

A humanist discussion of... DEATH AND OTHER BIG QUESTIONS

"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 Agnosticism and Christianity, 1889

Questions about the meaning and purpose of our existence (or "ultimate questions", as they are sometimes called) have puzzled human beings for a long time. Though religions have suggested answers, their answers cannot satisfy non-religious people who also think about these big philosophical questions. Some of the world's greatest thinkers and philosophers have thought that these are really the kinds of question for which there can be no certain answers, and that the only sensible responses are agnostic ones, where we acknowledge that we cannot know the answers and get on with living the best possible lives, here and now. Humanists think that the really important questions for all of us are answerable: How can I live a fulfilled and worthwhile life? How can I help others to do this?

Who am I?

People sometimes spend their lives searching for "the real me". They worry that their personalities are unfixed, or they lack self-esteem or confidence. Our personalities do change with experience and changes of context, and depend on a complex mixture of what we inherit genetically from our parents and our environment - everything that ever happens to us. Everyone is unique, though humanists believe that we have a great deal in common because we are all human beings, living in human societies. Some people find what they need in religion: an identity as a religious believer or as a child of god, and a community of like-minded people. For the non-religious it is not so easy, but some non-religious people gain confidence in their beliefs and values by studying Philosophy or by learning more about Humanism.

"You are an intelligent human being. Your life is valuable for its own sake. You are not second-class in the universe, deriving meaning and purpose from some other mind. You are not inherently evil - you are inherently human, possessing the positive rational potential to help make this a world of morality, peace and joy. Trust yourself."

- Dan Barker *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist*

How did I get here?

The universe began with the "big bang", when it is thought that matter - stars, planets and other bodies - was created out of energy in a huge

explosion. On Earth, the right physical conditions arose for carbon-based life to be possible, beginning with a "soup" of increasingly complex organic molecules and inorganic salts which developed into amino acids and then nucleic acids. Millions of years of evolution by natural selection (which continues even now) happened to produce Homo sapiens, human beings, one species amongst the many and various species that exist and have existed. And you are one individual of our species, here because your parents conceived you. No other reason. It is a wonder that you exist, and your uniqueness is amazing! We should also celebrate how much humans have managed to find out about how we got here - we are a remarkable species.

How do we know about the world?

Humanists trust scientific method, that is observation and experiment, as the best ways of finding out how the world works. Good scientists are always prepared to abandon theories if new evidence contradicts them and to come up with better theories – that is how our understanding of the world has increased. Many theories achieve the status of knowledge or truth because the evidence for them is so sound and there has been no evidence against them.

Humanists do not think that there things can be "true for you but not for me" or that there are special "religious" kinds of truth. They prefer to use the word "faith" or "belief" for beliefs which are not backed up by evidence, and "opinion" for matters of personal judgment. It is important to learn to distinguish things that are matters of personal taste or judgment from things that are matters of fact. Just believing things does not make them true, even if thousands of people believe them. At one time everyone believed the world was flat, but that didn't make it flat.

Where am I going?

"I was not - I have been - I am not - I do not mind."
Epicurean epitaph, from 2300 years ago

Human beings are like other living creatures. We are born, some of us will reproduce, and we all eventually die. But humans are probably unlike any other creature in worrying about where our lives are going. Most us can make important choices which influence how our lives turn out. Within limits, we can choose to work or be idle, who our friends will be, who we settle down with, whether we have children, what kind of job or career we follow. Humanists believe that we should make responsible informed choices which will help our lives to go in a worthwhile and fulfilling direction.

What happens to us when we die?

"Be sure then that you have nothing to fear in death. Someone who no longer exists cannot suffer, or differ in any way from someone who has not been born."

Lucretius (c95-55BCE) On the Nature of the Universe

Humanists believe that we only live once, that this life is "not a dress rehearsal". In theory it would be possible to combine disbelief in gods with a belief in an immortal consciousness (or "soul"). But in practice, the desire for evidence or proof before commitment to a belief prevents most humanists from living as though there were any kind of afterlife. The idea of a non-material existence after we die doesn't make sense to many humanists. What could life be like without everything that makes it interesting and worthwhile; our bodies (which communicate with others and move us around), our senses (through which we experience life), our brains (which contain all our knowledge and memories)? We will no longer exist as people, though the molecules that make up our body will still exist as part of the natural world. Humanists believe that the only ways we can live on are in other people's memories of us, in the work we have done while alive, or in our children. Humanist funerals are a positive celebration of a person's life, specially created for that person and their family, with music, readings and time to reflect. Many people, including religious ones, tell the BHA that they find humanist funerals dignified and caring, absolutely right for someone who didn't believe in God or an afterlife.

