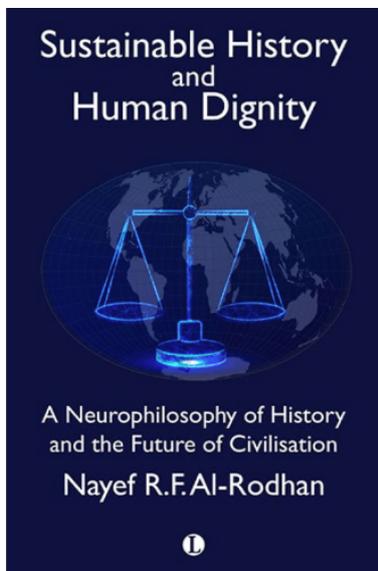


## Recently Published Book Spotlight: Sustainable History and Human Dignity

Nayef Al-Rodhan, Maryellen Stohlman-Vanderveen

August 25, 2023



[Nayef Al-Rodhan](#) is a philosopher, neuroscientist and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow of St. Antony's College at Oxford University, Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Program at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, Senior Research Fellow at the University of London's School of Advanced Study's Institute of Philosophy, Member of the Global Future Councils at the World Economic Forum, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He is a prize-winning scholar who has written twenty-five books and more than three hundred articles. His most recent book, [Sustainable History And Human Dignity: A Neurophilosophy of History and the Future of Civilisation](#), argues that the human quest for sustainable governance has and will continue to profoundly shape the course of human history. In this Recently Published Book Spotlight, Al-Rodhan discusses the influence that the imbalance between fundamental aspects of human nature and dignity needs has on humanity's progress. He also discusses his work's influences, his impetus for writing it, and the impact he hopes it will have.

### **What topics do you discuss in the work, and why do you discuss them?**

At its core, *Sustainable History and Human Dignity* is about the neurophilosophical tug-of-war between our three human nature attributes (emotionality, amorality, and egoism) and our nine human dignity needs (reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation, and inclusiveness). According to my Sustainable History theory, history is steered by good governance paradigms which balance this ever-present tension between human nature attributes and dignity needs. I argue that in our connected and interdependent world, dignity deficits—individual, collective, national, or global—fuel contempt and turbulence. If our dignity needs are met, and are linked to the right conditions, our neurochemically mediated emotions and motivations will promote social cohesion and cooperative behavior, both nationally and internationally; if not, the opposite is likely to happen.

I dedicate a lot of the book to this uneasy balance, because it helps us understand and improve the human condition, as well as nurture the core values around which effective global governance can be built and sustained. In doing so, I hope to present a road map of sorts for a future rooted in collective

prosperity, peace, and security, for all and at all times. I see this as a road map that nudges human history forward and ensures its sustainability by limiting the excesses of human nature through reason and dignity.

### **How is your work relevant to the contemporary world?**

This book, and my work more broadly, applies neuroscientific and philosophical frameworks in a transdisciplinary way, to help tackle a variety of important existential as well as practical questions. These range from “Who are we?” and “What motivates us?” to “How to create a safer world?” and “How should statecraft be conducted?” It is becoming more important than ever that we sharpen the intellectual tools needed to address these existential issues.

As I explain towards the end of my book, we are entering a new era defined by multiple frontier risks such as disruptive technologies and complex geopolitical crises. Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent due to the unprecedented exponential growth of various transformative technologies. As a result, rapid technological advances have rewired the relationship between philosophy and science. To shield humanity against the threats presented by this uncertain future, we need a much closer collaboration between philosophers, scientists, and others. That is why my most recent work has focused on creating transdisciplinary frameworks such as [Neuro-Techno-Philosophy](#), which ropes philosophers, scientists, in particular neuroscientists, AI experts, and others together in the aim of anticipating the societal implications of these impending transformations.

