

A Short Course On Humanism

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About this course

This short course is intended as an introduction for adults who would like to find out more about Humanism, but especially for those who already consider themselves, or think they might be, humanists.

Each section contains a concise account of humanist thinking and a section of questions to think about or discuss: ‘What do you think?’ (See www.humanism.org.uk for some BHA answers to some of these questions.) At the back of the booklet you will find lists of further reading, arranged by topic and section, for those who wish to delve deeper. Reading can be done before or after the relevant section. The course will probably work best if taken in the order suggested, with time between sections for further reading and reflection. But it is quite flexible and each section is more or less self-contained, so that you can spend more time on some sections than others, according to your prior knowledge and interests. This is not a course for which you have to write essays or take tests, or which will earn you a certificate. But we hope that you will find it interesting, stimulating and reassuring. It is not designed to convert you, but if you find yourself in agreement with much of what you read here, you might like to consider supporting the British Humanist Association (BHA) and your local humanist group.

Humanist groups or adult classes will find the course useful as a source of discussion material or as a way of introducing new members or adult learners to humanist ideas and history.

The unexamined life
is not worth living.

Socrates

The un-lived life is not
worth examining.

Anon

The good life is one
inspired by love and
guided by knowledge.

Bertrand Russell

Fear is the main source
of superstition and one
of the main sources of
cruelty. To conquer fear is
the beginning of wisdom.

Bertrand Russell

*‘An Outline of Intellectual
Rubbish’ in Unpopular
Essays, 1950*

Do you think that a year is lost when it is spent teaching that first appearances do not reveal all of truth? Do you think that it is not a good thing that, for reflections on human nature, on needs and the reasons for beliefs, on science and morals, we should be informed that all is not clear, that the world and thought pose complex problems that must be approached with modesty?

Gabriel Seailles

A Defence of Philosophy

Where it is a duty to worship the sun, it is pretty sure to be a crime to examine the laws of heat.

John Morley

*19th-century biographer
and philosopher*

Students may want to begin by introducing themselves and discussing what they expect from the course. We suggest that students read each section before the discussion, and then re-read it together, before tackling the questions. If time is short they should choose the questions they find most interesting or challenging to concentrate on – there is no need to cover all of them. The course can be adapted or expanded to suit the students or the group.

Groups might also like to share out the further reading in advance of each section and report back to each other in the next session. The books mentioned should be obtainable through your local library service.

It may be useful to choose someone to chair the discussion and to ensure that it remains on the subject. Worcestershire Humanists, who tested out a pilot version of this course, enjoyed lively discussions over a bottle or two of wine, and provided much useful feedback. They found that each section took about two hours.

Further courses on Humanism, and on humanist approaches to various topics, can be found at www.humanism.org.uk/courses.

Introduction:

What is Humanism?

‘Humanism is an approach to life based on humanity and reason – humanists recognise that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone and that the aims of morality should be human welfare, happiness, and fulfillment. Our decisions are based on the available evidence and our assessment of the outcomes of our actions, not on any dogma or sacred text.’ (BHA 2011)

‘Humanists think that:

- ✦ this world and this life are all we have
- ✦ we should try to live full and happy lives ourselves and, as part of this, make it easier for other people to do the same
- ✦ all situations and people deserve to be judged on their merits by standards of reason and humanity
- ✦ individuality and social cooperation are equally important.’

A J Ayer, former BHA President, 1960s

More definitions

Humanism

‘Contemporary humanism is a morally concerned style of intellectual atheism openly avowed by only a small minority of individuals (for example, those who are members of the British Humanist Association [BHA]) but tacitly accepted by a wide spectrum of educated people in all parts of the Western world.’ (*Oxford Companion to the Mind*)

If you are a humanist, that means you care about other human beings, and everything you do affects other human beings, so you have to think about that – even shopping for a bunch of grapes becomes part of a whole pattern of right and wrong.

Claire Rayner

*writer, broadcaster, journalist,
and former BHA President*

I arrived at my beliefs, as everybody should, by examining evidence... Something that has traditionally aroused religious feeling in people, the sense of wonder, is aroused in me by the contemplation of the world and the universe... I know I'm going to die eventually, and die forever. But before I do, I mean to use my brain to the greatest possible extent to understand why I was born....

Richard Dawkins
BHA Vice President

You devalue the good things in life if you really think there's something better somewhere else. This is all there is, but it's pretty good. Those that look elsewhere perhaps sometimes don't look hard enough for what's best all around us.

Polly Toynbee
journalist, broadcaster, social activist, and former BHA President

'The rejection of religion in favour of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts.' (*Collins Concise Dictionary*)

'...a non-religious philosophy, based on liberal human values.' (*Little Oxford Dictionary*)

'...seeking, without religion, the best in, and for human beings.' (*Chambers Pocket Dictionary*)

'...an appeal to reason in contrast to revelation or religious authority as a means of finding out about the natural world and destiny of man, and also giving a grounding for morality... Humanist ethics is also distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity rather than in fulfilling the will of God.' (*Oxford Companion to Philosophy*)

Agnosticism; agnostic

'The view that nothing is known, or can be known, of the existence of God or other supernatural phenomena; one who so believes.' Often used less precisely to describe doubt and indecision. Term first coined by T H Huxley in 1869, from the word 'gnostic', meaning 'relating to knowledge', especially spiritual knowledge; a-gnostic meaning without knowledge. Some humanists are firm agnostics.

Atheism; atheist

From the Greek 'atheos', meaning 'without God'. Disbelief in the existence of God or gods; one who disbelieves, or who chooses to live on the assumption, that gods do not exist. Atheism does not necessarily imply adherence to any value system and some religious people are atheists, eg. Buddhists or Jains. Many thoughtful atheists, however, realise that disbelief in gods places on human beings all responsibility for their own actions and the consequences of their actions, and for making the world a better place – in effect, they are also humanists. Many humanists are atheists.

To be a humanist you don't have to read anything or do anything: there are no obligatory texts or rituals or

meetings; you don't have to wear particular clothes or avoid particular foods. Humanism is a way of thinking rather than a way of life, though, of course, the way you think will affect the way you live. Most humanists think their ideas are common sense (though unfortunately they are not all that common); you may well have worked out very similar ideas for yourself.

There have always been people who lived without religious faith, even when it was unusual or dangerous to do so. International polls have shown that about 20% of the people in the world today do not believe in a god or gods, most of them in the developed world. In the UK, polls have shown about 30% of the population sharing the beliefs of humanists. Non-believers may call themselves freethinkers, secularists, rationalists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists, secular humanists, scientific humanists. Though there may be subtle differences between these labels, all reject belief in things for which there is no evidence, such as god or gods, and an immortal soul or an afterlife.

Thoughtful non-religious people ask themselves the same questions as everyone else: Why am I here? Is there a purpose to life? How did life begin? Is there life after death? Why should we be good? Most religious people come up with answers based on faith in god(s); those who are not religious look for answers based on reason and experience. As there is no humanist authority or sacred text to guide humanists, they have to think for themselves and may not always agree about everything. But by using reason and experience as guides, humanists can and do arrive at substantially similar core beliefs. Many humanists have arrived at their beliefs more or less by themselves, and are often delighted and reassured to find that others, including some of the greatest thinkers of the past, have reached similar conclusions about life. 'Humanist' is usually used these days to describe convictions which combine the absence of belief in the supernatural with a positive ethical philosophy: 'Good without God.'

Now I know what I believe!

Elderly woman

*after a public lecture
on Humanism*

I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for other people.

Katherine Hepburn

Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived.

Oscar Wilde

1.

A good life without religion

Those who believe in god(s) are often puzzled by those who do not, and can ask searching questions about how they live without religion. The non-religious, equally, can find it hard to understand faith and the belief that religious people have in the supernatural.

Here are some typical questions and answers:

Q: How can people manage their lives without the love and support of a god?

A: We can manage very well with the support of our fellow humans beings – family, friends, and communities. Human relationships are enough, though you have to be prepared to offer support as well as to accept it.

Q: Isn't life meaningless and pointless without God and an afterlife?

A: 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.

Q: I find my religion inspirational – where can a humanist find that inspiration?

A: We can find it in the beauty of nature and in the ever-growing knowledge of the universe revealed by science; or in creativity in, and appreciation of, the sciences and arts. Love, friendship, and family life can be important sources

It is not so much our friends' help that helps us, as the confident knowledge that they will help us.

Epicurus
c. 300 BCE

of happiness and joy. Human courage and achievement can be inspiring.

Q: What can motivate people to live good lives, if they don't believe in a god who will reward or punish them after this life, or have a sacred text to tell them what to do?

