



Humanism and the human being: Introduction

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What am I? Let's start with the basics: I'm a human being. But what kind of a thing is that? And is there anything special about it?

What if you believe we are made from matter alone - that there is no disembodied spirit or soul? That we are simply made from atoms of carbon and oxygen... oh, and last night's extremely nice roast dinner?

What if you appreciate how tiny we are on the scale of the universe? If you recognise that our home is a relatively small planet orbiting one of around 100 billion stars in one of around 100 billion galaxies?

What if you understand our nature as a living thing? The fact that we are apes and our extended family includes ferrets, frogs, fish, flatworms, and fungus.

And what if you recognise that one day we are going to die? And that's it. No second act. No 'see you after the break'.

Is there then anything to celebrate about being human?

Of course, there is more to being me.

I'm a thing that can read and write, tell a joke, bake a rather fine soufflé, I also knit these [holds up toy bunny], I can ride a bike, I can ski rather well, I can order a beer in most languages.

I can decide what I want to do with my life in the here and now.

But how does any of this support my understanding of how I should live?

The questions we'll be exploring through the rest of this week are:

- What kind of a thing is a human being?
- Where do we come from and what conclusions can we draw from this?
- What reasons might we have to believe this is the only life we have?
- Is there anything special about human beings?
- How does a recognition of our capacities, as well as our limitations, support a humanist understanding of how we should live our lives?

Hopefully, by the end of the week, you'll be able to explain what, for a humanist, it means to be a human being.