

# BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

## *EXPLORING HUMANISM*

Originally developed by Robin Grinter and Anna Whitehead for  
Greater Manchester Humanists

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# **EXPLORING HUMANISM**

## **AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

### **Course Overview**

- Session 1      What do Humanists believe?
- Session 2      What are the historical roots of Humanism?
- Session 3      Where do Humanists get their moral values?
- Session 4      How do Humanists handle moral dilemmas?
- Session 5      What is the meaning and purpose of life for Humanists?
- Session 6      What do Humanists do? (Celebrations and Campaigns) and Review of Course (What does Humanism offer the individual and society today?)

# SESSION 1

## WHAT DO HUMANISTS BELIEVE?

<b>SESSION PLAN</b>
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### **A. Introductory brainstorm:**

What do you think Humanism is?

### **B. What do Humanists believe?**

1.1 What makes a Humanist?

### **C. Disbelief in the existence of god(s)**

1.2 The existence of god(s): a spectrum of possibilities

1.3 Reasons for disbelief in god(s)

1.4 Atheists and Agnostics

### **D. Scientific thinking and rational explanation**

1.5 Scientific thinking and rational explanation

### **E. Living the good life**

1.6 Living the good life

### **Support Material**

1.7 The Amsterdam Declaration 2002

1.8 Humanism as a philosophical belief

## 1.1 WHAT MAKES A HUMANIST?

### **What Humanists believe in:**

- Thinking for ourselves
- Using evidence, experience and our reason to understand the world
- Living this one life well, working out meaning and purpose in life for ourselves
- Making ourselves and others as happy as possible
- Reducing unhappiness as far as possible
- Promoting human rights and freedoms
- Living cooperatively with people of other beliefs

### **What Humanists oppose:**

- The idea that you cannot have a meaningful life without belief in god(s)
- The idea that morality derives from religion or god(s)
- Doctrines of belief (religious or not) and indoctrination into them
- Privileges or special laws for religions or religious people
- Discrimination, human rights violations, and oppression

### **What Humanists do not believe in:**

- A god or gods: supernatural beings intervening in the world and taking an interest in human affairs
- Other supernatural beings: ghosts, angels, fairies, goblins etc; and other supernatural forces or events: karma, divine miracles etc.
- An immortal soul and a 'life' after death (in heaven, hell or in a reincarnated form)
- A divine 'plan' or ultimate purpose to the universe

## 1.2 THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A SPECTRUM OF PROBABILITIES

(From Richard Dawkins: 'The God Delusion' pp 50-51. Dawkins notes that there is no way in which anyone can prove or disprove the existence of God, so what matters therefore is whether his existence is probable or not.)

### 1. Strong theist

100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C.J.Jung, 'I do not believe, I know.'

### 2. Very high probability, but short of 100 per cent

De facto theist. 'I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.'

### 3. Higher than 50%, but not very high

Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism. 'I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.'

### 4. Exactly 50 per cent

Completely impartial agnostic. 'God's existence and non-existence are exactly equi-probable.'

### 5. Lower than 50 per cent, but not very low

Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism. 'I do not know whether God exists, but I'm inclined to be sceptical.'

### 6. Very low probability, but short of zero

De facto atheist. 'I cannot know for certain, but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.'

### 7. Strong atheist

'I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung "knows" there is one.'

## Questions to consider

Where do you stand on the spectrum? Why?

## 1.3 REASONS FOR DISBELIEF IN GODS

Those who have thought about and rejected religious belief often give one or more of the following reasons for this. You don't have to agree with all these reasons to be a Humanist – some will probably seem better or more relevant than others – but you may identify with some of them.

- They have considered the questions religions claim to answer and found religious answers unsatisfactory. People don't really *choose* not to believe: they simply *cannot* believe in ideas they find incredible and false, and decide to face reality without what they see as myths or pretence or false comfort.
- The existence of evil and suffering make it impossible to believe in a loving, all-powerful, all-knowing deity, who would allow so much suffering in the world to be caused by nature and people. For Humanists the only problem of suffering is how to reduce it!
- Religions claim things to be true for which there is no supporting evidence, and encourage belief in the unbelievable and in superstition.
- Rigid religious codes of behaviour often stifle our opportunity to think and act rationally and ethically. Ancient religious rules are unhelpful when thinking about new moral issues, where reason and the compassion that comes from empathy are more useful.
- Religious authority has been, and still is, used to justify oppression, discrimination and injustice (for example against women, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people, disabled people, particular races and religious or non-religious groups).
- Organised religions can cause deep divisions between people, communities and nations. Religious differences have been, and still are, a major cause of war, even when some religious leaders preach peace.
- Religious authority is often used to justify a puritanical and pointless repression of pleasure ("Puritanism - the haunting fear that someone somewhere might be happy." - H L Mencken).
- Religious beliefs and authorities often stifle free debate.
- Reliance on prayer and offerings to gods can prevent people seeking more active and effective solutions to their problems.
- Belief in life after death can mean that people have less motivation to fight injustice and misery in this life, and so they endure suffering when they should be fighting it. The idea that there is a 'better life' in a 'better place' devalues this life and this world.

### Questions to consider

Which of these reasons for disbelief do you identify with most strongly? Are there any that you don't agree with?

(NB This section on its own may suggest that disbelief in god(s) is sufficient to define one as a Humanist. Atheism or agnosticism is indeed necessary for Humanists, but it is not sufficient. Humanism is above all an ethical approach to life without a religious basis.)

## 1.4 ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS

Humanists differ in the certainty with which they hold to disbelief in god(s) and in their hostility to religious belief. Sometimes this is a result of their upbringing, and those who have been subjected to religious indoctrination are often the most hostile – as well as the best informed – critics of religion.

Most humanists will be quite happy to use the word 'atheist' to describe their view about god(s), even if they do not want this one aspect to be regarded as definitive of their view of the world.

Others do not like to call themselves atheists because it defines them in terms of what they *don't* believe rather than by what they do believe in.

Some Humanists do not like to call themselves atheists, because they think that the word implies absolute certainty about the non-existence of god(s), though in fact its derivation (a-theism = without god) suggests that it means living without god(s) rather than dogmatic disbelief. They may prefer to call themselves agnostics, which is not quite as vague and non-committal as is generally thought: 'agnosticism' is the term coined by T. H. Huxley to describe the belief that one *cannot* have a certain knowledge about things for which there is no evidence. In practice, agnostics live atheist lives, because they do not live with reference to any god(s).

No Humanists think that religious doctrines are likely to be true, but most uphold and respect the right to believe whatever one likes, as long as it does not infringe the rights and beliefs of others and one does not expect everyone else to agree with one.

### Questions to consider

Are you an atheist or an agnostic? Why? What difference does it make to the way you live your life?



## 1.5 SCIENTIFIC THINKING AND RATIONAL EXPLANATION

'It is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.' *T H Huxley*

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'The whole point about science and the scientific method is that it is a way of distinguishing truth from fiction...blind acceptance of authority is the very antithesis of real science, and...even if the most eminent person tells you that something is true, but the evidence says that it is not, you have to accept the evidence not the authority. All these intriguing and practical ideas, from black holes to digital television, have resulted from the application of scientific integrity and honesty to the study of the world, not from wishful thinking.' *John Gribbin*

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'Science is one of the very few human activities in which errors are systematically criticised and fairly often, in time, corrected.' *Karl Popper*

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'The scientific method (hypothesis – testing by experiment – observation – modified hypothesis – further testing by experiment, and so on) offers us powerful tools for understanding the world.' *British Humanist Association*

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'Life on earth evolved and is still evolving; there is no evidence that it was created by a deity. Most educated religious people in the West today also believe in evolution – but many think that God is somehow guiding it. However there is no need for, and no evidence of, a guide. Natural selection (essentially random genetic variation, combined with the survival and propagation of the individuals best adapted to their environment) can and does occur without a designer, and over billions of years has led to the evolution of complex and intelligent life.' *British Humanist Association*

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### Questions to Consider

Which of these reasons for scientific thinking do you find most convincing?

Is the scientific approach adequate for all human purposes? What are its limitations?

### A Further Question

Does science disprove the existence of God – not at all / possibly / completely?

## 1.6 LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

The following statements are included at this point to emphasise that Humanism is a positive set of beliefs and attitudes. Opponents often dismiss Humanism as a negative – ‘Atheists are united only in what they oppose’ – but it is far more than this. It is a morality – an ethical approach to life – in its own right. This is developed in detail throughout the course.

### Some Humanist statements

‘We develop meaning and purpose in life by identifying an emotionally and intellectually satisfying belief system.’ *James Sidelley*

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‘We should live the fleeting day with passion.’ *Richard Holloway*

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‘We can make our lives worth living with all the more intensity because we know that – like all things – they have a final and irrevocable end.’ *Andrew Copson*

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‘Always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.’ *Immanuel Kant*

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‘Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all.’ *Linus Pauling*

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‘Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishments after you are dead.’ *Kurt Vonnegut*

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‘Happiness is the only good...and the way to be happy is to make others so.’ *Robert Ingersoll*

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### Questions to consider

Which of these statements do you identify with most strongly? Why?

What parts of the Amsterdam Declaration (see 1.7) do you identify with most strongly? Why?

## 1.7 THE AMSTERDAM DECLARATION

This declaration made by the International Humanist and Ethical Union Congress in 2002 is the official defining statement of World Humanism.

"Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself. The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

1. ***Humanism is ethical.*** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
2. ***Humanism is rational.*** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
3. ***Humanism supports democracy and human rights.*** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
4. ***Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.*** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
5. ***Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.*** The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.
6. ***Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination*** and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.
7. ***Humanism is a lifeway aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living*** and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free inquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour."

