

How can we start humanising the world?

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Introduction

My book '[Humanise: how knowing ourselves can change the world](#)' sets out the latest evidence as to how human beings think and behave, and considers how we can use this knowledge to address some of the challenges we face as a species, including prejudice, the obesity crisis and climate change, as well as to build a better future more generally. It shows that much of our thinking and behaviour is determined by the situations and environments that surround us, so we need to build structures in society that help us flourish – in other words, we need to humanise the world. [Click here](#) for a summary of some of the book's key arguments.

Since writing the book, a number of questions have arisen during my public talks and discussions about it, and significant political and cultural changes have occurred in the world that make the book's insights and recommendations more important and urgent. The aim of this paper is therefore to briefly explore some of these points, and in particular the most pressing question - how can we start to humanise the world?

Although the recommendations made in the book on how to humanise our world are explicitly a thought experiment, the picture it paints of a better future in which people can flourish has proved very attractive to the audiences I've discussed it with, and the practical question often comes up of how we can move towards such a future, and implement some of the book's recommendations.

This is a question of particular relevance and urgency in the political and cultural times we live in globally, in which many aspects of the world appear to have quickly lurched in the opposite direction recommended by the book since its publication. These include the rise of populism, conflict, prejudice, environmental destruction and, overall, the dismantling of existing protective structures around human beings (such as the US pulling out of the Paris climate agreement) rather than the building of further structures to promote our flourishing.

What can we do?

So, how can we use our knowledge of human beings to make a humanised society actually happen - to get from where we are to where we want to be?

1. Realise that we have a powerful resource on our side

The first thing we should realise is that we have a powerful asset in our knowledge of how human beings actually think and behave. So, we should use this insight in evaluating the situation we find ourselves in and how we can move forward from it.

For example, we can take hope from the knowledge, as the book points out, that human beings are neither good nor bad but have the potential to be both these things - and the traits that are activated in us are dependent on our context, from our experience in the womb to the institutions that surround us through to the situations we find ourselves in during our lives. Our aim as a species therefore needs to be to build a positive context for human beings to live in - one that activates our useful traits such as our capacity for cooperation, rather than a context that neglects to support and protect us or activates our less useful traits such as negative tribalism.

Another powerful piece of knowledge is that human behaviour is to a significant extent determined by the structures and situations around us, which means you can predict the likely effect of particular policies, structures and situations on people and their thinking and behaviour - both in the present and into the future. We can also make a reasonable (although of course, not completely accurate) prediction of people's likely behaviour from the nature of the structures and situations that have surrounded them up to this point and in the present.

For example, we can see some of the behavioural drivers behind periods in history where progress was made in humanising the world, such as at the end of the Second World War, where there was:

- An urgent need to rebuild societies and a sense of need amongst populations - leading people to be more open to radical progressive ideas
- A sense of unity and equality within nations after rich and poor fought together and felt themselves to be one tribe and of equal value - again, opening up greater support for more social welfare initiatives, such as the National Health Service
- An awareness of the cost of war among all nations and a desire not to fight again - leading to a willingness to build and strengthen international institutions such as the United Nations.

We can also see how these humanising structures and ideas have weakened over the years as other structures and ideas have become more dominant, such as the doctrine of neoliberalism, which has helped to promote individualism and erode the welfare state.

2. Use human insight to understand the current situation and its challenges

We can apply behavioural insight to understand where we are at politically and culturally in the present, and how this is affecting the structures

around us. This, in turn, helps us understand the scale of our challenge to humanise the world and what we need to do to achieve it.

For example, in the US, in the early months of Trump's second presidency, his administration has been gathering data from various national agencies in order to influence and control people. It is also seeking to either eliminate some of the (already inadequate) structures and scaffolding that surround people, both in the US (such as removing policies that promote equality and diversity) and internationally (such as withdrawing from the Paris climate accords or defunding the US Aid agency). At the same time, it is establishing new structures and communication norms and practices that activate negative thinking and behaviours in people, such as activating negative tribal tendencies through prejudiced, aggressive and stereotypical framing of immigrants and other nations.

