



An introduction to humanism

Andrew Copson

Humanism is a world view, an approach to life which is a combination of a variety of different beliefs and values and attitudes. So a humanist is someone who doesn't think there's any supernatural side to this universe we're living in but thinks the universe is a natural phenomenon; something to be understood and explored through the techniques of science and observation.

Humanists also have a certain attitude towards morality. Humanists don't believe that the rules of morality come down from some non-human origin like a god, or even like an ancestral tradition. Humanists are people who believe that morality is something within us, part of our evolved nature, and something we have to refresh and think about all the time, to try and find the answer to difficult questions in their moral contexts.

And a third important humanist attitude that is constitutive of this worldview of humanism is a certain approach to the question of the meaning of life. Humanists aren't people who think that meaning comes to us from the outside; that somehow the universe has a purpose and we're just part of that. Humanists think that meaning is something we make in our lives, we do that by attributing meaning to the experiences we have.

One thing that is very important to humanists is to recognize human beings as part of the natural world. We're part of, and connected to, all of life on this planet. Most specifically we're animals and we've evolved from the same common ancestor as other animals on this world. Now of course we are different from other forms of life: we're distinctive; we've evolved in a certain direction; we have certain capabilities and capacities to a greater extent than other animals have. So we have the ability to reason, the ability to think about our surroundings, the ability to plan ahead. But we also have imagination, we're creative beings. We can give a meaning to our own experiences, we can attribute meaning to experience, we tell ourselves stories in our heads, even about our own lives.

There are all sorts of different possible ways of answering the question, 'What is true?' 'What is the nature of reality?' Now some people are happy to rely on trust: their parents have told them what is true, what's real, or some authority figure has told them what's true, what's real. Some people think they can go into alternative states of consciousness to connect with the real reality beyond all this day-to-day life we have today.

A humanist approach is different from both of those. Humanists say that if we want to know what is real what is true, the starting point is our own senses. We have a way of interacting with the world, we have our sight, we have our touch, we have all our other senses. Through observation and experience - not blindly trusting our senses of course because they can deceive us - but through experience, through testing our ideas, our provisional ideas about reality we can slowly move through our own observational experience and those of other human beings in that community of knowledge. We can slowly move towards a more complete understanding of what reality truly is.

One incredibly important fact about life for humanists is that when it ends, it's definitely over. Humanists don't think there is any sort of future life in which we may carry on, perhaps eternally.

That to, some people, can seem depressing, but to many humanists it's not depressing at all - it's a dynamic call to action - because if life is going to end and one day be over forever, that's surely a call to make it as meaningful and full and rich in the time that is given to you.

Humanists think that a sense of meaning is generated by ourselves. And that means of course there's not just one meaning of life but that different people have many different meanings in their life. All sorts of activities can give human beings meaning. Humanists recognise that, and celebrate it.

The origin of morality is something that's increasingly becoming clear to us especially as we study human societies in the past, but also other animals, and when we look at our closest relatives in the animal world, for example other apes, chimpanzees are a very good example, we can see in their nature the sorts of behaviours that lie at the foundation of our morality. Right back at the origin of our species we inherited these evolved capacities, the essential, necessary characteristics of animals, if they want to live in groups as human beings are evolved to do.

Knowing where morality comes from doesn't help with ethical questions we might confront day to day and there the humanist answer is a bit more complex. Humanists don't think the answer to the question 'what is the right or wrong thing to do?' is simple, they don't think there is just one set of rules you can read off, humanists accept that moral decisions take place in contexts; they seek to apply empathy to think about other people's feelings, but also reason, to think through very carefully the consequences of each moral decision afresh.

Humanist ideas aren't just personal beliefs about your own moral conduct in your own private life. They have public consequences. Humanists have very often been campaigners for equality; humanists don't think that races were created separately or that people of different genders or sexual orientations have strict preordained roles in this life. Humanists have been campaigners for freedom of thought, freedom of expression because humanists believe that progress in human civilisation is made by people who speak out; who think new things, who generate new knowledge, and that has also led very often for humanists to be political activists for secularism, for the separation of church and state and the end to the restrictions that religious denominations try to put on human freedom.