Is life meaningless?

"Limiting the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of an enjoyment."

Sigmund Freud On Transience, 1916

We can seem very small and insignificant when we think about the vast size and age of the universe. Some people think that if there is no life after death life is somehow meaningless and pointless. But our individual lives and feelings are still important to us, and something that comes to an end is not necessarily meaningless - it can be all the more precious. Humanists have to create their own meanings for their lives, without any illusions about their own importance in the grand scheme of things or any concern for reward or punishment after death. The main thing is to try to be happy now, while we are alive, and to make other people happy. We don't get another chance.

What is it all for, then?

The stark truth is that life isn't "for" anything, it just is; there is no underlying purpose to it all. But human beings have the great privilege of

intelligence, imagination, creativity - we can give our own lives a sense of direction and purpose. We may have many worthwhile purposes and projects that make us feel that life is worth living; there doesn't have to be just one purpose (for example, to do God's will). Realising this can give a great sense of freedom and relief - the fact that we are clever enough to think of these kinds of question doesn't mean that there are real answers.

Who can I trust?

"It is not so much our friends' help that we value, as the confident knowledge that they will help us."
Epicurus Fragments, c300 BCE

Humanists like to think for themselves, but this doesn't mean they can't trust anyone. They don't trust traditional authorities simply because they are authorities, or gods for whom there is no evidence. They do trust those human beings who respect evidence and the truth, and, of course, we all trust in other people who have earned our trust - our friends and relations who we can rely on to help us. Most people actually are quite trustworthy - we go about our lives amongst other people every day and it is really quite rare to be a victim of violence or hatred or abuse - because sensible people realise that a good life is best based on mutual respect. Humanists also think that we have to trust ourselves and other human beings to sort out problems, large or small, because there is no god out there to do it for us.

What matters most?

To humanists this life and living as good a life while we are here are what matter most. People will have different ideas about how to achieve this, and we will not always succeed, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth trying. A question that can bring this into focus for many people is: What would I like to be remembered for when I am dead? (It's not likely to be making a lot of money, or neglecting your friends and relations.)

How do I know what's right?

"Virtue is attended by more peace of mind than vice and meets with a more favourable reception from the world."
David Hume Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748

Religious people sometimes look to their sacred texts or to religious authorities for guidance on moral questions. But most of us more usually trust our "consciences", the part of our minds that warns us to think about the consequences of what we do, to treat other people as we would like to be treated, to avoid harming others or the planet, and which makes us feel uneasy when we don't. Some people think that conscience is a voice from God, but humanists believe that it is an aspect of our character,

perhaps partly instinctive because we are a social species that does best when we co-operate with each other, and perhaps partly developed by our upbringing as we learn how to get on with other people. Of course, it can be harder to do what is right than to know what is right, but doing the right thing usually turns out better in the long run, and we certainly feel better about our actions.

What do humanists believe?

You will have learnt a lot about what humanists believe from the answers above. Humanists don't like being called "unbelievers" or "non-believers" (common, if slightly old-fashioned words for the non-religious) because, of course, humanists believe all sorts of things, but mostly or always things based on evidence and experience.

You can find books about science and evolution by excellent writers such as Richard Dawkins, Steve Jones or Stephen Jay Gould, in any good library or bookshop. If you want to know more about humanist beliefs and ideas, you might also like to try:

Richard Norman *On Humanism* (Routledge, 2004)

Stephen Law, *The Philosophy Files*

Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy: the Basics* (Routledge)

Simon Blackburn, *Think* (Oxford)

Eds Peter Cave and Brendan Larvor *Thinking About Death* (BHA, 2004)

Julian Baggini *A Very Short Guide to Atheism* (Oxford)
