

Marriage Equality and Humanism

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
1: What is Humanism?.....	1
2: The issue: Marriage Equality.....	3
3: Humanism and Marriage Equality	3
4: Possible Objections Considered and rejected	4
Conclusion.....	5
Notes.....	6

Executive Summary

Marriage equality refers to a situation where same sex couples have the same legal right to marry as opposite sex couples, and the resulting marriages have equal legal standing and status. In recent years there have been campaigns in Australia, and elsewhere, for marriage equality. Some western countries have recently seen law changes leading to marriage equality, but not Australia at this stage.

One of the key animating ideas of Humanism is support for the fullest possible realisation of each person's potential consistent with others having similar opportunities, and basic respect for the dignity of all people.

One very important part of self-realisation, for many people, is realising themselves in loving relationships with others. Marriage equality increases the range of couples who can include a loving marriage with another person as part of their path to realisation and fulfilment in life. Marriage equality also involves increasing respect for the dignity of all people by increasing the range of relationships that can lead to marriage. These are both crucial reasons for humanists to support marriage equality.

Humanism supports marriage equality as part of realising the goals of human fulfilment and respect for the basic dignity of all human beings.

1: What is Humanism?

Humanism is, in essence, the belief that our best option to find meaning in an intrinsically meaningless universe is to rely on exploring our human potential for such things as love, compassion and reason to develop a positive vision of meaning, ethics, community and the good life.

It is not a fixed set of rules or values but an acknowledgement that the foundation of our values is human sourced, and an attempt to work positively with that. The key humanist message is that love comes from the human heart, not God, the nation, or anywhere else.

Humanism builds on the human potential to find and establish values. Human fulfilment, understood as including our social potential (e.g. love sympathy etc.), is a key value of Humanism. It is a value in terms of providing a goal for an individual; to realise the best in her or himself. It is a value in terms of society; to be used as a guide for assessing social conditions and policies; do they maximise the chance of all people for fulfilment and self-realisation.

The Amsterdam Declaration 2002ⁱ, the main guiding statement of principles of the contemporary humanist movement says in part:

"..Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual..." (Clause 1)

"...Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right..." (Clause 3)

"...Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living..." (Clause 7)

The human social potential, the conscience, the reflective human mind, is the key source of humanist ethics and ideas. Respect for the basic dignity of each individual human being, as both a source of meaning and as a person deserving of respect in their own right, is intrinsic to humanism. That is why the Amsterdam Declaration starts off with an affirmation of the "worth dignity and autonomy "of the individual.

This is also a key way of separating humanism, as a foundation for values, from other approaches, such as religion, as foundations for values. The humanist foundation is immanent to humanity, not separate to it. Humanism does not depend on external sources to humanity, such as Gods or "pure" reason, to justify values. Humanism is intrinsically at odds with approaches to meaning that source values in something "higher' than humanity, such as God or reason, and which can then run the risk of subordinating humanity to the so called needs of those higher values.

As Humanism relies on guiding values rather than fixed rules it is non dogmatic and humanists use reason and evidence to analyse guiding principles such as love, compassion and human fulfilment to develop better ideas and policies for whatever historical epoch an individual humanist lives in. For instance, as we increase our understanding of others our sense of empathy and compassion for others may be extended beyond the confines of our family and tribe to members of other nations, to all of humanity, non-human creatures and biotic systems, and even further. In this way humanism's ideals underpin a developing approach to living a fulfilling and ethical life as a human being.

As religion declines in our society the need to establish alternative paths to meaning becomes more acute. Not just revived religion, but other ideologies such as nationalism threaten to become the new anchors of meaning in our society. Humanism offers the best and most evidence based approach to developing, meaning and ethics in life. The evidence that love and compassion come from our human potential is far stronger than the (non-existent) evidence that they come from a supernatural being or that they should be limited to a particular national or ideological group of human beings.