A: The main motivation to behave well and live a good life is found in human nature and society. To survive and live well, we need to live harmoniously and co-operatively in communities. Because we all depend on each other, it is rational to behave towards each other with respect, and to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. The love and respect of others is important to all of us, and we are more likely to achieve this if we are decent human beings. We can work this out for ourselves and live good lives without religious rules and sanctions. (These ideas are further developed in parts 3 and 4.)

Q: How can humanists cope with the idea of complete extinction after death, for themselves and their loved ones?

A: The death of a loved one is difficult for everyone (and many religious believers also often seem to have little confidence that they will meet their loved ones in an afterlife). Non-religious people have to face death stoically and find comfort in the life that was lived. The idea that we will not live on after death can also be a motivation to make the best of the only life we know we have. The knowledge that all that will remain of us is the work we did and the memories people have of us can be a motivation to make those memories good ones.

Q: Why do so many people disbelieve in god(s)?

A: Some people remain open-minded about the existence of god(s), and some people (for example deists or 'Sea of Faith' Christians) believe in a vague or abstract kind of god that plays no part in our lives or the universe now. Most people today never really think about god(s). But those who have thought about and rejected religious belief, and that includes humanists, often give one or more of the following

Wear a smile and have friends; wear a scowl and have wrinkles. What do we live for if not to make the world less difficult for each other!

George Eliot

*19th-century novelist
and journalist*

Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it?

Richard Dawkins

Unweaving the Rainbow, 1998

reasons. (You don't have to agree with all these reasons to be a humanist – some are doubtless better or more relevant today or to you than others – but you may identify with some of them.):

- ✎ They have considered the questions religions claim to answer and found religious answers unsatisfactory. Often people don't choose not to believe; they simply cannot believe in ideas they find incredible or false, and decide to face reality without myths or pretence or false comfort.
- ✎ 'The problem of evil' makes it impossible for many people 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.
- ✎ Religions claim things to be true for which there is no supporting evidence, and encourage belief in the unbelievable and superstition.
- ✎ The rigidity of religious codes of behavior stifles our opportunity to think and act rationally, and, sometimes, ethically. Ancient religious rules are unhelpful when thinking about new moral issues, where reason and compassion are more useful.
- ✎ Religious authority has been, and still some times is, used to justify oppression, discrimination, and injustice (for example, against women, gay people, particular races, and other religious groups). Organised religions can cause deep divisions between people, communities, and nations.
- ✎ Religious differences have been, and still sometimes are, a major cause of war, even when religious leaders preach peace.
- ✎ Religious authority is often used to justify a puritanical and pointless repression of pleasure.
- ✎ Religious authorities often stifle free debate.
- ✎ The promotion of prayer and offerings to gods can prevent people seeking more active and effective solutions to their problems.

Virtue is attended by more peace of mind than vice, and meets with a more favourable reception from the world. I am sensible that, according to the past experience of mankind, friendship is the chief joy of human life and moderation the only source of tranquillity and happiness.

David Hume

philosopher 1711-1776
Enquiry Concerning
Human Understanding

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

c. 95-55 BCE
On the Nature of the Universe

When I ceased to accept the teachings of my youth, it was not so much a process of giving up beliefs, as of discovering that I had never really believed.

Leslie Stephen
The Aims of Ethical
Societies, 1900

- ✦ 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.

In the next section, we will look at how humanists make sense of the world.

For further reading on this section and the next, turn to the back of this booklet.

What do you think?

Although most humanists are happy to live without religion, it still has a role in many people's lives and a special place in British society, and these facts raise issues and questions for humanists, for example:

- ✦ What role should religious organisations have in British society today?
- ✦ Should religious leaders have places in a reformed House of Lords?
- ✦ What should children be taught about religions and non-religious beliefs in schools?
- ✦ The Human Rights Act 1998 enshrines the parental right to educate their children in their own religion or philosophy. Do you think children should also have rights, for example, not be indoctrinated, or the right to be taught about a range of religions and beliefs in an objective, fair, and balanced way?
- ✦ Are you concerned about the segregation of children by religion in faith-based state schools?

2.

Making sense of the world

How do we know about ourselves, the world around us, the universe?

Humanists say that we should look for good evidence before saying we know or believe something. They are empiricists, basing their knowledge on the experience provided by their senses (sometimes at second hand). Humanists think that we should question received ideas, and do not believe that we can know anything simply by reference to divine authority or revelation, to tradition or to sacred texts. They do not think that the absence of evidence for or against a hypothesis is sufficient basis for belief or knowledge.

There is no evidence for the existence of gods or an afterlife. The support given for such claims tends to be of the type that non-religious people do not have much faith in: within sacred texts or handed down by tradition or authority figures; or from personal experiences and therefore impossible to examine or prove.

For similar reasons, humanists believe that this is the only life we have, and it is not a preparation for another life, after death. And humanists also tend to be sceptical about the paranormal: miracles, astrology, feng shui, parallel universes, aliens from outer space, ghosts, angels, and so on. We are not obliged to disprove these phenomena – the onus is on believers in improbable phenomena to prove them.

A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.

David Hume

philosopher 1711 – 1776

I try not to think with my gut. If I'm serious about understanding the world, thinking with anything besides my brain, as tempting as that might be, is likely to get me into trouble. It's OK to reserve judgement until the evidence is in.

Carl Sagan

cosmologist

on being asked for his gut feeling on a question to which he did not know the answer

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

Scientific thinking, with its respect for the truth, experience, and reason, has been a major influence on many humanists, and many of them have an essentially scientific, materialist view of the universe. Most rational people (not just scientists) value the scientific method (hypothesis → testing by experiment / observation → more powerful hypothesis → further testing by experiment, and so on) and the knowledge we gain from scientists.

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 voice of 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...'

Dr John Gribbin

'Why Bother With Science?'
in *The Independent*

Science is one of the very few human activities – perhaps the only one – in which errors are systematically criticised and fairly often, in time, corrected. This is why we can say that, in science, we often learn from our mistakes, and why we can speak clearly about making progress there.

Sir Karl Popper

philosopher and former member of BHA's Advisory Council, 1963
Conjectures and Refutations

Science offers us powerful tools for understanding the world, and has helped to improve our health and standard of living. However, the twentieth century has brought home to us that exploitation of scientific development can be harmful as well as beneficial, and that progress must go hand in hand with ethical principles.

Scientific knowledge, like other kinds of knowledge, is amoral – neither moral nor immoral – though how knowledge is obtained and used can raise moral questions. It is for society to decide how, or whether, to use the knowledge produced by science.

Because humanists believe that this is the only life we have, and do not believe in supernatural forces that will help humanity to solve its problems, they believe that we humans must use our knowledge and understanding to solve problems and make life happier. If specific scientific developments (however 'unnatural') turn out to be for the good of humanity, then humanists would support them, unless the costs were too great (and this includes environmental and social costs, as well as economic). If they would do more harm than good, then they would oppose them.

Humanists favour rational scientific explanations for the beginning of the universe and the existence of life on Earth. At the same time they acknowledge that these are only the best possible explanations, and that they develop and change as our knowledge grows. 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 (though fewer in the US) also accept 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.

Morality has evolved too, and is based on human nature and needs, independent of religion. All human beings are members of the same species and share many common characteristics, needs, and values.

This view, that morality is based on human nature and experience, has been called ‘naturalism’. Humans evolved as a co-operative species – we need to live and work together. Very few of us could survive long or be happy without other people.

This idea will be further developed in Part 3. For further reading on this section and the next (on humanist ethics), turn to the back of this booklet.

What do you think?

- ✎ Do you believe anything for which you have not got good evidence? What authorities do you trust, and why?
- ✎ How far do you agree with the quotations in this section?
- ✎ An argument one often hears from religious believers is that the chance evolution of complex life forms is about as likely as throwing pieces of metal in the air to create a functioning airplane. How would you answer this?
- ✎ One often hears the arguments that scientists ‘play God’ or ‘tamper with nature’. How might a humanist answer these?

The key features [of science] are defining solvable problems, testing ideas, preferably quantitatively against reality, the importance of controls, and the key role of peer review.

Lewis Wolpert

BHA Vice President writing in The Independent

As man advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races.

Charles Darwin

The Descent of Man, 1871

3.

Where do moral values come from?

Humanists believe that moral values originated, and continue to develop, along with human nature and society, and are indeed based on human nature and society. If human civilisation were to develop all over again, it is highly unlikely that the same religions would develop all over again. But it is likely that our basic moral principles would be the same, because human beings, who have evolved to live in groups, would always need the kinds of rule which enable us to live together co-operatively and harmoniously. Although anthropologists in the past emphasised the differences between human societies, and xenophobes, racists, and fundamentalists have always stressed and exploited cultural differences, human beings have in fact much more in common than our superficial differences suggest. Recent anthropological studies and the work of evolutionary biologists and psychologists have brought home to us how much of our behaviour is universal, including our basic needs and values.

