ideals of citizenship in guidelines such as the United Nations' declaration on social inclusion for people with disabilities contribute to a just and caring society?