In this way Humanism is not so much a reaction against religion but a profound path to meaning, ethics and community in its own right. It is the path that humans actually have to find meaning and value in life.

2: The issue: Marriage Equality

Marriage equality refers to a situation where same sex couples have the same legal right to marry as opposite sex couples, and the resultant marriages have equal legal standing and status.

Traditionally marriage has been seen as between a man and a woman only. Marriage equality campaigners want to expand the legal definition of marriage to encompass one consistent with marriage equality. Such a situation is also often described as same sex marriage or “gay” marriage.

In recent years several countries in the western world have adopted a marriage equality approach. Some well-known examples include in the USA, where the Supreme Court held that State level restrictions on same sex marriage were unconstitutional, and in Ireland, through a referendum to amend the constitution.

There has been a campaign for marriage equality for several years in Australia now. The general arguments for marriage equality include; treating everyone equally, showing respect for same sex couples, and allowing people to express their love.

The arguments against include that it changes the traditional definition of marriage and that marriage is for procreation only.

3: Humanism and Marriage Equality

Humanist values such as human fulfilment, love, and compassion all lead to support for marriage equality.

Human fulfilment

Human fulfilment, or self-realisation, supports people being able to realise as much of, and as many of, their best potentialities as is possible. For many people a key such potentiality is the capacity to form a close and loving relationship with another human being. Such relationships can take a number of forms, and marriage is one of the more popular forms. For many people seeking happiness and fulfilment through a marriage is a crucial part of the path to fulfilmentⁱⁱ. It follows that supporting human fulfilment means supporting the right to marry for all (adults).

From a human fulfilment point of view there is no reason to say a person can only realise their loving potential in a relationship with someone of the opposite sex. The fact that there are fulfilling relationships between same sex lovers shows that. The human fulfilment argument for marriage is just as strong and logical for same sex marriage as for different sex marriage. Either type of marriage should hopefully be part of the path to fulfilment for the partners involved. Disqualifying same sex couples from marrying simply reduces the range of possibilities for human fulfilment through marriage. It means there is a class of people blocked from this particular, and popular, path to fulfilment.

Humanism should lead to support marriage equality as part of the humanist project of supporting human fulfilment.

Respect for human dignity

Respect for human dignity requires that, in general, where a right or option is seen as worthy of a human being it should be made equally available to all human beings. If it is not the implication is that the human beings denied the right or option are somehow less worthy; in other words being treated with less dignity, than other human beings. There are some exceptions to this where it is

simply impossible to extend a right or option to all human beings. For instance the option of becoming pregnant cannot be extended to all human beings. But, apart from such impossible or extraordinarily difficult extensions, to deny a human being a right or option available to others is to treat that human being with less respect and dignity than other human beings.

In the case under discussion, marriage equality, there is no doubt that it is possible for people of the same sex to form a loving couple, and to want to solemnise and celebrate their relationship by being married. There is nothing inherently impossible about same sex couples being married.

Again the argument is straightforward; to deny same sex couples the institution of marriage is to treat them as having less inherent dignity than those couples “worthy” of having their relationship confirmed by marriage.

Respect for human dignity also leads to the conclusion that marriage equality should be supported.

Compassion, empathy and love

As discussed in the summary of humanism such social capacities as compassion, empathy and love can be guides to developing humanist care for others. Now that Australia has had several decades of legalised same sex relationships it is clear that there can be loving and fulfilling relationships between people of the same sex. This makes it easier to realise (from the point of view of people who are different sex attracted) that same sex couples are our fellow human beings and deserve as much love and support in their aspirations as anyone else.

It is not so much that all same sex couples want to be married, or that all opposite sex couples have happy and successful marriages. But that marriage is a respectable option our society offers to some people, but not to same sex couples. There appears no reason to deny that option to same sex couples, and, the more we consider same sex couples and realise they are human beings, with all their strengths, flaws and imperfections, just like everybody else, the denial of marriage equality appears more and more unjustifiable.

