closely related to German), his words, and more importantly their meaning, came to life.

Meijer highlights how easy it can be to succumb to self-blame and self-criticism when struggling with mental illness, but she emphasises the importance of recognising that depression is not your fault. She talks a lot in the book about knowing herself, recognising the looming shadow of depression, and the significance of self-care and self-compassion in these moments. She emphasises the importance of finding ways to care for oneself, whether through therapy, medication or other forms of support. Running, going outside, bracketing her thoughts and staying on the journey are essential aspects of her self-care. She also acknowledges that the process is non-linear and that certain days may be simply wasted:

> *Sometimes it's twilight, then I'm under a shadow or a soft black layer, as if a wash of watercolour has been painted across me and everything else. I'm not standing in the light then, nor in the darkness; I can see both. I know it could be better than this, but something's wrong and I have to stay alert. I also know it could be far worse: I can still think, make plans, move.*
>
> (pp55-56)

On a personal level, I loved the book. The moving and lyrical language, and the exploration of the unexpressed brought me solace during difficult months. As a psychotherapist, I consider it a valuable resource that explores the power and limitations of communication. Its intimate portrait of depression and the difficulties faced by those who live it benefits my work with depressed clients. This may help them feel heard and understood, and perhaps reduce their sense of isolation. I also found it useful for clients who are looking to deepen their understanding of depression. Despite its profound insights, the book is accessible and not intellectually demanding. It is concise at one-hundred and twenty pages and is far from a waste of time.

Ondine Smulders

Humanly Possible: Seven hundred years of humanist freethinking, enquiry and hope

Sarah Bakewell, 2023. UK: Penguin Random House.

I chose to review this book partly because I have enjoyed Sarah Bakewell's earlier books but also because I could not say for sure what humanism is, and since we say existential therapy fits into humanist philosophy it seemed time to find out.

I have asked friends what they think it is and got responses about it being a nebulous concept, too idealistic or simply 'no idea'. A therapist

colleague admitted, like me, to not having thought deeply about it and suggested it is "a way of thinking about us lot, putting humans/humanity at the heart of the thinking".

Bakewell sets herself a considerable challenge, drawing on ideas from different countries, cultures and traditions through a history of seven centuries to arrive at a current understanding. The 2002 Amsterdam Declaration of Humanists International attempts to provide a summary but compromise has created something rather bland and unsatisfactory. Read it and you will see what I mean. It does not set your heart racing but then that is the humanist way.

Bakewell, on the other hand, tells a fascinating story with many engaging anecdotes and tidbits along the way. Setting the scene, she identifies three common principles: Freethinking, Enquiry and Hope. Freethinking means living by your own moral conscience rather than by reference to authority. She considers Enquiry because humanists believe in study, education and critical thinking, evaluating any text or source considered as beyond question. Finally, Hope is the belief that it is possible to achieve worthwhile things during our lives and to live as happily and fulfilled as we can and not be constrained, despairing or fearful.

She describes a colourful and extensive cast of characters who have lived these principles in various ways and how they have developed humanism to accommodate new ideas in response to significant events and discoveries. They include manuscript hunters, explorers, printers, collectors, writers, philosophers and scientists.

While acknowledging humanistic thought's deep history and touching briefly on Protagoras' statement "Man is the measure of all things" (as my colleague suggested) as an important reference point, she begins her exploration in Early Renaissance Italy with Petrarch (1304-1374) whose life and challenges were typical of his time for an aspiring humanist. There were few books available for study and inspiration, so each person had to find and develop a network of fellow book-finders. Travelling far and wide, they borrowed, copied and (mostly but sometimes years later) returned originals. They saw themselves as retrieving lost knowledge to pass on to future generations and in the process achieved impressive collections and learning despite the perils involved. They were inspired by the ancients, particularly Cicero for his intellectual scepticism, eloquence and wisdom, while seeing themselves as living in a time of dark forgetfulness.

Another challenge was that few in Italy then knew Greek so although they collected copies of Greek manuscripts these mostly sat on shelves as treasured objects unless they could find someone to translate. Hence the saying 'It's all Greek to me' where a copyist came across some Greek in a Latin text. Some Greek authors were available in Latin but had come

via Arabic with mistranslations that had to wait for future generations to unravel.