## 1.8 HUMANISM AS A 'PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEF'

Human rights treaties and law talk of 'religion or belief', where 'belief' means something like 'worldview', 'philosophy of life' or 'lifestance', and it is well established that this includes Humanism, a positive non-religious 'belief'. In a legal ruling in November 2009 the judge gave five tests to determine what would qualify as a 'belief'. He gave Humanism as an example meeting these criteria.

The criteria are:

- The 'belief' must be genuinely held
- It must be a 'belief' and not an opinion or view based on the present state of information available
- It must be a 'belief' as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life
- It must attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance
- It must be worthy of respect in a democratic society, not incompatible with human dignity, and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others

## SESSION 2

### WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF HUMANISM?

#### SESSION PLAN

##### **A. A Humanist historical quiz**

2.1 Contributors to Humanist thinking and action: a quiz

##### **B. Key developments in the history of Humanism**

2.2 The building blocks of Humanism: some key developments in the history of Humanism in the Western world

##### **Support Material**

2.3 Considerations of context

##### **Procedure for this session**

We are asking you to do some homework during the week before this session!

Please attempt the Humanist historical quiz, which is intended for your enjoyment as well as testing your existing knowledge. Please do so before you look at the 'key developments' in 2.2, because you will find the answers there!

For each of the four areas of Humanist thinking and action (which we have called 'building blocks' of Humanism), we will focus during the session on the key person noted below, with the aim of illuminating the area as a whole.

Freedom and secularism – John Stuart Mill

Scientific explanation and use of reason – Charles Darwin

Non-religious morality – Jeremy Bentham

Theory and practice of human rights – Thomas Paine

You are invited before the session to select one other item – from whichever area interests you most – and find out a little about the contribution it makes to the growth of Humanism. We hope you will feel able to share your findings during the session.

If there is anyone or anything that seems to you to be relevant to the area but is not included in the course material, please feel welcome to mention this at an appropriate point in the session. We are trying to cover some 2,500 years of human history, so have had to be selective! Finally, do please ask if you would like clarification of any item included in the survey.

## 2.1 CONTRIBUTORS TO HUMANIST THINKING AND ACTION: A QUIZ

We begin with a historical quiz that asks you to identify key contributions of 20 significant people in the history of Humanism. They are shown in chronological order under each heading. Their contributions are listed in a random order below.

The task is to match the person to their contribution, and so gain an appreciation of the 'building blocks' of Humanism during the last 2,500 years. We have helped by grouping the names under four major areas of Humanist thinking and action that we have called 'building blocks' of Humanism.

### 1. FREEDOM AND SECULARISM

DIDEROT (Fr) .....  
VOLTAIRE (Fr) .....  
T. BRADLAUGH (Br) .....  
J. S. MILL (Br) .....  
G. HOLYOAKE (Br) .....

### 3. NON-RELIGIOUS MORALITY

CONFUCIUS (Ch) .....  
EPICURUS (Gr) .....  
J. BENTHAM (Br) .....  
T. H. HUXLEY (Br) .....

### 2. SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION AND USE OF REASON

SOCRATES (Gr) .....  
COPERNICUS (Pol) .....  
GALILEO (It) .....  
F. BACON (Br) .....  
R. DESCARTES (Fr) .....  
C. DARWIN (Br) .....  
A. EINSTEIN (Ger/US) .....

### 4. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

T. PAINE (Br) .....  
M. WOLLSTONECRAFT (Br) .....  
J. H. HUXLEY (Br) .....  
F. BROCKWAY (Br) .....

1. Utilitarian philosopher: principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'
2. Author of 'The Rights of Man' and 'The Age of Reason'
3. Greek philosopher: find truth by questioning and analysis
4. Author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women'
5. French philosopher: 'Cogito ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am')
6. Compiler of first 'Encyclopaedia'
7. French satirist, radical critic of Church and Bible
8. First Director of UNESCO, first President of the British Humanist Association
9. Founder, with Bertrand Russell, of CND
10. British scientist: originator of the term 'agnostic' - 'Darwin's Bulldog'
11. Greek philosopher of 'ethical hedonism': pursuit of happiness and moderation
12. British political philosopher: writer of 'On Liberty' and 'Utilitarianism'
13. Organiser of Cooperative movement, originator of the term 'secularism'
14. British philosopher arguing for the scientific (inductive) method of thinking
15. Originator in the 15th Century of the 'heliocentric' theory of the solar system
16. Author of 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection'
17. Astronomer: discoverer of Jupiter's moons, confirmation of heliocentric theory
18. Chinese philosopher whose 'Sayings' generated a non-religious ethical tradition
19. British politician who secured the right to be an MP without taking an oath by god
20. Scientist who developed the theories of general and special relativity

## 2.2 THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF HUMANISM:

### SOME KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANISM IN THE WESTERN WORLD

#### Introduction

All aspects of modern life have their roots in the past – sometimes in the very distant past. This is true for all the thinking and action that are thought of as being 'Humanist'. We have picked out four major areas of concern to present day Humanists and tried to trace their roots to see how they have developed during the last 2,500 years.

- **It is not a conventional 'chronological' history** - instead it draws on key developments over the last 2,500 years to help explain the Humanist aspects of the present day in the Western world. As noted, we have identified four key areas, which we have called the 'building blocks' of Humanism. The survey is arranged in chronological order within each area: these can be seen as parallel, linked strands.
- **It is not a global survey** - there have been developments of great significance in other cultures, including Chinese, Indian, African and Arabic thought. This survey only covers Humanism in the Western world.
- **It is not a continuous story** - as you will note in each section, there is an enormous time gap from 'Classical' Athens and the Roman Republic (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE - 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE) to the Renaissance period in Western Europe (late 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries). This intervening period is sometimes referred to as 'The Dark Ages', for which only limited source material is available for study. More importantly for our purposes, this was a time when knowledge in Western Europe was mainly framed by religious doctrine and the authority of the Church. Independent thinking on morality, and on the nature and meaning of life was discouraged and suppressed as heresy and there was persecution of men and women with humanist views.

## **1. Freedom and secularism**

### **'Democratic' thinking and practice in classical Athens and the Roman Republic:**

- Democratic government: in Athens for citizens (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) and for citizens in the Roman Republic (5<sup>th</sup> Century mid-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), but not for women or the large slave population (though there were also anti-slavery movements).
- Free inquiry: questioning to discover truth, the Socratic method of inquiry – thesis/antithesis/synthesis (an initial explanation, rigorous analysis leading to an alternative explanation, resulting in a better but still provisional explanation).
- Independent thinking: on the human situation from Socrates (5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) to Marcus Aurelius (2nd Century CE). Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics.

### **Revival of independent thinking in the European Renaissance (late 13<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries):**

- An explanation of the universe based on observation that removed earth and mankind from the centre and argued that the sun is at the centre instead (Copernicus, 1542).
- Painting and sculpture glorifying the human body based on anatomical research (Michelangelo, Leonardo).
- Study of the classical, pre-Christian writers fosters reflection on the human condition outside of a religious framework.

### **A struggle for freedom of thought and expression:**

- The Inquisition sought to suppress the 'heliocentric' theory and other 'heretical' thinking; trial and conviction of Galileo for heresy (leading to house arrest for the rest of his life).

### **Criticism of corrupt practices in the Church:**

- Luther's belief in salvation for individuals, reading the scriptures in their own languages, Luther's '97 theses' against indulgences (1517)

### **Political revolutions against aristocratic/Church dominated governments in Europe (17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries):**

- End of theory of the 'Divine Right' of Kings to rule in England: civil war, execution of Charles I, establishment of an English Republic under Cromwell (1648-60) and growth of independent communities of Christian radicals with a belief in equality (the 'Diggers' and 'Levellers').



- American and French revolutions (1776-87, 1789-99): overthrow of colonial rule of George III, Declaration of Independence and writing of American Constitution; execution of Louis XIV, Declaration of Rights of Man, setting up of National Assembly.
- Parliamentary reform in UK (1832-1928): three Reform Acts extending male right to vote; universal suffrage in 1928 after campaign for women's right to vote.

### **The Romantic Movement (from c.1800):**

- Celebration of freedom, the beauty of nature (the English 'Lake Poets') and individualism (novelists in all the main European cultures).
- Music: Beethoven – symphonies dedicated to Heroism (3<sup>rd</sup>), Freedom (5<sup>th</sup>) and Joy (9<sup>th</sup>); symphonies exploring nature – Beethoven (6<sup>th</sup>), Mendelssohn, Dvorak, Mahler; songs of Schubert and Mahler.

### **The concept of liberty and freedom:**

- Freedom of choice based on use of reason, and liberty to act for your own welfare and fulfilment as long as it does not harm others (John Stuart Mill - 'On Liberty' 1859).
- Freedom of thought and expression: publications for political freedoms by Richard Carlile (1840s).
- Freedom of belief about religion: 'atheism' and 'secularism' – religion should not interfere in worldly matters (Holyoake 1853), 'agnosticism' (Huxley 1872).
- Nietzsche: 'God is dead': we each create our own morality.