Humanists are always being told that moral values come from religions, transmitted through sacred texts and priests, and that even the values of non-religious people have been absorbed from the religions around them. Even some non-religious people believe this, and it can be a source of insecurity for them, an area where they are made to feel indebted to a religious culture that they do not share, and where they are patronised or criticised by religious believers. Many people, including some non-religious people, worry

Why should I consider others?...Myself, I think the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one – because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and co-operative than if they are hostile and resentful.

Margaret Knight

humanist academic, in a controversial broadcast in 1955

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

Robert Green Ingersoll

*American humanists
The Gods, 1876*

that a general move away from religious faith will bring about some kind of moral breakdown in society.

We have all heard politicians, for example, claiming that more religion in schools will reduce juvenile crime, and we have all read stories about wrongdoers giving up lives of crime because they discovered religion.

There is much confusion around. The derivation of values is not such a simple issue that we can unravel it all in a neat sentence or easily win the argument. Trying to assert that moral values are not dependent on religion to someone who is convinced otherwise can be a frustrating experience; yet assert it humanists do and must, because we should not condone what is untrue, unfair to non-religious people, and a damaging idea in an increasingly non-religious society.

Humanists have been impressed with the apparently universal nature of the Golden Rule, 'Do as you would be done by' or 'Treat other people in a way you would like to be treated yourself'. All traditions seem to have come up with a version of it. It can be formulated both positively (as above) and negatively ('Don't do things to other people that you wouldn't like done to you.'). It is a principle based on reciprocity and necessitated by our desire to be treated well by others and to live harmoniously in groups. It can be worked out by anyone, anywhere, by reference to experience. We have only to look around and think to realise that no one, for example, likes to be bullied or to have their property stolen. Some values can also be seen in other social animals, for example mutual help is common in intelligent social animals such as chimpanzees. Ideas like this do not need to be revealed to us by a deity.

Our common human nature explains the considerable agreement between religions, societies, and ethical and legal systems, about what is good or bad, tolerable or intolerable, moral or immoral, even when they disagree about where their values came from. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has gained wide international acceptance, and which celebrated its sixtieth anniversary

in 2008, is underpinned by an understanding of basic human needs and values. In England and Wales, a National Forum for Values in Education and the Community formulated a statement of values, which was then given to MORI who polled 3200 schools, 700 national organisations and 1500 individuals. About 90% of people agreed with the statement, showing that even within a multicultural and pluralistic society, there is still considerable agreement about moral values. The Statement of Shared Values was published by School Curriculum and Assessment Authority in 1996, and included statements like:

‘We value the natural world as a source of wonder and inspiration, and accept our duty to maintain a sustainable environment for the future.’ and ‘We value families as sources of love and support for all their members [and] as the basis of a society where people care for others.’

These universal social and moral values still leave considerable leeway in their interpretation, and this accounts for disagreements about particular moral questions. There are, of course, some specifically religious values: for example rules about diet, family and marriage, or religious observance. Some religious people define as

The ten commandments are often said to be the basis of our moral codes and laws. Reread the Ten Commandments (abridged version below, or see Exodus 20, 7-17 or Deuteronomy 5, 7-21), and think about the questions that follow.

The Ten Commandments

1. **Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**
2. **Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.**
3. **Thou shalt not take the name of the lord thy god in vain.**
4. **Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.**
5. **Honour thy father and thy mother.**
6. **Thou shalt not kill.**
7. **Thou shalt not commit adultery.**
8. **Thou shalt not steal.**
9. **Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.**
10. **Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house nor thy neighbour’s wife... Nor anything that is thy neighbour’s.**

Q: How many of these are moral commandments?

Q: How many of these are derived from shared human values, not unique to Judaeo-Christian religions?

Q: How many of these do you think should be absolute (that is, allow no exceptions)?

Q: Do you think it would help people to live better lives if they were posted up on school walls and learnt by heart?

Q: What moral problems are not covered by them (even if you interpret them fairly broadly)?

Q: What attitude to women is conveyed by the 10th commandment?

Q: Can you improve on them?

Q: What would humanist commandments be?

Q: Would your commandments be more positive?

‘good’ anything that a religion or deity commands. But most people, including most moral philosophers, prefer other means (human reason) and other criteria (such as consequences for well-being) for judging right and wrong. Besides, many religious rules are not about morality at all. (Look at the Ten Commandments – how many of them are actually moral rules?) Many religious rules are based on tradition, or on practices that might have been useful in the past, but within the religion they have achieved the status of moral values, so that, for example, some groups think it wrong to eat pork or to use contraception. Some religious values are generally, and unthinkingly, accepted as morally worthwhile – for example the Christian edict to ‘turn the other cheek’ – but may, on reflection, be less unambiguously good than appears. Would it be right to turn the other cheek when bullied or exploited? Wouldn’t this encourage bad people to go on behaving badly, to the detriment of society?

Morality without religion

Humanist ethics make human beings solely responsible for working out and implementing moral values. Of course, we do not choose our moral values completely arbitrarily – they must be based on principles that respect the autonomy of others and the general welfare. Morality is much more necessary than religion, and in an era of declining religious belief it is a dangerous mistake to confuse the two. Religious faith does motivate and support some people in living better lives, and that is surely a good thing for the community – the more good people there are, the better for all of us. But religion is not essential for morality (as many religious people would agree). Many non-religious people think that it is actually more moral to think for oneself, and to make responsible and independent choices without divine authority or the hope of divine reward in an afterlife. Freely choosing to help someone else is surely more virtuous than helping someone out of obedience or because you expect some kind of reward.

Because this is the only life we have, humanists believe that we should all try to live full and happy lives, and one way to do this is to help other people to do the same. We should base our moral choices on the reasonably predictable effects of actions in particular situations, and review our moral codes in the light of changes in society and human knowledge. It is reasonable to enjoy the good things in life if we can do so without harming others or the environment.

Humanists have often been very active in charitable work, education and social reform, and campaigning for human rights, peace, and international co-operation. At the United Nations, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), and WHO (World Health Organisation) were all led by humanists in their early years. Humanists also played important parts in establishing organisations such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), London Zoo, the Science Museum, Oxfam, and Imperial College, London. Humanists believe that any rewards and punishments we may receive are in this life. They are not always very tangible and the world is full of injustice – bad people do often prosper and good

Humanists have often written alternative decalogues.

This is one written by Bertrand Russell, Prominent 20th century philosopher and advisor to the Ethical Union and the BHA in its early days. Can you improve upon Russell's commandments, written in the last century?

A Liberal Decalogue

Bertrand Russell

The Ten Commandments that, as a teacher, I should wish to promulgate, might be set forth as follows:

- ✎ Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
- ✎ Do not think it worth while to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
- ✎ Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.
- ✎ When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your husband or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.
- ✎ Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.
- ✎ Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.
- ✎ Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.
- ✎ Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.
- ✎ Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.
- ✎ Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fools' paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

people suffer. Nevertheless, it isn't naïve or stupid to be good, as some cynics would have it, but actually a sensible response to the problems of living with other people: decent people do generally earn the affection and respect of others, and don't live in fear of disapproval or punishment, and so are generally happier; those who actively care about and for other people usually have better relationships and more rewarding lives.

BHA members give money and/or time generously and regularly to an average of 6 charities each. Humanists tend to plan their giving rationally and selectively, but most also respond generously to emergency appeals and street collections. The most popular causes were those connected with social welfare (27%) and international development/aid (21%). Only 4% of BHA members in a survey of 2000 did not support any charities.

Questions to think about and more extracts on pages 11 and 12.

What do you think?

- ✎ If you were the only person on Earth, would you need moral rules?
- ✎ Have you ever observed or read about 'goodness' or altruism in other animals?
- ✎ How would the principles discussed on pages 13 and 14 help you to think about a current ethical debate? (See next section, or choose an issue in the news to discuss).

4.

Applying humanist ethics

When we consider moral problems, the difficulties of applying any moral code or set of principles to a new or unique problem become apparent. The Ten Commandments, the teachings of the New Testament, the writings of moral philosophers, even the Golden Rule, don't always seem to offer clear or acceptable solutions, for example when the problems relate to non-human animals or the environment, or when we are forced to choose the lesser of two bad outcomes. The first two hypothetical 'thought experiments' expose some of the difficulties; the third problem is a complicated contemporary ethical issue.

You might prefer to take other current moral issues from the news and try applying humanist principles to them.

The first two questions are taken from *Exploring Ethics*, by Jeremy Hayward, Gerald Jones, and Marilyn Mason, a collection of photocopiable activities for students published by John Murray.

You are on a business trip visiting a foreign country and, as part of your tour, your hosts show you round a local prison. You are shocked to find that the guards are about to execute six local political prisoners. The prison governor announces that as today is a festival, you will have the opportunity to save the lives of five of these prisoners: in a gesture of goodwill to his important guest he explains that if you will shoot one of the prisoners, the others will be spared. What do you do?