Section Conclusion:

It is clear that humanism, as an approach to life, not only agrees with but inspires support for marriage equality. Supporting marriage equality is part of the humanist project of supporting the building of societies which respect the dignity of all human beings and which have policies which maximise each individual human beings potential to achieve a high degree of self-realisation. Humanism is not a critique of religion but an approach to meaning in its own right. Humanist values support marriage equality. Supporting marriage equality is not about tearing down values but acting on the basis of values; humanist values.

4: Possible Objections Considered and rejected

This paper is about the humanist approach to marriage equality. So it will not consider objections along the lines of God is against marriage equality as that would turn the argument into a religion v. atheist argument. However not all objections to marriage equality rely on the claim of an unseeable God. Some of these objections are considered, and refuted, below.

4. A: Change to traditional approach

Marriage equality would indeed be a change to the traditional approach to marriage in Australia. But this is not an argument against marriage equality, it is simply a historical fact. All great social reforms involve changes to a tradition. The abolition of slavery, the abolition of child labour, the legalisation of homosexuality; all involved changes to well established practices. The fact that marriage equality

would change a situation that has lasted for a long time does not of itself constitute a persuasive argument against making that change

4. B: Not for procreation

This argument holds that the purpose of marriage is procreation and that same sex couples cannot procreate so they should not be allowed to marry. This argument has two devastating weaknesses.

Firstly there are many existing marriages (of opposite sex couples) which involve childless couples. Such marriages are not seen as invalid because the partners are childless. The primary social characteristics of marriage in Australia today are the loving commitment of the partners and the necessary legal ceremony. The contemporary legal and social definition of marriage does not include that it is invalid if the partners to the marriage do not have children.

Secondly same sex couples can in fact provide parenting and bring up children, whether through adoption, artificial insemination, or by other legal means. There are already many examples of same sex couples bringing up children. If anything the “bringing up children” argument simply compounds the argument for marriage equality by emphasising the inequality that same sex couple parents cannot be married at the moment while opposite sex parents can be. The current situation strikes not just at the dignity of individuals, but of families with same sex parents.

The procreation argument fails to establish any credible objections to marriage equality.

4. C: People will lose their religious freedom.

There is no proposal to abolish opposite sex marriage or to compel people who do not like the idea of marriage equality to be parties to a same sex marriage themselves! While some religious people may dislike marriage equality; bringing in marriage equality does not deny their freedom not to engage in same sex marriage themselves any more than the eating of pork by a non-Jew denies the religious freedom of an observant Jew to not eat pork.

Religious freedom involves ensuring people are free to believe in their religion, and practice it to the extent that that practice falls legally within the framework of existing laws. Religious freedom does not mean ensuring religious believers can stop others from engaging in conduct, such as marriage equality, which their religion frowns upon. That is religious domination; theocracy, not religious freedom.

There is nothing about marriage equality which makes it intrinsically opposed to religious freedom. In the absence of a coherent argument showing a connection between marriage equality and attempts to limit religious freedom there is no objection to address here.

Conclusion

Humanism is an approach to life which uses guiding foundation values such as human dignity and fulfilment to work out approaches to issues. It is clear that humanist ideas justify support for marriage equality. Supporting marriage equality is part of the humanist project of creating societies which respect the dignity of all human beings and have policies which maximise each individual human beings potential to achieve a high degree of self-realisation. Humanism is not a critique of religion but an approach to meaning in its own right, and its values support marriage equality. Supporting marriage equality is not about tearing down values but acting on the basis of values, such as humanist values, to build a better world.

Notes

ⁱ The full text of the Amsterdam Declaration can be found at <http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

ⁱⁱ This does not mean that Humanism claims that being married, or even being in a relationship, is the major or only path to fulfilment for all people. There are many paths to fulfilment, and there are people who focus on other paths to fulfilment. It is just that this paper is about marriage and fulfilment, not about all the possible ways to live a fulfilling life.