## 2. Scientific explanation and use of reason

### Philosophy exploring the human situation (Athens, 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE):

- 'Man is the measure of all things' (Protagoras)
- Free inquiry: questioning to discover truth (Socrates)
- Exploring human nature and behaviour through: history (Herodotus), tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), comedy (Aristophanes)
- Exploring the nature of matter – the atomist theory, development by chance happenings and necessary laws (Democritus); medicine based on observation and diagnosis (Hippocrates); 'heliocentrism' – sun at centre of things (Aristarchus)

### Development of the scientific method (Europe, 15<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries):

- The scientific method of inductive thinking, establishing laws from observed events (Bacon 1620)
- A explanation of movements in the Universe based on observation: revival of the heliocentric theory (Copernicus 1542)
- Use of the telescope to make observations of planetary motion that proved Copernicus' theory (Galileo 1610)
- Scientific inventions and designs including armoured vehicles, gliders and helicopters (Leonardo da Vinci)
- Explanation of the working of the solar system by mathematical forces of gravity (Newton 1687)

### The 'Age of Enlightenment' (Europe, 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries):

- 'Cogito ergo sum' ('I think therefore I am'): thinking is our essence, reason the only reliable route to knowledge: no divine ends to explain nature: Descartes (1644)
- Collation and publication of human knowledge: 'Encyclopaedists': Diderot (1750-65)
- Philosophical exploration of nature based on reasoning: Locke (1690) and Hume (1740) – 'Enlightenment' is using reason to shed light on areas of ignorance or darkness)
- Skepticism and critiques of religion based on reason: Voltaire (1759); the 'Age of Reason' Paine (1794) (NB both described themselves as 'Deists')
- Ideas of progress and the 'Perfectibility of Man': Godwin (1793)

### Continuing development of scientific investigation and explanation:

- Evolution by natural selection and the survival of the fittest: 'On the Origin of Species': Darwin (1859)
- 'The Descent of Man' – evolution of humans as one species descended from animal predecessors, undermining religious interpretations of human significance: Darwin (1871)
- DNA – evolution at the molecular level: Crick and Watson (1953)

### **3. A non-religious morality**

#### **Independent thinking (Athens, 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE - end of Roman Empire):**

- Happiness and contentment in agreement with nature (Diogenes and the Cynics)
- Modest pleasures avoiding excess, and reciprocity in seeking the happiness of others as well as your own (Epicurus)
- The fulfilment of human potential (Aristotle)
- Wisdom through harmony with the order of the natural world through logical reasoning, and courage to stand for your beliefs (the Stoics: e.g. Zeno and Emperor Marcus Aurelius)

#### **Philosophy and practice based on happiness and well-being:**

- American Declaration of Independence: right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (1776)
- Need for legislation to secure 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number': Jeremy Bentham (1832)
- Morality based on assessment of practical consequences using the pleasure/pain principle: Bentham (1832)
- Pursuit of happiness and higher pleasures – the concept of human dignity: Mill (1859)
- Reforming legislation based on investigation of situations and statistical analysis by Commissions in the spirit of Bentham. Victorian social reform (Factory Acts, Mines Acts, Climbing Boys Act, Health of Town Act etc) leading to the establishment of the welfare state (Lloyd George (1909-11), Beveridge (1940s), Attlee and Bevan (1945-51))
- Contemporary concern with happiness as a purpose for government: Layard (2002)
- Existentialism: reality lies in this world, and in making our own choices in life

## 4. Theory and practice of human rights

### Theories of human rights:

- Locke (1690), Paine 'Rights of Man' (1793), Wollstonecraft 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' as rational beings (1792); American and French Revolutionary Declarations (1776, 1791)

### Putting human rights into practice:

- Abolition of slave trade and slavery in British Empire: (1807, 1833)
- Utopian societies, Robert Owen, the Cooperative Movement: (1844)
- Critique of capitalism and exploitation, communism: Marx (1848, 1861)
- Feminism and women's equality (1792 - present day)
- European Convention on Human Rights (1950)
- Sex Discrimination Act UK (1975)
- Race Relations Act UK (1976) and Race Relations Amendment Act (2000)
- Human Rights Act UK (1998)
- Disability Discrimination Act UK (2005)

### Humanism and peace:

- Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: Russell, Fenner Brockway (1958 to present day)
- Humanism and the United Nations: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1947), Julian Huxley, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (1945 - present day)

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### Questions to consider

Which of the four 'building blocks' do you find most helpful in appreciating what 'Humanism' is?

Take a look on [www.humanism.org.uk/humanism](http://www.humanism.org.uk/humanism) at the pages dealing with the 'humanist tradition': which figures particularly inspire you?

## 2.3 CONSIDERATIONS OF CONTEXT

### 1. A story of struggle in dangerous circumstances at personal cost

Copernicus' fear for his life if he published his theory in his lifetime, and Galileo's trial and imprisonment when he did take this risk are highlighted, but it is worth noting that many other independent thinkers and activists were also punished. There will have been some who endured worse fates than his. In particular:

- Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for speculations on infinity at the time of Galileo
- a number of individuals in the survey were imprisoned at various times: Tom Paine had to flee to France to avoid arrest for his publication of 'The Rights of Man' in 1792, and was then imprisoned and condemned to death during the French Revolution in 1793, escaping this fate only owing to the fall of Robespierre; George Holyoake was imprisoned for blasphemy, Richard Carlile for 'seditious libel', and Fenner Brockway for being a conscientious objector in the Second World War
- many ordinary people who took part in protests and meetings to achieve things they believed in were at risk; eleven died in St Peter's Fields in Manchester as they attended a meeting for parliamentary reform in 1817 and were cut down by the swords of the local forces as they tried to escape during the panic that set in

### 2. All these initiatives were part of much wider developments

- few of the 'modern' developments would have been possible without the printing press invented by William of Gutenberg in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century
- the industrial and technological revolutions beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century made the later political revolutions possible
- many of the thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment depended on the support and protection of rulers of the age such as Frederick the Great of Prussia and Catherine the Great of Russia, or on the freedoms created by the revolutionary movements in France and America, and the reform movements in Britain
- in the most general terms, the developments in each area were interrelated and supported each other, which is why some names and themes appear in more than one list

## SESSION 3

### WHERE DO HUMANISTS GET THEIR MORAL VALUES?

<b>SESSION PLAN</b>
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#### **A. What are we talking about?**

3.1 Some definitions of morality and ethics

#### **B. Humanist morality**

3.2 Some key Humanist moral principles

#### **C. Humanist principles for living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

3.3 Some components for a Humanist morality for our time

#### **D. Where does Humanist morality come from?**

3.4 The building blocks of Humanist morality

#### **Support Material**

3.5 A charter for compassion and the Golden Rule

3.6 Some aspects of Humanist morality contrasted with religious beliefs

3.7 Lives at risk on a railway track

### 3.1 SOME DEFINITIONS OF MORALITY AND ETHICS

The following definitions are taken from *Chambers Dictionary* (2003). The selection is guided by those phrases that point up the links and distinctions between the terms.

**MORALITY:** that which renders an action right or wrong; the quality of being moral; the practice of moral duties, apart from religion

**MORAL:** directed towards what is right; capable of knowing right from wrong; relating to conduct considered as good or bad; supported by evidence of reason or probability

**ETHICS:** a system of morals or rules of behaviour; professional standards of conduct

**ETHICAL:** relating to approved moral behaviour

So, the two sets of terms have essentially the same meaning, but one or the other is often preferred in a particular context. Morals and morality are more often applied to individual behaviour (eg 'sexual morality') and to doing what is right. Ethics and ethical are more often applied to group behaviour (eg 'business ethics' and 'medical ethics') and to systems of rules or principles.

From the Humanist perspective the most interesting points are that:

- the dictionary definition of 'moral' includes 'supported by evidence of reason or probability'
- one dictionary definition of 'morality' is 'the practice of moral duties, apart from religion'
- 'moral' conduct is related to what is considered good or bad, right or wrong

Two further definitions from Chambers Dictionary suggest that both terms are different from religious concepts:

- a 'moralist' is defined as 'a moral as opposed to a religious person'
- an 'ethicist' is defined as 'a person who detaches ethics from religion'

Four of these five points demonstrate that morality stands independent of religion. A religious morality or ethic is only one version of morality or ethics.

#### **Questions to consider**

How do morality and ethics differ, if at all?

In everyday use are 'moral' issues more straightforward than 'ethical' ones? Why do we have 'moral panics', and never 'ethical panics'?

Why do religions claim that they alone can define morality?

In what ways is Humanist morality different from religious morality?

How can Humanists respond to the accusation that their morality is 'inferior' to that of religious believers?



## 3.2 SOME KEY HUMANIST MORAL PRINCIPLES

1. We should try to live by those values – such as compassion, fairness and respect – that have developed because human societies and groups cannot flourish without them.
2. Most of us can reason out right and wrong from the consequences of our actions, especially if we have sufficient information: we don't need god(s) to tell us how to lead good lives.
3. We should recognise that each society has evolved its own code of morality and laws, and that in most societies these will change as circumstances change.
4. Our actions and laws should aim to promote well-being and happiness, and to prevent, avoid or decrease suffering and misery.
5. Everyone should be free to act as they wish so long as their actions do not harm others.
6. We should be sensitive to the living environment and to people different from ourselves.
7. We should in general follow the two-part Golden Rule:
  - treat others as we would want them to treat us in their position;
  - do not treat others in ways we would not want to be treated ourselves in their position.

### Questions to consider

Can we rank these principles in order of importance to Humanists?

Are the two versions of the Golden Rule sufficient as a guide to living? If not, how should they be amended or added to?

Are there any situations where the Golden Rule doesn't work?

Are there any other principles we need to create a morality appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### 3.3 SOME COMPONENTS FOR A HUMANIST MORALITY FOR OUR TIME

To end the session we will try to frame a morality in the form of a list of principles that we feel create a Humanist morality relevant to human needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Below are some possible components, taken from a variety of sources.