Humanists will differ in their answers to ethical questions, but they will usually employ a combination of reason and compassion in their moral thinking

An empty train is fast approaching a junction. You are standing by the points. If you do nothing, the train will run over a baby who has crawled onto the line. If you alter the points, the train will be diverted and will run over a drunken old tramp who is lying on the other line. What do you do?

Both situations raise the question of acts and omissions. If you act (shoot a prisoner) one dies; if you omit to act, all six die. If you do something you cause the death of a tramp; if you don't do anything the baby is killed. Is there a moral difference between killing someone and letting someone die?

Most of us instinctively feel that an omission is not as bad as an act – and this argument is often invoked in discussions about voluntary euthanasia or our obligation to give to charities. But are we justified in making this distinction, or are we just being selfish or irrational? The philosopher Peter Singer certainly thinks the latter – his form of utilitarianism, which demands that we give away all our spare money and do all that we can to decrease suffering in the world, even if this sometimes involves infanticide or euthanasia, is every bit as demanding as traditional moral codes, and highly controversial.

Other moral problems raised include the difficulties involved in choosing between bad outcomes, and in choosing between individuals: whose rights do we respect, when we have to choose? We also have to decide how much information we have to gather before making a decision, and how much weight to give to secondary issues.

An interesting question to think about, after you have discussed the rights and wrongs of the two situations, is what you based your reasoning on. Intuition and feelings? Obedience to rules or principles, for example the Golden Rule? Considering the consequences?

Humanists will differ in their answers to the above questions, but they will usually employ a combination of reason and compassion in their moral thinking, trying to

work out the best possible consequences for human welfare and happiness. It is not always easy, as the above dilemmas demonstrate, but traditional moral codes, like the Ten Commandments, don't give a clear or right answer either.

What should a rational person think about genetic research and engineering?

This is a complicated contemporary moral issue and difficult to summarise concisely, but it is interesting to consider because it involves our relationship to the non-human world, and recent scientific developments.

What's the issue?

Genes direct the production and structure of proteins, the basic building blocks of body tissue, and the chemicals which drive the multitude of reactions which form the basis of life itself. By learning more about them by scientific experiment, it is possible that we will find cures for diseases such as cancers and cystic fibrosis, and be able to create new plants and animals. But although research in these new areas of biotechnology is still in its infancy, and we have seen few of the advantages or disadvantages yet, there is much public concern about the possible consequences, combined with a low level of public understanding of the facts.

There are two main areas of genetic research that currently cause ethical concerns:

- ✎ genetic engineering – the manipulation of genetic material for specific reasons, for example to clone organisms, or to modify crops, or to create animals with human-compatible organs for transplantation, or human beings with particular characteristics. It is faster and more specific than traditional selective breeding. Some of this genetic manipulation is 'transgenic', that is, it combines genes from

different species, and so would be impossible without genetic engineering.

- ✦ genetic mapping, testing and therapy – some diseases are caused by inherited abnormal genes, the result of mutations which lead to a protein not being made at all, or being over-produced, or made abnormally. More and more is being discovered about which human genes are involved in which characteristics, and about the structure of normal genes. This means that more diseases and disabilities will become detectable or predictable very early, sometimes even before birth, although these will still be a minority. They may then be treatable by gene therapy, which could take the form of ‘somatic’ therapy, which replaces a defective gene in a particular body tissue without affecting the reproductive capacity of the patient or future generations, or ‘germline’ therapy in which new genetic information can be passed on to future generations.

Currently, somatic therapies may offer short-term improvements in conditions; germline therapies offer better hopes of long term cures, but because of fears about their side-effects on future generations, they are illegal in many countries (including the UK). Most gene-related diseases are very complex, involving many different genes, and the interactions between them, as well as environmental factors; indeed they may not be easily treatable. These factors raise new, often conflicting, issues in medical ethics.

The discussion begins with a cautiously optimistic article by a well known scientist, reprinted with the kind permission of *The Evening Standard*, where it was first published in August 1998, and the writer, who is a BHA Vice President Richard Dawkins has written extensively about scientific issues, most recently in his books *Climbing Mount Improbable*, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, and *The Greatest Show on Earth*.



Who's afraid of the Frankenstein Wolf?

Richard Dawkins

To listen to some people, you'd think genetically modified foods were radioactive. But genetic engineering is not, of itself, either bad or good. It depends on what you engineer. Doubtless a malevolent geneticist could stick a poison gene into a potato. If we insert a gene for making oil of peppermint, we'll end up with peppermint flavoured potatoes. It's up to us.

There's nothing new about genetic modification. That's precisely what evolution is, and it's Darwinian evolution that put us all here. All plants, and animals including humans, are genetically modified versions of ancestors. Darwinian modifications are not designed; they evolve by natural selection – the survival of the fittest – which may or may not be good from our point of view. Mosquitoes are genetically modified to eat humans, which is good for them and bad for us. Silkworms are genetically modified by natural selection to make silk, which is good for them and also good for us because we steal the stuff.

Most genes are placed where they are by natural evolution. We can achieve a little further adjustment by artifice, and here we at least have the opportunity to tailor changes that are

good for us. We can selectively breed – a kind of artificial version of Darwinian selection which we've been practising for thousands of years. And we can genetically engineer. This is a technique that we're only just beginning to learn, and like all novelty it arouses fear.

Genetically engineered plants have been sensationally called Frankenstein plants. But traditionally bred domestic peas are 10 times the volume of their wild ancestors. Does this make them Frankenstein peas? The wild ancestors of corn cobs were half an inch long. Today a domestic cob may be one and a half feet long. Yet nobody accuses our forebears of 'playing God' when they bred them. Are spaniels and whippets Frankenstein wolves?

Presumably selective breeding seems less sinister because it's a little older than genetic engineering. But both techniques are extremely young compared with the long history of Darwinian genetic modification that produced wild plants and animals in the first place. I am reminded of the old lady who refused to enter an aeroplane, on the grounds that if God had meant us to fly He'd never have given us the railway.

Both natural selection (which gave us the maize plant in the first place) and artificial selection (which lengthened its cobs thirty-fold) depend on random genetic error – mutation – and recombination, followed by non-random survival. The difference is that in natural selection the fittest automatically survive. In artificial selection we choose the survivors, and we may also arrange cunning hybridization regimes. In genetic engineering we additionally exercise control over the mutations themselves. We do this either by directly doctoring the genes, or by importing them from another species, sometimes a very distant species. This is what 'transgenic' means.

And now, here's a potential problem. Natural selection favours genes that have had plenty of time to get adjusted to the other genes that are also being favoured in the species – the gene pool becomes a balanced set of mutually compatible genes (I explain this in a chapter called *The Selfish Cooperator* in my forthcoming book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*). One of the problems is that the balance may be upset. Pekineses, bred to satisfy questionable human whims, have consequent difficulties with their breathing. Bulldogs have trouble being born. Transgenic importation of genes might raise even worse problems of this kind, because the genes come from a more distantly alien genetic climate, and the translocation is even more recent. This is a danger we must think about.

Genetic engineering is a more powerful way to modify life than traditional artificial selection, so the potential for danger is greater as well as the potential for good.

Environmental dangers are likely to outweigh nutritional ones, mainly because knock-on environmental effects are so complicated and hard to predict. But some risks can be foreseen. Suppose there is an indiscriminate poison which is cheaper to produce than sophisticated selective weedkillers, but which cannot be used because it kills the crop along

with the weeds. Now suppose a gene is introduced which makes wheat, say, completely immune to this particular herbicide.

Farmers who sow the transgenic wheat can scatter the otherwise deadly poison with impunity, thereby increasing their profits but with potentially disastrous effects on the environment. If the same company patents both the poison and its genetic antidote, the monopolistic combination would be a nice little earner for the company, while the rest of us would see it as a menace. On the other hand, enlightened genetic engineers might achieve exactly the opposite effect, positively benefiting the environment by reducing the quantity of weedkiller required. There is a choice.

Part of what we have to fear from genetic engineering is a paradox – it is too good at what it does. As ever, science’s formidable power makes correspondingly formidable demands on society’s wisdom. The more powerful the science, the greater the potential for evil as well as good. And the more important it is that we make the right choices over how we use it. A major difficulty is political – deciding who is the ‘we’ in that sentence. If decisions over genetic engineering are left to the marketplace alone, the long-term interests of the environment are unlikely to be well served. But that is true of so many aspects of life.

Hysterical damners of genetic engineering in all its forms are tactically inept, like the boy who cried wolf. They distract attention from the real dangers that might follow from abusing the technology, and they therefore play into the hands of cynical corporations eager to profit from such abuse.

What is the humanist view?