### **What writing practices, methods, or routines do you use, and which have been the most helpful?**

I tend to alternate between two creative methods, depending on the challenge at hand. If I have an idea, or a kernel of an idea, I usually think about it intensely for several days. I let the idea marinate. After a few days, if the idea is still gnawing at me, if it continues to intrigue and challenge me, then I start researching it through multiple disciplinary lenses. I map out existing literature, speak to experts and take a step back before then putting pen to paper. After multiple tweaks and mental gymnastics, I flesh out the idea.

If I am looking for inspiration to solve a particular problem, I start with intense and analytical reading, both in related fields as well as areas that are not immediately connected to the issue. I then synthesize my ideas and reconcile them with what I already know to be true. What follows is an intellectual stress test, of sorts. I probe the idea to see how it fares under deeper scrutiny and evaluate how it can be applied to public discourse and the existing global order. I find both approaches useful and feel that they often complement each other.

### **Why did you feel the need to write this work?**

I wrote this book in the hope of improving, even if in a small way, the well-being and resilience of both present and future generations. With this goal in mind, I set out to pinpoint the prerequisites for lasting improvement in the human condition that would allow us to overcome the greatest obstacles facing humanity. I wanted to offer a new, fresh way of conceiving history, one that draws on cutting-edge research from various disciplines, in particular neuroscience, to plug the gap between the study of our shared history as a human civilization and human dignity. I touched on human dignity earlier, but I cannot stress enough the importance of dignity to our well-being. As mentioned above, my view of dignity is much more than the absence of humiliation, it is also the presence of recognition through the guarantee of nine critical dignity needs. Dignity should be the normative ideal that guides us in our collective efforts to sculpt a sustainable history. By removing the

disciplinary barriers that have traditionally created intellectual silos between history and the natural sciences, I wanted this book to redefine the philosophy of history. On a broader level, I also wanted to breathe new life into dusty debates around concepts such as statecraft, security, and justice. These are concepts that are key to understanding the preconditions for lasting progress.

**Which of your insights or conclusions do you find most exciting?**

Building on my previous work in the neurophilosophical space, this book cemented the idea that sustainable history and, consequently, civilizational success will be attained only if a comprehensive vision of security is adopted, with justice at its core. This book also reinforced my theory that although some of the most powerful driving forces in history are rooted in human nature (without reductionism or determinism), how they shape history largely depends on our immediate environment. In short, our evolutionary history has a profound impact on the present and, as such, is much more relevant to today's world than we might think. Indeed, human nature, through innate predilections, owes a lot to the challenges faced by early humans. This is because each one of us carries the genetic legacy of our ancestors: our emotional amoral egoism. This is truly amazing when you think about it. The key takeaway here is that to truly unleash the best in human behavior we must break away from binary zero-sum paradigms and narrow, short-sighted geopolitical goals, towards multi-sum and symbiotic win-win, non-conflictual competition and absolute gains.

**What effect do you hope your work will have?**

In my book, I point to the history of positive interactions and mutual learning between humanity's different cultures and sub-cultures throughout history. Despite the conflicts that occurred, I want my writing to help us focus on humanity's untapped potential by reminding us of the positive and hopeful moments that take place between global cultures. These historical synergies were especially apparent between Greek and Arab cultures as well as between Arab culture and Europe. The former preserved and advanced critical Greek knowledge while the latter was pivotal in sparking the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. With this in mind, I hope my work will help us understand that in our hyperconnected and deeply interdependent world, all geocultural domains must succeed if humanity as a whole is to triumph. No one must be left behind, no matter how distant or different. If the human species manages to unshackle itself from deeply embedded cultural hierarchies and exploitative paradigms of hegemony, we will be on course to achieve peace, security, and prosperity for all in a sustainable way. I will be happy if my work edges us closer to this reality, even if by a little bit.