#### **The ten commandments** (minus the religious bits)

- Honour your father and your mother
- Do not kill
- Do not commit adultery
- Do not steal
- Do not bear false witness against your neighbour
- Do not covet your neighbour's house, nor your neighbour's wife... nor anything that is your neighbour's

#### **Bertrand Russell's 'liberal Decalogue'** (selections)

- Do not feel certain about anything
- Do not conceal evidence
- Do not discourage thinking
- Meet argument with reason not authority
- Have no respect for the authority of others
- Do not suppress opinions
- Do not fear to be eccentric in your opinions
- Value intelligent dissent more than passive agreement
- Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient

#### **What Humanists believe in** (see 1.1)

- Thinking for ourselves
- Using our reason to work out meaning and purpose in life for ourselves
- Living this one life well
- Making ourselves and others as happy as possible
- Reducing unhappiness and suffering as far as possible
- Promoting human rights and freedoms

#### **The Golden Rule** (see 3.2)

- Treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves in their position;
- Do not treat others as we would not like to be treated ourselves in their position.

#### **The future** (two final thoughts from the course leaders)

- Think for all humanity
- Safeguard the future by preserving the environment

#### **Questions to consider**

What positive qualities underlie the list you have drawn up?

Are there ways in which a Humanist morality can be seen as superior to a religious one?

#### **Bernard Gert's Moral Rules**

- Do not kill
- Do not cause pain
- Do not disable
- Do not deprive of freedom
- Do not deprive of pleasure
- Do not deceive
- Do not cheat
- Keep your promises
- Obey the law
- Do your duty

#### **Immanuel Kant**

- always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end
- always act in a way that you could will others to act the same

## 3.4 THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF HUMANIST MORALITY

### Introduction

It is often said by Humanists that we should not define Humanist morality in terms of religious morality. The argument is that to do this is to take up a negative approach that puts Humanists in a defensive position. Instead Humanists should celebrate their values in their own right. Many Humanists have quite seriously been asked by religious colleagues and friends, 'Have you Humanists got any morals?' That kind of question needs a robust reply without any reference to God!

However, it can be argued that Humanists are bound to be criticised from time to time from a religious perspective, so they need to be able to take on religious critics on their own terms. As we have seen in Session 2, modern Humanism developed in some ways (though not exclusively) from a critique of religious arguments and attitudes, and there has been conflict between humanist and religious views ever since. But it is Humanists who have been the critics for the last three or four hundred years.

### The four building blocks of Humanist morality

- Morality has developed and develops as part of human nature and experience
- Morality depends on being able to appreciate consequences
- Moral principles must be appropriately applied in context
- The point of morality is to promote human wellbeing

Each of these 'building blocks' is fleshed out in 3.6 'Some aspects of Humanist morality contrasted with religious beliefs'. This introduction provides a brief summary of each building block, followed by a challenging question for discussion.

## **1. The natural evolution of morality**

Human societies depend on nearly all their members respecting and cooperating with each other. Selfish behaviour damages everyone else. This has been the experience throughout history (and pre-history as well), and it is this experience that has created the powerful concepts of right and wrong. We don't need god(s) to understand them and respond to them.

**How can human beings work out universal principles from their own limited individual experience?**

## **2. Appreciating consequences**

We can all observe and make predictions about the results of actions by using our experience and reasoning power. We can see how our actions benefit or harm others, and as we view others as of equal value to us as human beings, this gives us a universal guide to behaviour. We can also use our reason to take the complexities of situations into account and act appropriately.

**Can we guarantee that everyone will use their reason objectively and compassionately?**

## **3. Appreciating context**

Humanists live by universal principles and values, but recognise that these are applied in different ways in different situations at different times. As we have done in the past, we should use our reason and compassion to improve laws and behaviour, both to reduce suffering and to promote well-being. Believing there is only one unchanging set of rules for every situation can cause great suffering.

**Does this approach make morality relative to the situation, justifying whatever individuals think is best from their point of view?**

## **4. Promoting the wellbeing of others**

Humanists believe that the only genuinely unselfish behaviour comes from a wish to act in such a way as to benefit everyone affected by our actions, making them happier. This is surely superior to a morality based on fear of punishment or hope of reward.

**Don't our better instincts need the support of powerful sanctions to check human selfishness?**

### 3.5 A CHARTER FOR COMPASSION AND THE GOLDEN RULE

"Socrates maintained that people must ask themselves questions about their fundamental prejudices or they would live superficial lives because 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. A truly 'Socratic dialogue' between two people is a joint effort to discover new understanding. But there is little genuinely Socratic dialogue going on. All too often in a debate we have to defeat and even humiliate our opponents. And yet if there was ever a time when we needed an appreciation of how little we know it is surely now. A joint effort and a Socratic humility and openness to others is required if we are to meet the challenges of our time and create a just and viable world.

That is why we are launching the Charter for Compassion. Compassion does not mean pity: it means to 'experience with the other'. The golden rule, of treating all others as you would wish to be treated yourself, lies at the heart of all morality. It requires a principled, ethical and imaginative effort to put self-interest aside and stand in someone else's shoes.

The golden rule does not just advocate kind feeling but impels us to examine our presuppositions, change our minds if necessary, and submit our assessment of a dilemma to stringent criticism. One cannot act for the true benefit of the greatest number of people if not fully aware of the intricacy of a particular situation; this calls for an intellectual effort, an impartial investigation of the history of a problem, and an honest attempt to look into an opposite viewpoint – instead of simply relying on discussion that happens to chime with our own opinions."

- From 'At one with our ignorance', *Karen Armstrong, Guardian 11 November 2009*

### **3.6 SOME ASPECTS OF HUMANIST MORALITY CONTRASTED WITH RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

Note: it is only too easy to present the views of religious people in a 'fundamentalist' way, whereas there is a wide range of views in most of the monotheistic religions. Quakers, Unitarians and liberal Christians, Jews and Muslims have strong reservations about the 'traditional' views of God. Many eastern religions, such as classical Buddhism, Jainism, and some traditions within Hinduism, do not include a belief in god(s) at all. These notes are written on the basis that there is a clear distinction between non-religious Humanism and (mono)theistic religion, whatever the nuances in religious perspectives.

#### **1. The natural evolution of morality**

##### **Humanists:**

- think that the concepts of right and wrong have some basis in our biology and have been developed further by humans to meet fundamental human needs, especially concern and respect for others (which encourage cooperation) and empathy and kindness to others (which create happiness and contentment).
- see that societies depend on these concepts. Altruism brings with it a benefit to the wider society; while selfishness, which may benefit one person, can cause damage to others. It is human experience of this that has developed the powerful concepts of right and wrong, good and bad. You don't need a god to understand them.
- regard the similarities in many religious codes as an outcome of this process: they are not god-given, rather they reflect human needs, experiences, and shared values – the best of human nature and human culture.

##### **Religious people:**

- argue that universally valid concepts cannot develop from individual experience, and that without objective standards you only have conflicting subjective experiences and feelings.
- believe that god and religion provides the absolute objective standards human beings need to live well.

**Has morality developed and changed? Is it a result of natural biological and cultural processes or does it need to be god-given?**

## 2. Appreciating consequences

### Humanists:

- assert that in most circumstances whether actions are right or wrong can be reasoned out from their consequences, which can be observed and predicted by almost all human beings.
- argue that this universal reasoning power makes a universal standard for behaviour possible.
- think that the consequences of actions should be calculated in terms of the happiness or suffering they cause or prevent.
- claim this as a universal morality because it treats all human beings as of equal value and applies to everyone.
- claim that Humanism is a morality that can resolve complex moral dilemmas because it takes circumstances into account and doesn't, like many religions, use a set of rules that can be applied too simplistically.

### Religious people:

- believe that reason is not as objective as Humanists claim, but can and has been used to justify subjective and deeply flawed arguments.
- assert that this proves atheism does not create an adequate basis for morality: it has led to great evils, which a universal standard of goodness would have prevented in the first place.
- argue that if you seek a guide to living in calculating the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number' you have to allow some bad actions to avoid worse ones; you still have no perfect solution to dilemmas.
- observe that consequences do not give an absolute guide to action either. It all depends on which consequences you select.

**Can we establish morality *just* by looking at the consequences of behaviour?**

**Can rational arguments be misused just as effectively as religious ones?**

**When in history have rational arguments been used to the detriment of society?**

**When in history have religious arguments been used to the detriment of society?**

**When in history have humanist arguments been used to the detriment of society?**

### 3. Appreciating Context

#### Humanists:

- recognise universally valid principles, and so are not 'moral relativists'. They distinguish these principles from customs and laws that change over time but are often seen as codes of morality (eg family structure, gender roles, treatment of minority groups, sexual behaviour and even diet).
- observe that some laws and customs have needed to change because the suffering they caused has been recognised, leading to eg greater tolerance for other forms of family life than the 'nuclear' family; wider rights to vote; recognition of rights to divorce and to abortion; reduction of child exploitation and abuse; abolition of slavery; and outlawing racial and other forms of discrimination. Many further changes in law and behaviour are needed, eg promotion of the conservation of other living species and of finite material resources; and measures to reduce climate change and secure humanity's future.
- think that imposing unchanging absolute standards stands in the way of such improvement.
- observe that absolute religious doctrine has caused great damage by its own consequences (eg the crusades and other religious wars; persecution of heretics by the Inquisition; the religious justifications for slavery, colonialism and genocide; and the recent troubles in Northern Ireland).