Scientific developments have the potential to cause new problems as well as bring benefits. Getting hold of the facts, assessing the risks, and balancing the probable consequences for welfare or harm must be the basis of ethical decision-making. A humanist would consider the following questions:

- ✦ Where can we get reliable information? The media? Public opinion? Politicians? Scientists? Doctors? Religious leaders? The food industry? Environmentalists? Animal welfare experts? Animal rights campaigners? Philosophers?

- ✎ What are the potential benefits? For human health and welfare, for animals, for food production, for the environment. Find current examples of as many of the benefits as you can. If current examples do not yet exist, think of developments which could realistically happen in the next ten years.
- ✎ What are the potential problems? For human health and welfare, for animals, for food production, for the environment. Find current examples of as many of the problems as you can. If current examples do not yet exist, think of developments which could realistically happen in the next ten years.

Quality of life?

Humanists will want to see improvements in the quality of human lives. But, even when everything is taken into account, it can be difficult to see whether some aspects of genetic engineering will or will not achieve this. Humanists will think that it is essential that open and well informed

debate continues, and it seems sensible that this is based on further research, but also think that commercial development should be restricted and highly regulated. It maybe preferable that research be carried out by impartial scientists who are not paid by industry, and tax-payers should be prepared to fund that research, ultimately in their own interests.

Destroying well run experiments must be counter-productive in the search for the truth. We ought also to distinguish

What do you think?

- ✎ How much information about your own health do you want? Are there some things that it is better not to know? Or does knowledge give more control over one's life?
- ✎ Should others – employers, insurance companies, the police, family members – have access to personal genetic information?
- ✎ Should society fund research into very rare disorders?
- ✎ Are experiments on genetic material an ethical problem in the same way that experiments on people, fetuses or animals might be? Can one be cruel to genes?
- ✎ Current theories suggest that most of our inherited characteristics are the results of complex combinations and interactions of genes. How likely, then, are 'designer babies'? Should we be worrying about them?
- ✎ What ethical issues do reproductive cloning or the possible creation of life in the laboratory raise? Make lists of the possible good consequences and possible bad consequences. (The relative length of the lists is not necessarily a guide to the right answer – if one of your bad consequences was, say, 'The eventual destruction of all life on earth' you might feel that this outweighed numerous advantages.)

between possible problems (for example some of the environmental effects of GM crops), and problems that are highly unlikely to arise because the science will be too complex and costly (for example, 'designer babies'). Each development needs to be judged on its own merits and constantly reviewed as our knowledge increases, and, until we are very clear about the risks and consequences, we should try to avoid choices from which there will be no going back. On the other hand, few human activities are without risk and a small amount of risk may be justified if the gains are important.

The BHA has played a part in the debates on these developments, participating in government quangos and committees on genetic issues, and presenting the arguments to students and other members of the public as clearly and objectively as possible.

In the next section you will learn more about work of humanist organisations and the history of Humanism. For further reading on this section and the next, turn to the back of this booklet.

What do you think?

- ✎ What special ethical problems would the reproductive cloning of human beings raise? Do embryos have human rights? At what point do they acquire them?
- ✎ Is therapeutic cloning different? Would it be right to use 'stem cells' from very early embryos to treat diseases or to grow spare parts? What should be done with spare or 'leftover' embryos?
- ✎ If a severely disabled baby is not born, is this a good or bad consequence – for the family? society? the baby?
- ✎ What issues are raised by the possible patenting of genetic sequences or genetically engineered organisms?
- ✎ Are GM crops a huge experiment that we cannot afford? Or a necessary step towards solving some human problems? How much risk are you prepared to tolerate? Should one generation risk the health and welfare of future generations? Do humans always come first?
- ✎ 'The precautionary principle' is a popular one – but many technological advances that we now find useful would not have been permitted if the precautionary principle had been invoked. Can you think of examples?

5.

Humanism: its history and humanist organisations today

A short history of religious and humanist ideas

Human beings have always created spirits, gods, cults, and religions, most of them mutually contradictory. Stories about gods and myths offered pre-scientific explanations of the mysterious workings of nature and the universe. As long as human beings have lived in communities, and long before the Ten Commandments, moral rules which would enable them to live and work together harmoniously have existed, though they were not necessarily connected with religion. In the ancient mythologies, gods or their messengers sometimes administered rewards and punishments, but did not necessarily display exemplary lives themselves.

There have also always been skeptics, though until fairly recently religious skepticism was often met with hostility and persecution, and so tended to remain a private matter. Long before skeptical ideas were widely accepted in Europe, Eastern thinkers expressed skeptical views about the existence of gods or the soul or how the universe came to be. Atheism, a materialist naturalistic view of the cosmos, questioning the need for ritual and the authority of religious texts and priests, and occasional hedonism, have been part of the Indian tradition of philosophy since a thousand years

Don't fear god, don't worry about death; what's good is easy to get, and what's terrible is easy to endure.

Philodemus of Gardara
c. 110 – c40 BCE Epicurean
philosophy summary

Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself.

Confucius
Analects c. 500 BCE

My country is the world, and my religion is to do good.

Thomas Paine
political activist, 1737–1809
The Rights of Man

or more BCE. Confucius, the Chinese thinker who lived about 500 BCE, tried to replace old religious observances with moral values based on reason and humanity, stressing the importance of benevolence, respect for others, and reciprocity as the basis for social and political order.

At about the same time, in ancient Greece, thinkers such as Democritus were teaching that the world we know through our senses is all there is, and that it works naturally without any prior plan. The philosopher Epicurus (c. 341 – 270 BCE) and his followers denied a provident god and immortality, and taught and practised an enlightened form of hedonism, based on a concern for happiness and the desire to live a good life.

Much classical writing was lost to Europeans in the ‘Dark Ages’ when Christianity took hold over the continent. Mediaeval scholarship and philosophy was dominated by theology.

In the Renaissance scholars studied the classics and this period saw a revival of a human-centred philosophy, secular arts, and scientific enquiry free of religious controls. These influential scholars were later called ‘humanists’ – an early use of the word, which originally had little to do with a person’s religious beliefs. The Reformation in Europe, during which the authority of the Church was questioned and translations of the Bible first became available, opened up arguments about religious dogma and practice that continue to this day.

The eighteenth century was a period of intellectual discovery and ferment in Europe, with dissent (religious, political, and social) becoming more open, despite widespread censorship and the risk of punishment. Though still unusual and generally disapproved of, religious skepticism became more common in eighteenth century Europe, partly as a consequence of the development of a more scientific view of the universe.

Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.

John Stuart Mill

...it is better to love men than to fear gods...grander and nobler to think and investigate for yourself than to repeat a creed...

Robert Green Ingersoll

American humanist
The Gods, 1876

This was given a major boost in the nineteenth century with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Published in 1859, it described evolution by natural selection over millions of years and confirmed what many had suspected, that the biblical creation story was not literally true. Many people became agnostics when they learnt how life on earth evolved and realised that there was no need for a god to have created it. During this century moral philosophy became increasingly detached from religion. Jeremy Bentham and, later, John Stuart Mill developed a utilitarian definition of – and basis for – goodness.

Friedrich Nietzsche attacked Judaeo-Christian morality. Theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists began to speculate about the roots and varieties of religious experience.

This period also saw the rise of polemicists and publishers who openly challenged organized religion and theology. Some were still persecuted, like Richard Carlile (1790-1843), journalist and radical reformer, who was imprisoned several times for printing Thomas Paine's and other political works, and G W Foote, who was imprisoned for blasphemy in 1883. In 1842, George Holyoake became the last person in Britain to be tried and imprisoned for atheism. Britain's first openly atheist MP, Charles Bradlaugh, was elected in 1880. Anti-religious and secularist organisations campaigned for the rights of atheists and against religious privilege in society.

The oldest surviving organisation in the wider British humanist movement, the South Place Ethical Society (SPES), is based at Conway Hall in London. It began life in 1793 as a radical chapel congregation that bit-by-bit jettisoned all religious doctrines and evolved into a humanist Ethical Society, influenced by the Ethical Culture movement in America and Germany.

Many of these 'ethical societies' sprang up in the 19th century to provide alternatives to church. They usually held Sunday meetings and concerts and did much useful

It is a mistake to try to impose [Christian beliefs] on children, and to make them the basis of moral training. The moral education of children is much too important a matter to be built on such foundations ...

Margaret Knight

humanist academic, in a controversial broadcast in 1955

The only possible basis for a sound morality is mutual tolerance and respect; respect for one another's customs and opinions; respect for one another's rights and feelings; awareness of one another's needs.

A J Ayer

*philosopher and former President of BHA
The Humanist Outlook, 1968*

What do you think?

