

DEFINITIONS OF HUMANISM

Roughly speaking, the word humanist has come to mean someone who:

- trusts to the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural (and is therefore an atheist or agnostic)
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.



Humanists UK

Human beings

Humanists have a scientific but also a sympathetic, generous, and cautiously optimistic understanding of human beings. They believe human beings are material and mortal. We are the product of purposeless physical and biological processes. However, while we cannot ignore our natural origins, our flaws, and our limitations, humanists also see much to be celebrated about human beings. We are conscious, curious, and creative, and we have the potential to use those capacities to support the building of a better world.



- **Evolution:** the natural process by which we acquired all our capacities
- **Natural capacities:** our different talents and abilities that all evolved naturally
- **Mortality:** death is the end of our existence – we have no afterlife
- **Consciousness:** our capacity to be aware of ourselves and consider our choices
- **Potential:** the ability to shape our own lives and make a difference to the world through our action

Understanding the world

Humanists believe that the world is a natural place with no supernatural side (they are atheists or agnostics). They believe interrogating and adjusting our beliefs about the world through the process of scientific investigation gives them the best chance of being true. Wisdom can come from many different sources, but is primarily something that develops over time – through the sharing and challenging of ideas, we can make progress in our knowledge. Humanists believe science can also be a source of wonder.



- **Naturalism:** the belief that the world is a natural place and the rejection of supernatural forces or explanations
- **Scepticism:** the belief that all claims are open to doubt and should be open to question
- **Reason:** the process of applying a logical and critical examination of claims in order to form a judgement
- **Science:** the process of forming hypotheses about the world, making predictions, and testing them through observation and experiment
- **Wisdom:** something that has stood the test of time and experience and still chimes with our understanding of human nature and wellbeing today
- **Curiosity:** a passion for exploring questions about the world
- **Atheism:** the absence of belief in a god or gods
- **Agnosticism:** the belief that we cannot know whether or not a god exists

The one life

Humanists believe we should have the freedom to shape our own lives, finding happiness in the one life we have and supporting other people to do the same. Despite the absence of any 'ultimate' meaning or purpose to the universe, we can make our lives meaningful. There is no one-size-fits-all best way to live and we should be tolerant of diverse approaches. Although they do not believe in an afterlife, humanists believe something of us can, in a sense, survive our deaths: our atoms, genes, shared ideas, and contributions to wider society can outlive us.



- **The one life:** the belief that this is the only life we know we have and that that should focus our attention on the here and now
- **Personal autonomy:** a sense of positive freedom – not just an absence of restriction on our choices, but the opportunity to consciously create and choose our own purposes and actions (being the authors of our own lives)
- **Responsibility:** the acknowledgement that we cannot delegate decisions about how we should live to someone else
- **Tolerance:** acceptance of diverse approaches to life (as long as they do not cause harm)
- **Flourishing:** a wider sense of happiness and wellbeing that does not focus only on the sense of feeling happy in the moment, but describes a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction with our lives as a whole (making the most of life and our potential)
- **Connections:** the links that make our lives feel meaningful: to friends and family, to other people on whom our actions have consequences, to our ancestors and descendants, to human history, to the natural world
- **Wonder:** awe and delight at human achievements, knowledge, creativity, or our connections to something bigger (e.g. the natural world, human history)

Humanist ethics

Humanists believe the origins of morality lie inside human beings. They do not believe morality is handed down to us from an external source: instead it evolved through our nature as a social animal. The reason to be good is because of the impact our actions can have on other people, animals, and the planet. The function of morality is to try to improve the welfare and flourishing of human beings and other sentient life in the here and now. They believe we should make our ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a consideration of the consequences.



- **The evolution of morality:** our moral instincts and norms evolved biologically and culturally from the way our species has long lived together in communities
- **Shared values:** the basic values that appear to be almost universal among human beings and are based on our shared needs: happiness, freedom, love, respect, fairness, justice, honesty – these values give us the groundwork on which we can build morality and avoid resorting to relativism (the claim that no answer is better than any other)
- **Moral autonomy:** the acceptance that we cannot escape individual responsibility for our actions
- **Consequences:** rules can be a helpful guide and can help society to function; however, we should always consider the potential consequences of our actions on the people and other animals involved in the here and now
- **Empathy:** the naturally evolved capacity to imagine how other people might feel that can help us consider how they would like to be treated
- **The golden rule:** a helpful principle that has appeared in many philosophies and religions around the world: 'Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself and do not treat others in a way you would not like to be treated yourself'

Society

Humanists believe human beings alone are responsible for improving the world: we cannot expect help to come from elsewhere. Nor can wrongs be righted in some other life, we need to work for wellbeing and justice in the here and now. Humanists believe we need to recognise our shared humanity rather than focusing on how we differ.



- **Equality:** everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities, regardless of gender, race, religion or belief, age, sexuality, or disability
- **Human rights:** the universal and inalienable rights that we are all entitled to (including freedom of religion and belief, and freedom of expression)
- **Secularism:** a political aim that ensures the the state is neutral in its relationship with, and its attitude towards, religious and non-religious beliefs; guarantees freedom of belief; and ensures there is no discrimination on the grounds of religious or non-religious belief
- **Optimism:** a belief that, while a perfect world might be impossible, human beings have made progress and have the capacity to build a better world