#### Religious people:

- accept that improvements in society are valid and necessary, and that churches have perhaps erred in the past, but believe that these problems are the result of human susceptibility to sin and the attractiveness of evil behaviour rather than a flaw in the doctrine itself.
- believe that only an absolute standard and faith in it had the power to move people like Shaftesbury, Wilberforce, Nightingale and Fry to be inspired to campaign against social evils and lessen human suffering. It could be said they also believe this is grounded in a power for good that is god-given.
- argue that any other basis for morality is 'relativism' and therefore inadequate. If morality is subjective, then everything is 'up to you', meaning there is no universal standard available by working from human experience.

#### Is morality absolute or relative?

**If Humanist morality respects the right of people to their different cultures and their value systems, does this mean Humanists believe they are all equally valid?**



## **4. Promoting human wellbeing**

### **Humanists:**

- look for inspiration for being good in promoting the well-being of all others they affect. This is particularly true when we live in a time of imminent irreversible environmental damage that has been largely caused by human activity, and can only be reversed by changes in human behaviour.
- think that a morality directed towards universal human welfare and drawing on human qualities like sensitivity and compassion is superior to a morality based on avoiding hell fire or securing the joys of paradise, which is a morality based on fear and hope for oneself, and could be seen as selfish.

### **Religious people:**

- believe that we need a stronger basis for living well than just compassion for other human beings. Sanctions are needed because human beings are selfish.
- believe that the strongest basis for morality is a belief in future life after death, whose nature depends on how well you live in this one. Fear and hope are perfectly valid human concerns.

### **What are the most effective reasons for being good?**

### **Does the modern world require a new way of 'being good' beyond the traditional understanding of what this means?**

## 3.7 LIVES AT RISK ON A RAILWAY TRACK

### **'Denise's dilemmas' (from Richard Dawkins 'The God Delusion')**

These situations are exercises in logic rather than practical reality, but they point up some of the complexities in making moral judgements.

#### **SITUATION 1**

A runaway truck on a railway line threatens to kill five people trapped in a car stranded on a level crossing. Denise is standing by a set of points and in a position to divert the truck into a siding and save their lives. Unfortunately there is a man trapped in the siding.

**Should Denise throw the switch and save the five by killing the one?**

#### **SITUATION 2**

The truck can be stopped and five lives saved by dropping a large weight off a bridge above the track. But the only weight available is an extremely fat man sitting on the bridge above the track admiring the sunset.

**Does Denise push the fat man off the bridge?**

#### **SITUATION 3**

Denise can save the five in the car by diverting the truck onto a side loop that rejoins the main track just before their vehicle and happens to have an extremely fat man trapped on it who is heavy enough to stop the truck.

**Should Denise switch the points in this instance?**

#### **SITUATION 4**

The diversionary loop has a large weight on it, enough to stop the truck. Unfortunately a hiker is sat in front of it enjoying his lunch and will certainly be killed if Denise switches the points.

**Should Denise switch the points?**

#### **A VARIATION ON SITUATION 2**

Five hospital patients in a hospital ward are dying, each with a different organ failing. Each can be saved if a donor can be found. There is an obviously healthy man in the waiting room, all five of whose organs are suitable for transplanting to these hospital patients.

**Should the healthy visitor be used to save the five terminally ill patients?**

## SESSION 4

### HOW DO HUMANISTS HANDLE MORAL DILEMMAS?

<b>SESSION PLAN</b>
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#### **A. Introduction**

4.1 Common aspects of abortion and euthanasia as moral dilemmas

#### **B. Abortion as a moral issue**

4.2 Abortion - some facts, arguments and issues

#### **C. Euthanasia as a moral issue**

4.3 Euthanasia - some definitions, facts, arguments and issues

#### **Support Material**

4.4 Faith positions on abortion and euthanasia

#### **Procedure for this session**

At the start of the session, participants will be divided into two groups. One group and course leader will consider abortion; the other group and course leader will consider euthanasia. Each group will be asked to select a spokesperson to report back to the whole group in plenary session, and this will be followed by general discussion.

The session will close with some overall reflections from the course leaders that tie the two exemplars to the course as a whole up to this point.

## **4.1 COMMON ASPECTS OF ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA AS MORAL DILEMMAS**

We have chosen to consider abortion and euthanasia as moral dilemmas for Humanists because they raise fundamental issues of life, quality of life, and death. They matter to all of us because they can affect any one of us at any time. They are also issues on which almost everyone has strongly held opinions, and these often clash at a very deep level.

The issues that need to be considered in relation to abortion and euthanasia can be grouped under a number of headings, including:

- individual autonomy and freedom
- happiness
- quality of life
- the legal position
- medical advances
- 'slippery slope' arguments
- religious arguments

For specific points relating to abortion see 4.2, and for specific points relating to euthanasia see 4.3.

In both cases, a Humanist stance as set out in position papers produced by the British Humanist Association (BHA) is considerably different from the official position of most faith communities (see 4.4).

**Which Humanist principles underlie the Humanist stance in each case?**

**Do you believe there are any modifications needed to these statements of the Humanist stance?**

## 4.2 ABORTION - FACTS, ARGUMENTS AND ISSUES

### **A Humanist stance (from a British Humanist Association position paper) is to:**

- value happiness in life, and choice, and therefore accept the right to abortion
- believe the foetus becomes a person much closer to birth than conception
- choose the mother's interests and rights above those of the foetus or embryo
- value quality of life above the right to life if the two are in conflict
- argue for good sex and relationships education and easily available contraception to avoid the distress of unwanted pregnancies
- wish to ensure that abortions are carried out as early as possible, and to remove barriers to achieving this
- believe safe abortion should be available on demand

### **The legal position:**

- abortion is permitted up to the 24<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy (this limit was reduced from 28 weeks in 1990, thus restricting the right to abortion)
- two doctors must agree that there is a danger to the life or physical or mental health of the mother or other children in family
- there is no time limit to abortion if there is substantial risk that the foetus will be severely disabled or grave risk to the mother's life, physical or mental health

### **Some medical facts:**

- a foetus is now often viable before the 24 week limit, but needs intensive support
- a foetus with disabilities may also be viable before 24 weeks
- diagnosis of disabilities, illness and gender is possible long before birth
- 80% of abortions take place before 13 weeks of pregnancy

### **'Pro-life' groups wish to:**

- reduce the legal limit for legal abortion from 24 weeks to 20 weeks (or much less)
- prevent abortion of a seriously damaged foetus after 24 weeks
- impose a two week 'cooling-off' period before a final decision is made
- sometimes, ban abortion entirely

### **Some issues:**

- when does human life begin? If at conception, is the morning after pill murder? If at birth and consciousness, should we allow abortions at any stage?
- where do you draw the line for abortion between conception and birth?
- Is it justified to abort a foetus known to be severely damaged, but still viable?
- Is abortion after rape more justified than other abortions?
- whose rights are paramount - mother, father or foetus?
- Where do contraceptive issues enter the debate?
- How can we avoid the need for 'back street' abortions?

## 4.3 EUTHANASIA - DEFINITIONS, FACTS, ARGUMENTS AND ISSUES

### **A Humanist stance (from a British Humanist Association position paper) is to:**

- support the right to voluntary euthanasia out of concern for the quality of life and avoidance of unnecessary suffering and indignity
- believe in personal autonomy, so that people in sound mind are entitled to decide these matters for themselves, and advance decisions (formerly living wills) made when mentally competent should be respected
- recognise that proper safeguards are essential to avoid non-voluntary euthanasia

### **Definitions:**

Euthanasia is the intentional premature termination of someone's life, whether by direct intervention (active euthanasia) or by withholding life-prolonging measures and resources (passive euthanasia). Both active and passive euthanasia can be *voluntary* (in response to someone's declared wish, ie 'assisted dying'), *non-voluntary* (carried out in what is considered the best interests of someone unable to express an opinion, eg if they are in a coma) or *involuntary* (*against* someone's expressed wish, such as under the eugenic policies of the Third Reich in Germany). Involuntary euthanasia is a euphemism for murder.

### **The legal position:**

Refusal of treatment or nourishment is legal in the UK, as is treatment to alleviate pain that may hasten death as a side-effect. Neither is legally regarded as euthanasia. Advance decisions are in principle to be respected if someone is not in a position to make their wishes known. Active euthanasia by lethal injection or administration of drugs by a physician is illegal in the UK, but it is legal in Belgium and the Netherlands, provided strict procedures are followed. Assisted dying is legal, in restricted circumstances, in Luxembourg, Switzerland and the state of Oregon, and hundreds of Britons have chosen or are choosing this course of action by travelling to Switzerland.

### **Some medical facts:**

- much medical thinking – eg the 'Hippocratic Oath' – and medical practice is based on the right to life
- most people up to a century ago died quickly and painfully from injury or illness. Medicine can now keep many people alive in conditions that they find intolerable because of pain, loss of dignity and dependence on others, often for long periods

### **Some issues:**

- whose opinions matter most when a terminally ill person requests euthanasia?
- is there a slippery slope so that if euthanasia is legalised in restricted circumstances the conditions under which it is allowed will gradually be relaxed?
- how can the dangers of such a slippery slope be effectively guarded against?
- is euthanasia ever acceptable if patients cannot be consulted to give consent?
- should we campaign for legal voluntary and non-voluntary euthanasia with safeguards?

- which is more important, life or quality of life? Is this the only issue?
- if it is cruel to keep animals alive in misery, should we do this to human beings?