Petrach's life and views were hugely impacted by the devastating bubonic plague which swept across Europe. He lost his son and many friends and concluded "Fortune will always let us down. A better plan is to turn to the comforts of study, reflection, and friendship" (p53). He was a great letter writer including ones to the dead Cicero, signing himself off as "from the land of the living". With an eye to the future, he also wrote one "to Posterity".

Printing arrived in Europe in the fifteenth century, initially to print thousands of indulgences. Gutenberg printed the first major European book, the Bible. Aldus Manutius, who had had a humanist education, became a virtuoso of printing style with one hundred and fifty presses at work in Venice, Italy. His printshop became a magnet for humanist scholars living there as a commune while working on translating, editing and weeding out errors in previous copying and translations. Among them, in 1507, was Desiderius Erasmus.

Disappointed and scarred by his brutal and rigid schooling, Erasmus proposed education should train a person to be at home in the world, in tune with fellow humans, able to live peaceably and enjoy an intellectually satisfying life. A devout Christian, he focused on living wisely and well in this world. He had a strong aversion to cruelty and intimidation at a time when these were rife in the religious wars raging across Europe and Britain, yet he was a great friend and correspondent of Thomas Moore, an enthusiastic burner of heretics. He has been criticised for not realising how many people are attracted to violence and fanaticism and yearn for something to fight about. But his legacy lives on in the ERASMUS programme, which honours his quest for peace, educational innovation, knowledge sharing, free movement and "friendship among many" (p153).

Montaigne (1533-1594), another great humanist, was born three years before Erasmus died. Famous for his essays which express his response to life as it was happening to him, his state of mind, his health and his reflections on life and how to live it, he happily undermines several humanist sacred cows; if he gets bored with a book he flings it aside, he calls Cicero "nothing but wind" (p137). His essays are comforting for their humanity, I particularly liked his thoughts on memory and the impossibility of remembering much of what he has just read, which I encountered in Bakewell's book *How to Live: A life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*. He even mocked Protagoras saying, "like all of us, he could not have achieved any definite measure of himself" (p157). He said he wrote so much about himself because he was an ordinary example of a human being and that "you can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as a life of the richer stuff" (p159). He left no formal school of thought but the next century saw an

explosion of personal essays written in his style; witty, sceptical, digressive, reflective and freethinking.

The devastating 1755 Lisbon earthquakes that killed tens of thousands marked a significant development in humanist ideas. The Black Death of the fourteenth century had been thought to be God's will, maybe punishment for bad behaviour. Voltaire said that we must 'cultivate our garden' instead of accepting what happens and holding a philosophy of despair. He meant that we must take control of our destiny and work to improve things through better reasoning, science and technology so that we may live more bravely and happily. This attitude became known as 'meliorism', making things better ourselves rather than passively submitting to our fate.

The eighteenth century also saw important humanist writers like Thomas Paine, whose landmark book *The Age of Reason* was banned in Britain for blasphemy and perhaps also because he promoted American independence. David Hume was famously a sceptic and atheist at a time when this was dangerous; there were still book burnings and executions. Nevertheless, he got away with it despite his meticulous arguments against mystical happenings like miracles and the dead coming back to life, apparently because he was just so nice. He was also careful to avoid scandal and conflict.

Most of the humanists mentioned so far were only concerned with the lives of white heterosexual men. Enlightenment thinkers started advancing arguments that we are all united in our humanity and should respect and accept difference in others. So humanism expanded to include universality, diversity and moral connection to all. From the late eighteenth century arguments were taking hold against slavery. Female writers and some men started arguing for the rights of women, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor and John Stewart Mill.

Another milestone occurred when Wilhelm von Humboldt was appointed to redesign the Prussian education system based on humanist ideals, to unfold the individual to reach their highest capacity. It did not turn out this way, but his ideas inspired educators around Europe and Britain. This included Matthew Arnold who, alongside working as a schools' inspector, wrote reports on the systems in other countries in an attempt "to improve the level of human unfolding" (p238). Arnold's ideas influenced the founding principles of the BBC – to enlighten and inform as well as entertain and be accessible to all – and the founding of institutions for adult education.

Discoveries emerging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in geology and palaeontology, along with Darwin's Theory of Evolution, were challenging to the 'one-off' creation story. Together with more widespread education and freethinking, this marked the dawn of 'scientific humanism' (p250) to co-exist with 'humanities-humanism' and 'meliorist humanism'. Despite some disagreements over which is more important, they have informed

and enhanced one another and extended the scope of humanism.