**Who has influenced your work the most?**

It is impossible to narrow it down to one individual or movement, there are too many. But I would be remiss if I did not mention my parents. I grew up in a family that instilled in me the love of knowledge and scholarship and the belief that for humanity to triumph, everyone needs to play their part, and everyone must succeed in a symbiotic and collective way. This has always stayed with me. I started my career as an experimental neuroscientist and neurosurgeon, where I developed a deep desire to mitigate human suffering. During this time, I was mentored by the renowned neurologist, Lord John Walton of Detchant. Lord Walton's innovative transdisciplinary approach to medicine, and life more broadly, inspired me greatly. During my academic career in the U.S. at the Mayo Clinic, Yale, and Harvard, Professor Thoralf Sundt Jr., one of the greatest neurosurgeons, had a major and profound influence on me. He was my mentor at the Mayo Clinic. Both he and Lord Walton had impressive intellects, ironclad discipline, and a genuine and deep sense of decency which made them intent on mitigating human suffering. They were both a guiding light for me when, years later, I

shifted my intellectual focus from academic neuroscience and clinical neurosurgery to the interplay between neuroscience, philosophy, history, and international relations.

My interest in philosophy dates back to my childhood: I read a lot of Bertrand Russell, Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, Ibn Rushd, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. In particular, Russell and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) had the most significant influence on my philosophical development. Ibn Rushd inspired my transdisciplinary inclinations. He was a philosopher, physician, judge, and political advisor. He transcended geocultural domains, bridging the gap between Greek and Arabic Philosophy, especially his original commentary on Aristotle, during his distinguished career in Arab-Spain Al-Andalus (Cordoba) during the 12th Century, which played a pivotal role in the development of European philosophy. Russell also had a profound influence on me. He was an intellectual giant and a transdisciplinary thinker, who was also deeply concerned about the human condition and global peace, as am I. These philosophers continue to inspire me to this day, and it was through them that I developed my initial thoughts about human nature, global justice, the dignity of man, transcultural synergies, and the mechanics of a peaceful and prosperous global order. Today, I continue to be inspired by my colleagues at Oxford University, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, the Institute of Philosophy, and the World Economic Forum, as well as The Royal Institute of Philosophy, where we are launching a [prize promoting transdisciplinary philosophy](#). In their own unique ways, they all help me further my mission to build transdisciplinary bridges to promote human, national, economic, and transcultural peace, security, prosperity, and respect for all – the essential prerequisites for collective civilizational triumph.



### **Nayef Al-Rodhan**

[Nayef Al-Rodhan](#) is a Philosopher, Neuroscientist and Geostrategist. He holds an MD and PhD, and was educated and worked at the Mayo Clinic, Yale, and Harvard University in the US. He is an Honorary Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford University, UK, Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Program, Geneva Center for Security Policy, Switzerland, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, School of Advanced Study, University of London, UK, Member of the Global Future Councils at the World Economic Forum, and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA).

In 2014, he was voted as one of the Top 30 most influential Neuroscientists in the world, in 2017, he was named amongst the Top 100 geostrategists in the World, and in 2022, he was named as one of the Top 50 influential researchers whose work could shape 21st-century politics and policy. He is a Prize-winning scholar who has written 25 books and more than 300 articles, including most recently [21st-Century Statecraft: Reconciling Power, Justice And Meta-Geopolitical Interests](#), [Sustainable History And Human Dignity](#), [Emotional Amoral Egoism: A Neurophilosophy Of Human Nature And Motivations](#), and [On Power: Neurophilosophical Foundations And Policy Implications](#). His current research focuses on [transdisciplinarity, neuro-techno-philosophy, and the future of philosophy](#), with a particular emphasis on the interplay between philosophy, neuroscience, strategic culture, applied history, geopolitics, disruptive technologies, Outer Space security, international relations, and global security.



**[Maryellen Stohlman-Vanderveen](#)**

[Maryellen Stohlman-Vanderveen](#) is the APA Blog's Diversity and Inclusion Editor and Research Editor. She graduated from the London School of Economics with an MSc in Philosophy and Public Policy in 2023 and currently works as a Marketing Assistant for a wine start-up in London. Her philosophical research interests include conceptual engineering, normative ethics, the philosophy of technology, and questions related to living a good life.