## 4.4 FAITH POSITIONS ON ABORTION AND EUTHANASIA

(Extracts from the Manchester RE syllabus: 'Education in religion')

### ABORTION

### EUTHANASIA

#### **Christianity**

A variety of positions in different denominations, from absolute rejection of abortion to acceptance in a number of specified situations.

A variety of positions, from absolute rejection on grounds of the sanctity of life that only God can give or take away, to acceptance to prevent suffering.

#### **Judaism**

Mother's life has precedence at birth, but abortion is acceptable for medical reasons to Orthodox Jewry, also for social/emotional reasons to Reform Jewry.

We cannot precipitate death, but it is not essential to keep people alive in all circumstances.

#### **Islam**

Only allowable if mother's life is at risk. Abortion is then seen as the lesser of two evils

Euthanasia is forbidden: only Allah knows the reasons for suffering. The sanctity of life prevails.

#### **Hinduism**

Life begins at conception, abortion is only allowable to save mother's life.

(no statement on euthanasia)

#### **Buddhism**

Abortion is not allowable because it is the taking of life.

No clear statement on euthanasia: there is both a respect for life and a duty to avoid suffering wherever possible.

#### **Sikhism**

Abortion is rejected in almost all cases. Life begins at conception, is God's creation, so abnormalities of the foetus are not a sufficient ground for abortion. But some Sikhs accept abortion after rape, or on grounds of danger to the mother.

Euthanasia is rejected as only God has the right to give and take away life, humans should not tamper with God's creation. But equally there is a duty to sustain life.

**What are the major points of difference from the Humanist position?**

**How would Humanists counter these arguments?**



## SESSION 5

# WHAT IS THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE FOR HUMANISTS?

<b>SESSION PLAN</b>
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### **A. Personal perspectives and preliminary thoughts**

5.1 Some preliminary thoughts

### **B. The meaning of life**

5.2 Some views and opinions on what gives meaning to life for Humanists

### **C. Spirituality**

5.3 Is a 'spiritual' dimension necessary for life to have meaning?

### **D. The purpose of life**

5.4 Some views and opinions on what makes life purposeful for Humanists

### **Support Material**

5.5 Meaning and purpose: some questions and suggested answers

### **Procedure for this session**

At the start of this session, the course leaders will give brief accounts of what they feel gives their life meaning and purpose.

Participants are invited to contribute their own thoughts.

## 5.1 SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

### Selected quotations

'Is man what he seems to the astronomers, a tiny lump of impure carbon and water impotently crawling around on a small and unimportant planet? Or is he what he appears to Hamlet? Or is he both at once?'

*Bertrand Russell - History of Western Philosophy*

\*

'What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form, in moving, how express and admirable! ... the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights me not.'

*William Shakespeare, Hamlet Act 2 Scene 2*

\*

'Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.'

*William Shakespeare - Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5*

\*

'Negative Capability – that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.'

*John Keats - letter written in 1817*

\*

'Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,  
The proper study of mankind is man.'

*Alexander Pope - Know Thyself*

\*

### A Humanist position on purpose and meaning in life

Humanists do not believe in any one overall meaning or purpose to life, for three reasons central to their thinking:

- **we know that we are the product of evolution** and have each arrived on earth as the outcome of an untold number of random variations in inheritance over hundreds of thousands of years – and that is only the time of homo sapiens. We

are here by chance, so there is no reason for us to think existence has any ultimate meaning.

- **Humanists do not believe in an afterlife**, which leaves nothing for individuals to aim for outside this life that would give them an overall purpose.
- **Humanists do not believe in a god** that could be the one, all-knowing, authority that could tell us whether life has meaning or purpose.

**If this statement of the Humanist position is correct, what are the grounds on which we as Humanists find meaning and purpose in life?**

### **Questions to consider**

Is 'a purposeful life' a more useful term for Humanists than 'purpose in life'?

Can our capacity for compassion act as a source of 'purpose' in life?

Does our capacity for reasoning help us create meaning in life?

Is it more useful to find 'meaning' in life and then 'purpose', or the other way round?

## 5.2 SOME VIEWS AND OPINIONS ON WHAT GIVES MEANING TO LIFE FOR HUMANISTS

All Humanists agree that a life should have meaning, and that compassion and empathy are as important as knowledge and understanding for achieving a meaningful life.

One useful approach that involves all these elements is to examine different levels of meaning, such as:

- Self-knowledge and understanding of who **we** are, and what has made us what we are
- Knowledge and understanding of **others** so we can assess their needs and how we have an impact on them
- Knowledge and understanding of the condition of **humanity** and our responsibilities as human beings

### Quotations

'We can find or create meaning in our lives, in our everyday purposes and relationships. The fact that something eventually comes to an end does not make it pointless or meaningless. It may well be that we have to create meaning and purpose for ourselves, finding them in the way we choose to live our lives and the choices we make. Humanists tend to be optimistic about the human capacity to solve problems, but think that life doesn't have a meaning, any more than a tree has meaning.' *The British Humanist Association*

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'It is essential to humanism that it brings values and meaning into life.' *Jim Herrick*

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'We develop meaning and purpose in life by identifying an emotionally and intellectually satisfying belief system.' *James Siddelley*

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'A meaningful life is one that has significance, one that has point, substance, purpose, quality, value and direction.' *Alex Mace, aged 16 - James Hemming Essay Prize winner 2009*

'What does a meaning outside my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms.' *Albert Camus*

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'We can take joy in a life well lived, and take comfort from the fact that our achievements will survive us for a while at least, and that those we loved and gave happiness to will remember us well when we are gone.' *Andrew Copson*

\*

'When the map of our life is complete, and we die in the richness of our history, some among the living will miss us for a while, but the earth will go on without us. Our brief finitude is but a beautiful spark in the vast darkness of space. So we should live the fleeting day with passion.' *Richard Holloway*

### **Questions to consider**

If you could only choose one of these statements, which seems to best express your view on the meaning of life?

Is anything missing that should be added?

Is it only knowledge and awareness that give meaning to life?

Are there different levels of meaningfulness?

## 5.3 IS A 'SPIRITUAL' DIMENSION NECESSARY FOR LIFE TO HAVE MEANING?

**The concept of 'spirituality'** is a matter of intense debate among Humanists, the source of some of our deepest disagreements.

Some Humanists lay emphasis on the fact they are **materialists** and emphasise that nothing has reality beyond what can be measured and proved to exist. All feeling and emotion is a matter of chemical reactions or electrical currents in the brain.

Some Humanists say explicitly that **human life has a spiritual dimension**: that there is 'a world of the human spirit without a holy spirit'. This dimension is found for example in the cultural sphere: the world of the arts - painting, sculpture, music, opera, poetry, drama and novels; the enjoyment of nature and the wonder inspired by the universe; the inspiration of human courage and achievement. For Humanists who believe this, it is this dimension that helps give life another layer of meaning.

Many, probably most, humanists maintain that both these positions are correct and they are not in conflict with each other.

Disagreement among Humanists about spirituality may arise because there are several different meanings that can be attached to the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality'. These include:

- a collage of everyday practices which give life meaning
- a world of 'the human spirit' that includes emotions, enjoyment, compassion, inspiration and wonder
- experiences of a supernatural nature

Of course, all Humanists can agree about the irrelevance of the third of these! But difficulties of language in this sphere can nonetheless intrude into any discussion of the meaning of life.

### Quotations

'Spirituality is a path or journey away from the constraints of belief systems. It is therefore as available to atheists and Humanists as to religious believers. But Humanism's emphasis on rationality limits our capacity for spiritual experience.'

*Nick Otten - talk to Greater Manchester Humanists: 'Is there an atheist spirituality?'*

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'As people open their lives to the possibility that there is more to life than them, something in them lifts their 'spirit', and they know that they are changing and the world they encounter is all part of a coherent whole . . .'

*Alan Scantlebury - Chaplain, Bolton University*

'Concepts of good and evil, or awareness of right and wrong are not supernatural in origin. They are part of our collective awareness, handed down to us in story, legend and history, and essential to realising our potential as human beings. They are driving forces towards meaning and purpose.'

*Robin Grinter - Greater Manchester Humanists, in correspondence with Alan Scantlebury*

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'Ethical Humanism is primarily an attitude about human beings, their worth and the significance of their lives. It is concerned with nature and the quality of living, the character and creativity of our relationships. Because of this concern, Humanism spontaneously flowers into a spiritual movement in its own right.'

*Edward Ericson - author and biographer of Solzhenitsyn*

\*

'Religion is for people who are scared to go to hell. Spirituality is for those who have already been there.'

*Robert Riatt - guitarist and songwriter*

\*

'Spirituality exists whenever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the cosmic scheme of things ... We also become spiritual when we become moved by values such as beauty, love and creativity . . .'

*Robert Fuller - Professor of Religious Studies*

## **Questions to Consider**

Is there room for 'spirituality' in a Humanist philosophy and where would we find it?

If a 'spiritual' dimension exists, in what sense does it contribute to meaning in life?

Do religious and non-religious people share the same breadth and depth of human experience?

Is 'spirituality' anything more than human emotion?

## 5.4 SOME VIEWS AND OPINIONS ON WHAT MAKES LIFE PURPOSEFUL FOR HUMANISTS.

### 'The Happy Human'

All Humanists will agree that promoting human happiness and reducing human suffering are two key elements in living a 'purposeful' life. One expression of this view is the British Humanist Association's logo 'The Happy Human'.