Darwin speculated that the general gaze of others had become, during evolution, identified with an all-seeing Deity. He lost his belief but chose to call himself agnostic rather than atheist. Several humanists wanted to keep the best of Christianity, including Thomas Jefferson, a Deist, who removed all the 'supernatural stuff' to create the Jefferson bible which he said retained what was the "most sublime and benevolent code of morals" (p269). There are still today religious humanists, not mentioned by Bakewell who, like Erasmus, focused on "living wisely and well in this world" while viewing scientific discoveries with awe.

Her tenth chapter identifies several 'heroic hopers' such as Ludwik Zamenhof who invented a simple common language, Esperanto, in the hope that it would inspire connection and friendship among people of different cultures and languages. It did not take off but crops up here and there, including a commemorative plaque in Esperanto near Petrarch's home.

Another Bakewell 'hopeful', Bertrand Russell, was born in 1872 and who was still optimistically rebelling when he died in 1970. He was traumatised by World War I, by the descent into barbarism and by friends becoming German-haters. He proclaimed, "this is our world, and it rests with us to make it a heaven or hell" (p290). He supported World War II, saying that Hitler and Nazism had to be stopped and that to take arms against them was the lesser of two evils. He supported the anti-nuclear campaign and after a speech in Hyde Park Corner was convicted of inciting public disobedience. It was 1961 and he was eighty-nine. The judge tried to let him off for a promise of good behaviour, but he would promise no such thing and went to prison.

I think it helps to clarify what humanism is by looking at its opposites, such as Fascism, Nazism, fanaticism, Communism and all belief systems that deny personal freedom of thought and behaviour, and that control through fear.

The humanist project was actively put aside in the Thirties and Forties when Hitler was in power. He launched a totalitarian education programme aimed at producing children incapable of imagining anything beyond nation and race. Classes habituated them to ideas of war. It was much the same in Fascist Italy. The humanist project returned after 1945, inspired by organisations such as UNESCO, its Erasmian founding text stating that as wars begin in human minds, peace must start there too. Notable also was the remarkable survival from the Nazis (by transfer to London in 1933) of the Warburg library filled with works by humanist writers including Petrarch.

There have always been gainsayers to humanist ideals. Thomas Mann was one who said in humanism there is always a weakness; it is too flexible,

too easily stunned, intimidated, ignorant of what is happening 'out there' and too eager to see the other side of any question which isn't helpful when dealing with murderous fanaticism (p312). All true, but as this book makes clear, the ideal of a humanistic way of life has shown impressive staying power in the face of active opposition to its rebellious authority-challenging adherents and ideas. We can hope it will continue to inspire, flourish and evolve despite those who would destroy it in their pursuit of power and control.

Diane Pringle

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Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy

Karen Weixel-Dixon, 2020. London: Routledge.

I have been interested in groups for most of my adult life. Initially through coaching rugby, a challenging and sometimes hostile environment to lead and mould, then as a member of variously themed groups as a psychiatric inpatient. Upon my release I joined a fortnightly men's group where I stayed for several years until I could no longer combine it with my private practice. Last year I joined a quarterly men's workgroup that was recommended by a couple of unrelated friends as a good place. Given my background as a participant in groups, I have long harboured a desire to set up a group work practice, but it is unlikely I will develop this until my commitment to the after-nursery/school situation of my children can change.

I was excited to read this book. It is straightforwardly laid out. A vivid and accurate introduction precedes three parts which have numerous chapters within them: Modern Western Origins, Being and Doing, and Doing and Being. Each chapter has its own reference list that is simple and accurate, and each part ends with a summary and conclusion. As a result, all can be comfortably read as standalone.

The first part is a quick tour in thirty pages through the origins of thought around groups, drawing on Lewin, Bion, Folks, Rogers and Yalom. The section covers a balance of the authors' thoughts and critiques as well as how earlier ideas are positioned and considered today. The Being and Doing part proposes a model of existential phenomenological thinking around group psychotherapy in chapters modelled on the authors' take on important existential givens and themes. It is well-argued, shows a relatedness to previous works and that there is a consistency in Weixel-Dixons thinking. The final part, Doing and Being, is the most instructive and inspiring part