Aside from identifying these changes, our human insight helps us understand that these modern far-right populists have an easier task to influence people than those seeking a more humanised world, as they are appealing to people's automatic, judgemental, system 1 instincts - encouraging people to take positions that require the least cognitive effort. It's therefore important to note that we have a harder task than they do, as we are aiming to build structures that help people use more considered System 2 thinking, and overcome automatic traits and biases such as seeing out-groups in a negative light.

3. Have hope - and make the most of our opportunities to change things

The point above suggests we are living at a time where the tide seems to be running against the ideas in the book. But by applying human insight, we can see that there are actually opportunities, both now and in the future, to gain leverage with the idea of humanising the world.

First, the world is polarised in its political ideas, and although right wing authoritarian parties are becoming more powerful, they are also incredibly divisive, and at least half of the population is vehemently against them and looking for alternative solutions - and humanising the world could play a role in these alternatives.

Second, using our insights on the effect of structures on human thinking and behaviour, we can see that the policies of hard right-wing conservatives such as Trump in the US will ultimately bring greater misery and a more hostile living environment for the citizens in their countries, and will unfortunately have the greatest negative consequences for the groups who voted most enthusiastically for these parties, including those with lower incomes and more precarious lives.

Just as one example among many, as the book shows, human beings need greater equality of resources in order to flourish, so by weakening the already inadequate safety net of social support in the US and introducing policies to benefit the rich and increase inequality even further, the Republican party is sowing the seeds for greater misery, discontent and division. As the impact of these policies bites and former Republican voters become more disenchanted with the reality, this leaves an opportunity for a radical alternative vision to be presented to them. And this vision, of humanising the world, can be shown to have the backing of psychological evidence in its favour.

It is therefore critical that we make the most of any opportunities to present this alternative vision of how to seek a better future, in which human beings can flourish within the natural world we are part of.

4. Support parties, groups and policies that seek to defend and build positive structures

One important step we can all take is to support political parties and organisations that are working against the tendency to trash structures, and are attempting to build structures and policies that contribute to humanising the world - like the Green Party. When you see other parties and organisations pursuing policies that are advocating the dismantling of support structures around people, tell them why you are withdrawing your support from them. And tell all parties why you want to support organisations that are humanising the world, and what this means for the policies you want to see - from reducing inequality to improving our information environment.

At the same time, support journalism, authors, academics and institutions that are trying to expose the dismantling of structures by politicians and other organisations, and that are advocating for a more humanised world. Examples of these can be found in mainstream media, including Carole Cadwalladr, George Monbiot, [Chris van Tulleken](#) and others. Prominent academics include Timothy Snyder, Sander van den Linden and [Steven Levitsky](#).

Support charities, institution campaign groups that are establishing, and campaigning for, more humanised structures in society. These cover a massive range of issues, including media literacy (e.g. [MediaSmarts](#)), reducing economic inequality (e.g. [New Economics Foundation](#)) and climate change (e.g. [Climate Outreach](#)).

5. See yourself as a structure - and humanise the world

It is in your control to humanise some important parts of the world.

First, you are a structure that influences other people's thinking and behaviour. This might be as a parent, friend, family member, work colleague, boss, or user of social media. Seeing ourselves like this can be a powerful way to see the significant potential you have to change the world, even if large-scale change seems to be distant. One critical step you can take is therefore to live and behave in a manner that aligns with your goal of humanising the world, as this will influence others.

The groups and organisations you are part of (from your workplace to leisure clubs) are also structures that you can influence to become more humanised. This could cover every area of their operation, including their business practices, HR policies, workplace culture and how they advertise and communicate with the outside world. By helping your organisation to become more humanised, you could have a significant positive impact on the world that could affect many thousands of people.

6. Build a movement to humanise the world - take action yourself

Do your bit to spread the word about the need to humanise the world. Help people to understand how human beings really think and behave, and the importance of having structures around us that protect and promote our flourishing. Tell people about [the book](#). Spread these ideas and promote these values, and live them in your life.

Feel the urgency of this issue - and see it as the most meaningful way you can take action to make the world better.

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