### The concept of Happiness

We have already seen in Session 2 that Jeremy Bentham defined happiness as a purpose for lawmakers and John Stuart Mill analysed the importance of the quality of happiness that we achieve. It is interesting that there is now a revival of interest among philosophers and others in the importance of happiness as a human concern after a long period of emphasis on economic growth and productivity.

### Happiness and Well-being

There is an important distinction to be kept in mind between happiness and well-being. Indeed our western culture may need to reconsider its view of happiness with well-being in mind. There has undeniably been an emphasis in recent years on pursuing happiness through individual consumption, satisfying wants far beyond our needs. But there is growing evidence that not only is this not producing lasting happiness, but also it is generating circumstances that threaten the very survival of humanity and other species. Without a new emphasis on well-being and quality of life our culture may prove to be terminally self-destructive.

### Are there different levels of happiness?

One useful approach as suggested by David Nettle may be to consider that there are three levels of happiness:

- momentary feelings of pleasure and joy
- reaching an understanding about feelings of satisfaction and well being
- awareness of quality of life in fulfilling one's potential and living a good life.

### Quotations

Most of us want to be happy, and perhaps increasing the amount of happiness in the world is a worthy enough purpose.'

*The British Humanist Association*

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'Create all the happiness you are able to create; remove all the misery you are able to remove . . . and for every enjoyment you sow in the bosom of another, you shall find a harvest in your own bosom'

*Jeremy Bentham - Eighteenth century English political philosopher*

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'Happiness is the only good: the time to be happy is now, the place to be happy is here, and the way to be happy is to make others so.'



*Robert Ingersoll - Nineteenth Century American Humanist*

'If you are a humanist, that means that you care about other human beings, and everything you do affects other human beings, so you have to think about that.'

*Claire Rayner - journalist and Vice President of BHA*

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'Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity, of application of new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all.'

*Linus Pauling - Nobel Prize winning scientist.*

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'Humanism stands for the building of a more humane society.'

*IHEU (International Humanist and Ethical Union)*

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'Always treat people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end.'

*Immanuel Kant, Eighteenth Century German philosopher*

\*

'Being a Humanist means trying to behave decently without expectation of rewards or punishment after you are dead'.

*Kurt Vonnegut*

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Finally, four suggestions from an educational resource from the British Humanist Association 'What's it all for?', which were suggested by pupils themselves:

- to help my family grow up in a positive and fulfilling way
- to help reduce unhappiness and make a difference to people
- to acquire knowledge so that we can enjoy this one life even more
- to make sure that in some small way I have helped to make the world a more just and fairer place, and help the environment

### **Questions to consider**

What do you consider the three most important purposes from these statements?

What sort of things should Humanists do in order to make life worth living at the present time?

Is promoting human happiness an adequate purpose for life?

Is Humanism stronger if it avoids using the term 'purpose' with its religious overtones, or should Humanists seek to reclaim the term?

Do particular purposes (like fighting racism) imply a longer term or wider purpose?

How important are (a) empathy and compassion and (b) knowledge and understanding, to having purpose in life?

## 5.5 MEANING AND PURPOSE: SOME QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

### 1. Is there any difference between the concepts of meaning and purpose?

The following definitions are taken from 'The Chambers Dictionary' (2003).

MEANING: that which is in mind and thought ... purpose

PURPOSE: an idea or goal to which efforts are directed ... a definite intention

These concepts are closely related, but significantly different. Purpose gives you a goal or a destination, but doesn't tell you how to get there. Meaning is 'a mental characteristic', the outcome of a process of trying to make sense of experience, which *will* tell you how to get to a destination but doesn't necessarily tell you what that purpose should be.

It's rather like making a map. You can make a map to find a clear route to a destination. But you don't have to have a destination to start with: you can make a map, survey the territory, and then choose one or more destinations.

So meaning *can* be defined as purpose because it is an independent process that gives understanding of your situation and can lead to a destination or several destinations. But purpose is *not* defined as meaning because it doesn't in itself give you an in-depth understanding of your situation.

### 2. Why should we try to find some meaning and purpose in life?

*Suggested Humanist response:* because we are thinking and feeling beings, and because our immediate situation is all we've got. Life matters, but it will end: what matters more is the quality of our own individual lives. That is where meaning and purpose come in. Not everyone worries about this, but it is almost a definition of being a Humanist to try to make some meaning out of life, and work out some set of purposes to guide one's life.

### 3. What is the relationship between meaning and purpose?

*Suggested Humanist response:* the search for meaning comes first, and then we decide our own purposes. This makes our purposes relevant to the circumstances we are in, and if circumstances change so will our understanding and so will the purposes that our reasoning power leads us to adopt.

### 4. How does a Humanist position on purpose and meaning differ from a religious one?

Humanism has no creed of beliefs, and no overriding purpose, whereas all theistic religions lay down belief and purpose from above. They require that you believe in a particular god, follow the principles which that god has laid down for living and so achieve your purpose of eternal life which god has promised. In the religious context your reasoning power may confirm your belief in god, but it is heresy to challenge your religion's view of the meaning of life.

## SESSION 6

### WHAT DO HUMANISTS DO? (CELEBRATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS)

and

### REVIEW OF COURSE: (WHAT DOES HUMANISM OFFER THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY TODAY?)

<h2>SESSION PLAN</h2>
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#### **A. Ceremonies and celebrations**

6.1 Humanist celebrations of rites of passage

#### **B. Organisations and campaigning**

6.2 Humanist organisations and campaigns

#### **C. Course review**

6.3 Reflection and review

#### **Reference Material**

6.4 Contact information for Humanist organisations

6.5 A selected booklist

6.6 A course glossary

#### **Procedure for this session**

For this session we will be joined by a Humanist celebrant.

## 6.1 HUMANIST CELEBRATIONS OF RITES OF PASSAGE

Most of us want to mark important events in our lives and to commemorate people we have loved when they die. For those with no religious belief it is important to do so with honesty, warmth and affection, using words and music that are personal and appropriate to the lives and people involved.

Humanist ceremonies can be arranged in a number of ways. In particular the British Humanist Association maintains a network of trained and accredited Humanist celebrants throughout England and Wales conducting funerals, weddings and civil partnerships, and naming ceremonies. The following notes relate to ceremonies conducted by a British Humanist Association accredited celebrant.

The philosophy behind Humanist ceremonies is one of celebration, based on shared human values, allowing all who attend to relate to what is said, whether they are religious or not. All aspects of the occasion are planned by the celebrant in close consultation with the family, and there are no religious references. Each ceremony is unique, and there are no special rules beyond basic legal requirements. Many people get their first experience of Humanism at one of these ceremonies, particularly a Humanist funeral: it is nearly always a very positive experience.

### **Funerals**

A Humanist funeral is for those without a religious view of life and death for whom a religious service seems an inappropriate way to say farewell. It will normally be the expressed choice of the deceased person, who may well share in planning the funeral. It will often take place in a crematorium, but if the funeral involves a burial rather than a cremation, it can be held at any site chosen by the deceased or their family, for example a woodland area. There will be no religious input, and readings and music will reflect and celebrate the interests and achievements of the deceased person.

### **Weddings and partnership ceremonies:**

Humanist weddings and partnership celebrations can be held anywhere - in gardens, marquees, on boats, in castles, on beaches. They express the deepest feelings of a couple, and affirm a lifelong partnership. They can take any form that the couple wishes, with words and music that have real, personal meaning for them. However, to be legally married or civil partnered in England and Wales, couples must also have a civil ceremony conducted by a Local Authority Registrar.

### **Naming ceremonies:**

Celebrating the arrival of a new baby, a child or new step-children into your family and circle of friends is both a joyful and serious occasion. The Humanist alternative to a 'christening' is often held at a celebratory party, either in the family home or a special venue. Parents may express their love for and commitment to their child, and their hopes for its future welfare and happiness. Relatives or friends are chosen to become 'guide parents' or 'special friends' (rather than 'godparents') and they can join in the ceremony, saying how they will be there for the child as he or she grows up. The celebration may include poetry or prose readings and music.

### **Questions to consider**

What readings or music would you choose for a rite of passage? Why?

## 6.2 HUMANIST ORGANISATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS

### 1. National and international Humanist organisations

- The South Place Ethical Society (1793)
- The Ethical Union (1896)
- Rationalist Association (1899)
- International Humanist and Ethical Union (1952): founded by Harold Blackham
- British Humanist Association (developed from Ethical Union): first President Sir Julian Huxley (1963)

All these organisations still exist, except for the Ethical Union, which became the British Humanist Association in 1963. They work closely together and the last three share the same headquarters in London.

### 2. Humanist campaigns

The British Humanist Association (BHA) campaigns against the growing influence of religious bodies, and is often assisted by local Humanist groups. Examples of present day campaigns include:

- opposition to faith schools that are exempt from inclusive religious education, as a member of ACCORD, a coalition for inclusive schools whose members include the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Socialist Education Association and the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement
- ending religious worship in school assemblies
- promoting the teaching of Humanism as a non-religious value system in schools
- ending the statutory place of bishops in the House of Lords
- ending exemptions in legislation that allow religious organisations running public services such as schools to discriminate on grounds of religion in employment, and to provide services in a distinctively religious way
- opposing indoctrination and all forms of fundamentalism
- support for legalisation of assisted suicide with appropriate safeguards

The BHA works with Humanist groups in each political party at Westminster and The All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, in alliance with other groups in campaigns such as Accord against faith schools, and on occasion with the National Secular Society.

### 3. Local Humanist groups

There are currently over 60 local Humanist groups in England, Wales and Northern Ireland affiliated to the British Humanist Association. In addition, there are some 20 student groups and a number of special interest groups. All of these groups are independent and

autonomous. The Humanist Society of Scotland is the national body in Scotland and has a number of local branches.