- ✎ What readings would you choose for a humanist ceremony for yourself or a family member? (This could be the basis of an entire evening's discussion if the group were interested.)
- ✎ What work should humanist, secularist and rationalist organisations be doing today?
- ✎ Is there still, in a largely secular society, a need for non-religious people to get together?
- ✎ Do we live in a secular society?
- ✎ Should children be taught about a range of religions and beliefs in schools?
- ✎ Should children be made to worship in school?

social work. SPES is the last remaining one, and still runs a specialised humanist and philosophical reference library and regular meetings on Sundays – an opportunity for members and interested visitors to listen to concerts and to hear talks and discuss subjects of social and philosophical interest.

The twentieth century saw a decline in religious belief and an increase in secularisation in Europe. Our knowledge and understanding of the universe has expanded hugely, though sometimes hindered by the traditionalism and authoritarianism of organised religions. On moral and social issues there has been slow but measurable progress, based on humanist and humanitarian values rather than religious traditions, which have often been reactionary and intolerant. Fewer people in Europe are actively religious and people are free to declare their disbelief in gods with little fear of reprisal or social disadvantage. Mobile populations and the mass media have made most of us aware of a range of beliefs, and more liberal attitudes mean that people often feel free to choose a philosophy for themselves. The near monopoly of the churches on education and ritual was eroded as state education and civil and humanist ceremonies offered alternatives. Few Christian intellectuals nowadays defend the literal truth of the entire Bible, but focus instead on its 'metaphorical truth' and the exemplary life of Jesus. Christian beliefs have tended to evolve, casting some doubt in the minds of humanists about what exactly Christians believe these days, or what they mean by 'truth' or 'God'.

The BHA developed from the Ethical Union, founded in 1890, in 1967. Its first President was Sir Julian Huxley, and its first Director was Harold Blackham. The words 'humanist' and 'Humanism' have been widely used since then to stand for the idea that you can live a good life without religion.

The British Humanist Association Today

Surveys indicate that about one third of the population of Britain share the positive ethical stance of Humanism. Amongst them are many well known people who support the BHA's aims, for example: Julian Baggini, Peter Cave, Simon Blackburn, A C Grayling, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman, Polly Toynbee, Lewis Wolpert, Stephen Law, Nigel Warburton, Jane Asher, Stephen Fry, Miriam Karlin, Stewart Lee, Ed Byrne, Maureen Duffy, Ian McEwan, Anish Kapoor, Grayson Perry, Colin Blackmore, Richard Dawkins, Robin Dunbar, Harry Kroto, John Sulston, Susan Blackmore, Kenan Malik, Jonathan Meades, Jenni Murray, Jon Ronson, and Laurie Taylor.

The BHA is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity.

Founded in 1896, the BHA is trusted by over 30,000 members and supporters and over 80 local and special interest affiliates to promote Humanism. Our policies are informed with the support of over 130 of the UK's most prominent philosophers, scientists, and other thinkers and experts and we seek to advance them with the help of over 100 parliamentarians in membership of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group. Our trained and accredited celebrants conduct funerals and other non-religious ceremonies attended by over 600,000 people each year.

What do we want?

- ✎ We want a world where everyone lives cooperatively on the basis of shared human values and respect for human rights.
- ✎ We want non-religious people to be confident in living ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity.

What do we do?

- ✎ We promote Humanism, represent the non-religious, and support those who wish to live humanist lives, including through the provision of humanist ceremonies.
- ✎ We campaign for a secular state, challenge religious privilege, and promote equal treatment in law and policy of everyone regardless of religion or belief.
- ✎ We offer a humanist perspective in public debate, drawing on contemporary humanist thought and the worldwide humanist tradition.

However, there are many issues and activities of importance to humanists that the BHA does not get involved in. Some of our concerns are so widely shared that there is no need to make specifically humanist public statements about them, for example that hunger and

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(for information about the BHA or to find out more about non-religious ceremonies) or member@humanism.org.uk (to find out more about joining or BHA services to members) or see www.humanism.org.uk



poverty are bad and the environment should be cared for. Other organisations have more expertise in certain fields, for example charities already exist to alleviate world poverty or to preserve the environment.

And there are some issues that humanists will not necessarily agree on, for example the best ways to deal with hunger, poverty, crime and homelessness – reason and compassion do not always lead humanists to identical answers to ethical and social problems. Most humanists also support a range of charities and social or political organisations, leaving the BHA to concentrate on its core activities.

The ‘happy human’, adopted by the BHA in the 1960’s, became the symbol of international Humanism and is the basis of the logos of many humanist organizations around the world.

There are affiliated local humanist groups in most parts of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland whose members meet regularly to support each other and to discuss questions of interest to them. The Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS) also has close links with the BHA. You can contact your local group or national organisation via the BHA website at www.humanism.org.uk. There are similar organisations in most countries, and the BHA is affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and the European Humanist Federation (EHF) which bring these organisations together.

Humanist Celebrations

Most of us want to mark important events in our lives, such as births, marriages and partnerships, as well as to commemorate people we have loved when they die.

For those of us with no religious belief it’s important that we can mark these occasions with honesty, warmth and affection, using words and music that are personal and appropriate to the lives and the people involved.

Each of the ceremonies conducted by humanist celebrants is unique, created specially for the people involved and based on shared human values with no dependency on religion or superstition. What's important to us, as it is to you, is the occasion and the person or people being celebrated or commemorated. There are no special rules or strict observances beyond basic legal requirements. Our celebrants will plan the ceremony you want, in close consultation with you to make sure it's exactly what you and your family want.

Humanist Ceremonies™ is the BHA's network of trained and accredited humanist celebrants throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For celebrants in Scotland, please consult the Humanist Society of Scotland.

Baby Namings

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. You are not only introducing them by name, you are also marking your commitment to their welfare and to them as significant people in your lives. You might also wish to take the opportunity of including older children in a ceremony if they didn't have one when younger.

In the case of older children who have usually grown into their names, the ceremony could focus on expressing love for them and on welcoming them to their family.

The ceremony can take place anywhere, but is most often held in the home of a family member or close friend. With the help of a humanist celebrant you can plan the ceremony that is right for your family, your situation.

Humanist Weddings and Affirmations

If you are not religious and wish to be legally married in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, you are currently obliged to have a marriage or a civil partnership ceremony in a Register Office or an approved venue.

But like many couples, you might want a separate ceremony which means something more to you. Humanist wedding ceremonies enable you to celebrate your commitment to each other exactly where, when, with whom and how you want to. In England and Wales, most couples who choose to have a humanist wedding or partnership ceremony complete the legal formalities and obtain a civil marriage certificate at a Register Office first. But they regard their humanist wedding or partnership ceremony as the one which truly marks their life-long commitment to each other. This is the ceremony which is special to them and their guests, at which they make their personalised vows and during which they choose to exchange rings.

Humanist Funerals

The death of someone we have known and loved, whether someone in our extended family, a friend or colleague, an elderly person, a parent, sibling, child or baby, is no less sad, shocking or painful for those of us who have chosen to live without religion.

A funeral director is the professional most likely to deal with all the practical arrangements of a funeral, but we are all entitled to specify the kind of funeral ceremony we want.

A humanist funeral is increasingly common. It's simply more appropriate for those who neither lived according to religious principles, nor accepted religious views of life or death. A humanist funeral or memorial ceremony recognises no 'afterlife', but instead uniquely and affectionately celebrates the life of the person who has died. Proper tribute is paid to them, to the life they lived, the connections they made and have left behind.

Nothing in a humanist funeral or memorial ceremony should be offensive to those who are religious. It will focus sincerely and affectionately on the person who has died. Humanist funerals or memorials allow friends, relatives and acquaintances to express their feelings and to share their memories. They have warmth and sincerity. Many bereaved people find them helpful and are pleased to have provided a ceremony their loved ones would have wanted.

Training to Conduct Ceremonies

The BHA has a network of trained and accredited celebrants in England and Wales. Our celebrants are men and women from all walks of life. Some conduct our full range of ceremonies – funerals, memorials, weddings, partnerships and namings. Others choose to conduct just one kind of ceremony. Some manage to combine being a humanist celebrant with full-time work. Many are people who find themselves busier than ever in 'semi-retirement'. Others combine their work as celebrants with their work as parents or carers, or as part of their freelancing 'portfolio'. All of them find being a celebrant deeply rewarding.

For more information on training to become a celebrant, phone 020 7079 3582, visit www.humanism.org.uk/ceremonies or e-mail: ceremonies@humanism.org.uk

The next and final section of this course sums up the humanist worldview, and asks whether you share it. For further reading on this section and the next, turn to the back of this booklet.

6.

Are you a humanist?

Do you share humanist beliefs about what are often called ‘ultimate questions,’ the big questions about life, death and values?

Where do moral values come from?

Human beings – whether religious or humanist – share many values but may differ about where they come from. Religious people tend to think that moral values are given by a god and enforced by religions. Humanists argue that they share so many values with religions because they are human values, and that there is no need for divine guidance – morality stems naturally from human needs and society, in the interests of social harmony and general happiness (and religions merely adopt some of those values).