Local groups engage in educational events (including talks, debates, introductory courses), social events, local campaigning and activism, promotion of Humanism, and voluntary or other charitable work. All welcome new members.

## 6.3 REFLECTION AND REVIEW

### Review questions

- What have we learnt?
- Are we still Humanists?
- What are we taking away from the course?
- Have we changed any of our views since coming on the course?
- Are we less or more tolerant of others than when we started the course?
- Are we less or more open-minded than when we started the course?
- What does Humanism offer to the individual and society today?
- Where is the Humanist movement going now?
- What can Humanists do to make the world a better place?



## 6.4 CONTACT INFORMATION FOR HUMANIST ORGANISATIONS

### **British Humanist Association**

1 Gower Street  
London WC1E 6HD  
020 7079 3580  
info@humanism.org.uk  
humanism.org.uk

### **International Humanist and Ethical Union**

1 Gower Street  
London WC1E 6HD  
iheu-office@iheu.org  
iheu.org

### **Rationalist Association**

1 Gower Street  
London WC1E 6HD  
020 7436 1151  
webcontact@newhumanist.org.uk  
newhumanist.org.uk

### **Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association**

1 Gower Street  
London WC1E 6HD  
0844 800 3067  
info@galha.org  
galha.org

### **South Place Ethical Society**

Conway Hall  
Red Lion Square  
London WC1R 4RL  
020 7242 8037  
library@ethicalsociety.org.uk  
www.ethicalsoc.org.uk

### **Other local groups and special interest groups**

See [humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups](http://humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups) or contact the BHA

## 6.5 A SELECTED BOOKLIST

Many of these books are relatively short and all are reader-friendly - though dealing with challenging concepts. Most are available via Amazon, and there are interesting Customer Reviews on the Amazon website.

Julian Baggini	Atheism: A Very Short Introduction
BHA	What is Humanism?
BHA	The Case for Secularism
Simon Blackburn	Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics
Peter Cave	Humanism: a beginner's guide
Richard Dawkins	The God Delusion
A.C.Grayling	What is Good? : The Search for the Best Way to Live
Richard Holloway	Godless Morality
Richard Norman	On Humanism
Ben Rogers (editor)	Is Nothing Sacred?
Bertrand Russell	Why I am not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects
Bertrand Russell	What I believe
Peter Singer	How are we to live? - Ethics in an age of self-interest
Barbara Smoker	Humanism

Two rather more analytical texts:

A.C.Grayling	Towards the Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights That Made the Modern West
Peter Singer	Practical Ethics (1979) (Detailed, controversial and wide-ranging, with useful chapters on moral dilemmas including abortion and euthanasia)

## 6.6 A COURSE GLOSSARY

These notes are written to give a definition relevant to Humanism of some terms used in the course. They are given in alphabetical order for each session, and are the course writers' definitions and commentary on how the terms are used in the course material.

### Session 1

**Atheism** – 'a' (no) and 'theism' (belief in a god). Certainty that there is no god, or living without reference to god(s).

**Agnosticism** – 'a' (no) and 'gnosticism' (knowledge). Uncertainty about the existence of a god: we cannot know whether one exists or not, even if we feel that this is so unlikely that in practice we act as if there is not.

**Doctrine and Indoctrination** – teachings that are accepted as the 'truth', found in the sacred texts of religions and in authoritarian political systems; imposing these teachings on all who belong to that religion or political party.

**Evolution** – the change in the inherited characteristics of a population of living things through successive generations: descent with modification. The accumulation of small changes over many generations can lead to substantial changes in a population and the emergence of new species.

**Natural selection** – the process by which characteristics that increase/reduce the chance of survival and reproduction become more/less common in a population, acting at many levels from individual genes to entire species.

**Religious privilege** – powers given to religious groups and organisations by law that allow them special rights (eg exemption from discrimination laws) and powers arising from past history that give them special opportunities to influence lawmaking (eg places for bishops in the House of Lords).

**Supernatural** – outside or above nature, experiences that cannot be explained by using our reason, beyond proof. (Not the same as 'spiritual'.)

### Session 2

**Atomist theory** – belief of the Greek thinker Democritus that all matter is made up of small basic particles that he called 'atoms', each incapable of further division.

**'Cogito ergo sum'** – the phrase coined by the French thinker Rene Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century 'I think, therefore I am'. This is the classic statement of a basic Humanist belief.

**Existentialism** – a modern philosophy that says that it is individual people who have the responsibility to make meaning of their lives, and that philosophy should focus on the existence, thoughts, emotions, actions and responsibilities of individual people. This requires freedom, and is not necessarily selfish. Most of us live in an existential way. Many, but not all, existentialist thinkers do not believe in the existence of God.

**Heliocentric theory** – the theory that the Earth goes around the Sun, replacing the theory upheld by the Church that the Earth and Mankind is central to creation. Its publication in 1542 marked the beginning of the scientific revolution of the 15th and 16th Centuries in Europe. It was proposed by Copernicus and proved by Galileo.

**Inquisition** – the Roman Catholic body that defines the beliefs of the faith. In mediaeval and early modern times it punished independent thinking and behaviour ('heresy'), often by burning at the stake. Sometimes called the 'Holy Office', it still exists as the 'Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith' (its recent head was Pope Benedict XVI).

**Philosophy** – the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, the search for understanding. Can be very academic, but the search for meaning in life that most people undertake is also a form of philosophy.

**Rationalism** – reliance on reason as opposed to dogma as the tool to explain issues and to approach human problems and dilemmas.

**Renaissance** – the 're-birth' or reawakening of interest in knowledge for its own sake in Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, after the thousand year long period of religious authority in the 'Middle Ages' or 'Dark Ages'. Inspired by the rediscovery of Greek learning, it was the product of secular thinking, produced great art and literature and saw the beginnings of modern science.

**Scepticism** – doubt: a refusal to accept anything proclaimed by authority, especially at first hearing, and a determination to test the accuracy of any claims or interpretations.

**Scientific method** – taking an initial explanation or procedure (the hypothesis), testing it by experiment and observation, modifying it by further testing, and proposing a new explanation or procedure. This is a continuing process, and so does not produce absolute truth. (See below - 'Socratic method')

**Secularism** – a non-religious approach to government, free from religious concepts and authority. A secular state like France, America or Turkey is completely independent of any church by allowing no legal powers to religious bodies.

**Socratic method: thesis, antithesis and synthesis** – The educational procedure used by Socrates in Greece. He encouraged his students to begin with an accepted explanation (a 'thesis' or 'hypothesis'), develop and argue for an alternative or opposing explanation (an 'antithesis'), and develop a new explanation that combines the best parts of both (a 'synthesis'). (See above - 'Scientific method')

### Session 3

**Altruism** – unselfish behaviour, considering the well-being of others, acting to benefit another person without expecting the kindness to be returned. (See below - 'Reciprocity')

**Empathy** – the ability to relate to others and gain some understanding of their feelings and values. It is close to sympathy, but more thoughtful, and so can be defined as sympathetic understanding. (See below - 'Subjectivity')

**Ethics** – codes that guide the behaviour of professional groups (eg medical ethics and business ethics).

**Fundamentalism** – an extreme position in a belief system, insisting on basic simple 'truths' and interpretations, and rejecting any changes in doctrine. Similar to 'absolutism'. Typically leads to conflict.

**Morality** – principles that guide individual behaviour (often imposed by society).

**Moral advancement** – general improvement in the human condition, as a result of people thinking more generously, understanding things better and taking the needs of others more fully into account.

**Moral relativism** – the claim that there is no absolutely valid morality, that all cultures have their own version of what is moral, and so all moral codes and practices are equally valid whether other people like them or not. Often associated with 'multi-culturalism'. (See next entry)

**Multi-culturalism** – the mixing of cultures arising when large migrant communities retain a distinct identity, and the belief that this is beneficial to society as a result of the mutual learning that takes place when cultures interact.

**Objectivity** – looking at things in a detached and unemotional way, leaving aside one's personal feelings as far as possible. (See 'Rationality')

**Reciprocity** – action according to mutual advantage: 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours'. (See above - 'Altruism')

**Subjectivity** – looking at things from one's own perspective, bringing one's personal feelings into an assessment. It is the opposite of 'objectivity', and is not necessarily damaging: it can convey a feeling for a situation, and assist sympathetic understanding. (See above - 'Empathy')

## Session 4

**Eugenics** – a development of evolutionary theory, an attempt to improve the human species or more often particular races by a breeding programme that would select out the 'fittest'. Eugenics is linked with racism, and in the form of 'Social Darwinism' has been used to justify the existence of a dominant class.

**Hippocratic oath** – the pledge made by doctors that they will observe absolute integrity concerning the welfare of their patients and absolute confidentiality as to any information provided in consultations.

**Personal autonomy** – individual freedom, responsibility for our own decisions, living our own lives free from outside pressures. (See also 'Existentialism')

## Session 5

**Materialism** – the belief that there is nothing in life beyond material existence and material explanations of experiences as the result of economic laws, the operations of physics or chemical reactions. There is no such thing as spirit, and everything can be measured and calculated.

**Personal reality** – what is meaningful and real for us as individuals: our own view of the world. (See 'Existentialism')

**Spirituality/spiritual dimension** – the belief that there is a dimension to life that is additional to material existence. It is not necessarily religious, nor is it necessarily 'supernatural' because it is seen as a valuable and normal part of human nature and experience. (See 'Supernatural')