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How do you decide moral questions?

Religious and non-religious people may also differ about the way to decide moral dilemmas and the importance of some values. Free from traditional authorities and rules, the non-religious can judge situations on their own merits, considering the consequences for individual and general happiness, and basing their decisions solely on reason and compassion. Some issues of private behaviour that affect no one else seem to many humanists to be outside the sphere of moral judgement, but humanists tend not be relativists, in that they do believe in a body of shared human values against which to test moral questions. (Moral relativism is the belief that what is right for one individual or one

Free from traditional authorities and rules, the non-religious can judge situations on their own merits, considering the consequences for individual and general happiness, and basing their decisions solely on reason and compassion.

society may not be right for others. It can lead to an inability to subscribe to any moral values at all, or to claims that slavery, for example, and the persecution of witches, were 'right' at the time.)

What counts as knowledge and truth?

Humanists tend to look for evidence before they believe things – and so they are more likely to believe what scientists or their own observation and experience tell them, or to remain open-minded about questions.

Religious people will accept some things on trust, as a matter for faith, because they are part of their tradition or expressed by a sacred authority. Bertrand Russell, a staunch humanist, defined faith as 'a firm belief for which there is no evidence.' Humanists tend to look for evidence before they believe things – and so they are more likely to believe what scientists or their own observation and experience tell them, or to remain open-minded about questions. Humanists understand that knowledge grows and that new ideas are often closer to the truth than old ones, but this does not mean that they are relativists (who believe that truth varies from person to person and culture to culture). They have often defended scientific progress, reason, and tolerance, when religions have opposed or persecuted new ideas.

What is the meaning or purpose of life?

Religious people usually take answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life from their religions. Humanists tend to think about these fundamental questions for themselves, rather than relying on authority. Some of the questions may not have answers, or we might not like the most probable answers. 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. Most of us want to be happy, and perhaps increasing the amount of happiness in the world is a worthy enough purpose. 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. Religious

answers to these questions may be comforting and persuasive, but they may not be the best ones.

What happens to us when we die?

Most people who believe in god(s) also believe in the immortality of the soul, though the two beliefs are not necessarily mutually dependent – one could believe in one without the other. However, the vast majority of non-religious people do not believe that one can live a non-physical existence, either before or after life, and think that such a belief is incoherent. What could disembodied survival be like, when everything that makes life interesting, worthwhile and capable of being experienced (movement, sight, hearing, relationships, emotions, etc) is inextricably bound up with physical activity and sensation? What could disembodied thoughts or emotions be about, and how could they exist, deprived of all the usual stimuli and outlets and separated from the brain which holds all our memories? Even if the human mind is not entirely material (and most psychologists and philosophers think that it is) its survival apart from the brain on which it is so dependent is inconceivable to a skeptical thinker. The evidence for life after death is anecdotal, weak and unconvincing. Humanists hope to survive in the memories of others, and through their achievements and descendants.

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What is your attitude to religion?

Humanists differ in the certainty with which they hold to disbelief in God 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.

Humanists differ in the certainty with which they hold to disbelief in God and in their hostility to religious belief.

Most would call themselves atheists but some do not like to do so, thinking that this gives the concept of god more importance than it deserves or that the word implies absolute certainty about the non-existence of god. Some prefer to

What do you think?

- ✎ What are your basic moral values?
- ✎ Do you think you owe your moral values to the religion around you, or did you work them out for yourself?
- ✎ Why do you think so many cultures share very similar basic moral values?
- ✎ What should be the role of the state in promoting morality?
- ✎ How far do you think that sexual relationships between consenting adults and involving no one else are a moral issue?
- ✎ What or whom do you trust as sources of knowledge: Journalists and the media? Politicians and the Government? Books? The Internet? Teachers and academics? Businessmen and industrialists? Religious leaders? Scientists? Doctors? Philosophers? Charities and pressure groups?

call themselves agnostics, which is not quite as vague and non-committal as is generally thought, agnosticism being the term coined by T H Huxley to describe the belief that one definitely cannot have certain knowledge about things for which there can be no evidence. Few humanists think that religious doctrines can 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.

Some humanists campaign vigorously for an end to religious privilege, and some try to argue other people out of irrational beliefs. Many believe that religion has done more harm than good and that religious codes of behaviour have little to offer humanity. Most accept that others think differently from them, and work alongside religious believers to alleviate some of the world's problems. Some think that the major religions these days are relatively harmless in the west and that, if they help people to live better and happier lives, we should tolerate them, just as our non-religious beliefs are tolerated.

What do you think?

- ✎ What are the aims and purposes of your life?
- ✎ What do you think will happen to you after you die?
- ✎ What do you hope to be remembered for after you die?
- ✎ How tolerant of beliefs very different from your own are you? Where do you draw the line? What (if any) views should not be tolerated or suppressed? What should be the sanctions for intolerable views?
- ✎ Would you call yourself an atheist or an agnostic or a humanist — or all three? What are the differences?

Now that you've completed this course...

Do you share the beliefs and aims of the BHA?

Look at the definitions of atheism, agnosticism, and Humanism in Part 1. Do you agree with them?

- ✎ Do you support the work of the BHA?
- ✎ Are you free-thinking and open-minded?
- ✎ Are you glad that organisations like the BHA exist to represent your viewpoint?
- ✎ Are you sometimes irritated by the deference paid to religious thinkers and leaders?
- ✎ Are you annoyed by the idea that there are 'different kinds of truth'?
- ✎ Are you glad that organisations like the BHA exist to advise and support non-religious people?
- ✎ Are you glad that humanist weddings, namings, and funerals, which can be led by BHA-trained celebrants, are now widely available alternatives to religious and civic ceremonies?
- ✎ Would you like to train as a humanist celebrant?
- ✎ Would you like to meet people with similar ideas to your own for discussions or social events?

If you answered 'YES' to one or more of these questions, do consider joining the BHA as a member or supporter (see back page). You do not have to agree with everything in this booklet to consider yourself a humanist, and your commitment to the organisation can be as much or as little as you wish. Providing training for humanist officiants, educational resources, and support and advice to humanists and members of the public costs money, and we can only continue our work through the generosity of our members. It would also help our work if we could claim to speak for millions, rather than thousands – as we know we do!

If you found this course interesting you could:

- ✎ Pass this booklet on to someone else.
- ✎ Contact a local humanist group (via the BHA).
- ✎ Make a donation to the BHA to cover the cost of publishing and mailing this booklet.

For further reading on this section, turn to the back of this booklet.

Further reading

Electronic reading (a small selection out of 1000s)

www.humanism.org.uk is a good place to begin a web search for information about Humanism and the BHA. The New Humanist at www.newhumanist.org.uk is good for news, discussion, books and articles from past issues of New Humanist magazine. Other informative BHA websites are www.humanism.org.uk/news, www.humanistlife.org.uk, <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk>, and www.humanistheritage.org.uk.

1 – A good life without religion

- ✦ Peter Cave: **Humanism: A Beginner's Guide** (Oneworld, 2009)
- ✦ E M Forster: **What I Believe, and other essays** (BHA, 1999) — reprinted talks and writings by the distinguished novelist, former member of BHA's Advisory Council and President of Cambridge Humanists.
- ✦ Jim Herrick: **Humanism: An Introduction** (RA, 2003)
- ✦ Alfred Hobson and Neil Jenkins: **Modern Humanism** (North East Humanists, ISBN 1856541118) — a good general introduction.
- ✦ Stephen Law: **Humanism: A Very Short Introduction** (OUP, 2011)
- ✦ Richard Norman: **On Humanism** (Routledge, 2004)
- ✦ Barbara Smoker: **Humanism** (BHA, ISBN 0706231465) — a good general introduction.

Philosophers, ancient and modern: there is much support for the humanist world-view in the writings of philosophers. Some of the more accessible and available are listed below — most of these can be dipped into for particular topics or chapters (readable and clear accounts of the traditional 'proofs' of the existence of God and the arguments against them can be found in the first three):

- ✦ Nigel Warburton: **Philosophy: The Basics** (Routledge, ISBN 0415146941)
- ✦ Simon Blackburn: **Think** (OUP, ISBN 0192100246)
- ✦ Julian Baggini: **A Very Short Introduction to Atheism** (OUP)
- ✦ Alain de Botton: **The Consolations of Philosophy** (Hamish Hamilton, ISBN 0241140099)
- ✦ David Hume: **Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion** (Penguin, ISBN 0140445366)

- ✦ David Hume: **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding** (OUP 0198752482), Section X (On Miracles) — the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher considers the classic atheistic arguments.
- ✦ Epicurus: **The Essential Epicurus** (Prometheus, ISBN 0879758104) and **The Epicurus Reader** (Hackett, ISBN 0872202429)
- ✦ Lucretius: **On the Nature of the Universe** (OUP, 0192817612)
- ✦ J S Mill: **Utilitarianism**, and **On Liberty** (Fontana, ISBN 0006860222)
- ✦ Thomas Nagel: **What does it all mean?** (OUP, ISBN 0195052161)
- ✦ Ed Ben Rogers: **Is Nothing Sacred?** (Routledge, 2004)
- ✦ Bertrand Russell: **Why I am not a Christian** (Routledge, ISBN 0415079817)
- ✦ Bertrand Russell: **The Conquest of Happiness** (Routledge, ISBN 04150986645) — as well as his more demanding works, Russell wrote many articles and essays for the general reader which still contain much good sense on religion and how to live well.

See also BHA educational briefings on: Arguments on the existence of God; The paranormal, miracles and faith healing; Jesus; The Bible; all of which can be found on www.humanismforschools.org.uk.

2 – Making sense of the world: science and naturalism

- ✦ David Attenborough: **Life on Earth** (and/or the BBC video of the TV series)
- ✦ Andrew Brown: **The Darwin Wars** (Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0684851485) — an important and entertaining insight into the current scientific debate on evolutionary theory.
- ✦ Charles Darwin: **The Origin of Species** (Penguin, ISBN 0140432057) and **The Descent of Man** — Darwin changed the way most of us think about human beings and our place in the universe.

Every humanist should at least dip into these seminal works, which are surprisingly readable.

- ✦ Richard Dawkins: **The Selfish Gene** (OUP, ISBN 019260925), **The Blind Watchmaker** (Penguin, ISBN 0140144811), and **The Greatest Show on Earth** (Bantam ISBN 059306173X) — on evolution
- ✦ Richard Dawkins: **Unweaving the Rainbow** (Penguin, ISBN 0140264086) — on the beauty and inspiration found in science. Dawkins is a combative atheist, an inspiring defender of science, and always an exciting read.
- ✦ Adrian Desmond and James Moore: **Darwin** (Penguin, ISBN 0140131922) — ‘unquestionably the finest biography ever written about Darwin’.
- ✦ Jared Diamond: **The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee** (HarperCollins, ISBN 0060984031) — a tour de force on human evolution and genetics

- ✎ Jared Diamond: **Guns, Germs and Steel** (Vintage, ISBN 0099302780)
- ✎ Robert Hinde: **Religion and Darwinism** (BHA booklet)
- ✎ Michael Shermer and Stephen Jay Gould: **Why people believe weird things** (Freeman, ISBN 0716733870) — ammunition for the sceptic.
- ✎ Steven Pinker: **How the Mind Works** (Penguin, ISBN 0140244913)
- ✎ Frans de Waal: **Good Natured** (Harvard, ISBN 0674356616) —the origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals

BHA educational briefing: ‘Nature’, on www.humanismforschools.org.uk

3 – Where do moral values come from?

- ✎ Simon Blackburn: **Being Good** (OUP ISBN 0192100521) or *A Very Short Introduction to Ethics* (OUP) — a short, clear introduction structured around the threats to ethics.
- ✎ Dylan Evans and Oscar Zarate: **Introducing Evolutionary Psychology** (Icon Books, ISBN 1840460431)
- ✎ Jonathan Glover: **Humanity** (Pimlico, ISBN 0712665412) — a moral philosopher surveys the atrocities committed by humanity in the 20th Century, atrocities made easier by technological advances coupled with a decline in religious sanctions. A grim read, but not totally pessimistic: Glover also analyses acts of heroism and altruism. He notes patterns in human behaviour and psychology and comes to the conclusion that we need to strengthen our man made moral codes and cultivate our moral imaginations.
- ✎ Richard Holloway: **Godless Morality** (Canongate, ISBN 0862419093) — the former Bishop of Edinburgh writes about the necessity of separating religion from ethics.
- ✎ Matt Ridley: **The Origins of Virtue** (Penguin, ISBN 0140244042)
- ✎ Richard Robinson: **An Atheist’s Values** (out of print but available from online booksellers secondhand)
- ✎ **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (available via the United Nations Association)
- ✎ Mary Warnock: **An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Ethics** (Duckworth, ISBN 0715628410)
- ✎ Robert Wright: **The Moral Animal** (Abacus, ISBN 0349107041) — a very readable account of the life of Darwin, and aspects of evolutionary psychology.

BHA educational briefing: Thinking about Ethics, which can be found on www.humanismforschools.org.uk.

4 – Applying humanist ethics

- ✦ Peter Singer: **Practical Ethics** (ISBN 0521297206)
- ✦ Jonathan Glover: **Causing Death and Saving Lives** (Penguin ISBN 0140220038)
- ✦ Jeremy Hayward, Gerald Jones & Marilyn Mason: **Exploring Ethics** (John Murray, 2000, ISBN 0 7195 7181 2) — an accessible introduction to ethical theory, coupled with a collection of activities and philosophical games, aimed at sixth-form students, but popular with adults too.
- ✦ Humanist Philosophers' Group: **For Your Own Good?** (BHA, 2000, ISBN 0 901825 20 4) — a study of paternalism including issues such as personal autonomy and who is the best judge of what is good for us.

BHA educational briefings on moral issues, with discussion questions: Abortion; AIDS and HIV; Animal Welfare; Crime and Punishment; Discrimination and Prejudice; Drugs; Embryo Research; Environmental Issues; Family Matters; Human Rights; 'Nature'; Suicide; Voluntary Euthanasia; War; World Poverty, all of which can be found on www.humanismforschools.org.uk.

5 – Humanist history and organisations today

- ✦ www.humanistheritage.org.uk
- ✦ David Berman: **A History of Atheism in Britain** (Routledge, 1988)
- ✦ Bill Cooke: **The Blasphemy Depot** (RA, 2003) — the history of the Rationalist Press Association
- ✦ Jim Herrick: **Against the Faith** (Glover and Blair, ISBN 090668109X) — some of the great freethinkers of the past.
- ✦ Nicolas Walter: **Humanism, What's in the Word?** (RA, ISBN 0301970017) — a history of the word.
- ✦ A N Wilson: **God's Funeral** (Abacus, ISBN 0349112657) — on the decline of faith in the 19th and 20th centuries.

BHA books on non-religious ceremonies: Sharing the Future, New Arrivals, Funerals Without God.

6 – So what do you think? Are you a humanist?

- ✦ Humanist Philosophers' Group: **What is Humanism?** (BHA, 2002, ISBN 0 901825 22 0)
- ✦ Humanist Philosophers' Group: **Thinking about Death** (BHA, 2004)
- ✦ Jim Herrick: **Humanism – An Introduction** (RA, 2009)

BHA educational briefing: Death and other Big Questions which can be found on www.humanism.org.uk.

Compilations of quotations, poetry and prose for humanists

- ✦ Margaret Knight & Jim Herrick: **Humanist Anthology** (RA, ISBN 0301940010)
- ✦ Nigel Collins: **Seasons of Life** (RA, 2000, ISBN 0301000018)
- ✦ Christopher Hitchens: **Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-Believer** (Da Capo, ISBN 0306816083)

Scientific, sceptical and philosophical magazines

Including: New Scientist, Scientific American, The Philosophers' Magazine, Philosophy Now, Think, The Skeptic, New Humanist

BHA publications available from BHA, 1 Gower Street, London WC1E 6HD, phone 020 7070 3580, website www.humanism.org.uk.

Join the British Humanist Association and help us to:

Promote Humanism

The BHA promotes the understanding of Humanism through its website, publications, speakers, and resources for teachers and students.

Play your part in influencing society

If every humanist joined the BHA our views would carry more influence with government and the media – numbers really do matter!

Have a stronger voice in your area

Campaigns are far more effective when local members and national organisations work together.

Develop the social side of Humanism

More members mean more and better events and more local groups. From conferences, discussions and lectures to family network weekends, there should be something for you.

Develop our humanist ceremonies network

The demand for our high quality humanist ceremonies (weddings, affirmations, baby namings and funerals) is growing very rapidly, and members can apply to train for this demanding but very rewarding work.

If you are already a member, you can help by:

Checking that you really are a member of the BHA

Your membership may have lapsed, or you may be a member of a local group but not of the BHA, the organisation that represents you nationally. The BHA is a charity and every member and every pound helps.

Making a donation

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Regular donations, whether by standing order or a tax-efficient Give as You Earn scheme, mean that we can plan ahead

Becoming a life member

Only £500

Remembering us in your will

Have you thought about leaving a legacy to the BHA?

Volunteering

From stuffing envelopes to data entry, we can always use help in our busy London office.

For more information

- ✂ Visit our **website** www.humanism.org.uk.
- ✂ **Telephone** 020 7079 3580.
- ✂ **Email** info@humanism.org.uk.
- ✂ **Write** to BHA, 39 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB

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