

# SHOULD DEATH BE A SOURCE OF FEAR AND SADNESS?

- Do you find the idea of an afterlife scary or comforting?
- What about the idea of no afterlife?
- What might it be like to live forever? Wonderful? Exciting? Boring? Repetitive?

Humanists believe that this is the **one life** we have. Death is the end of our existence. **Evidence** is important to humanists when deciding what to believe, and they see no persuasive evidence that we live on after we die. They believe the only life we can be certain of is this one.

## FEAR



'I suggest death should lose its distinctiveness and become less easily distinguished from what we call life.'

**ANTHONY PINN,**  
humanist

For humanists, death is part of life. It cannot be escaped. It is something we need to come to terms with.

“Your death is the order of things: it belongs to the life of the world.”

**LUCRETIUS,** (99-55BCE)

Fear of dying is a perfectly natural emotion, but many humanists feel that being dead need not necessarily be something we spend our lives worrying about.



'If death is bad then for whom is it bad? Not for the living, since they are not dead, and not for the dead since they don't exist.'

**EPICURUS,** (341-270BCE)

'Look back on the eternity that passed before we were born, and mark how utterly it counts to us as nothing. This is a mirror that Nature holds up to us, in which we may see the time that shall be after we are dead. Is there anything terrifying in the sight – anything depressing – anything that is not more restful than the soundest sleep?'



**LUCRETIUS,** (99-55BCE)



**QUESTION:** What do you think of Epicurus' and Lucretius' arguments that we should not fear death? Do you find them persuasive or not?

While we need not be afraid of being dead, humanists will typically see death as something to be avoided. Death can have negative consequences. It means that we might not achieve our goals. It deprives us of experiences we enjoy. For humanists, this is a motivation to **make the most of life** in the here and now. It is the fact that it does not go on forever that gives life its value.

Some consolation might also be found by humanists in further words from Epicurus – 'I was not – I have been – I am not – I do not mind' – and the recognition that the 'I have been' always will be. As the humanist philosopher Peter Cave says:

*'[That] we existed at some time remains timelessly true, outside of all time. For lovers of eternity, that is as good as it gets.'*

# GRIEF

The fact that somebody might not be afraid of death does not mean that they won't feel sadness when a loved one dies. Many humanists believe that grief is an understandable, often unavoidable, and often necessary emotion. A humanist believes that the death of another human being means that they will never see that person again. Death can sometimes be tragic and is often a great loss to those left behind. However, many humanists would have sympathy with these words from a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

*'Tis better to have loved and lost,  
than never to have loved at all.'*

Many humanists find comfort in the memories they have of the person who has died and the positive impact that person had on their life. Support can also often be found from friends and family. For humanists, death can also remind us of the value of life and the time we have. It can motivate us to embrace being alive.



“When my son Eddie died, it was a great shock and for a short while I thought it was unfair. Finding out about his illness, I discovered that it's just something that can happen to anyone. Everyone who loved and knew Eddie wanted to talk about him. For over ten days, the house was full of people talking together, sometimes about Eddie, sometimes just being friendly. Very nearly everyone was very kind to me. That reminded me why I like being alive.”

**MICHAEL ROSEN,**  
author of *What is humanism?*



“My best friend died earlier this year and I took her ceremony. Before she died, she asked me to transcribe something that she wanted to impart to the people at her funeral. She said: “I hope that the experience of my illness and death has taught you to enjoy your life even more, to relish each moment, and to be inspired by the friendship that we shared.” Almost everybody at the funeral said they felt hugely uplifted and hugely reignited by these words.”

**ISABEL RUSSO,**  
humanist funeral celebrant



“Think of those you care about; imagine them mourning when you die; and ask yourself how much sorrow you would wish them to bear. The answer would surely be: neither too much, nor for too long. You would wish them to come to terms with loss, and thereafter to remember the best of the past with joy; and you would wish them to continue life hopefully... If that is what we wish for those we will leave behind us when we die, then that is what we must believe would be desired by those who have already died.”

Credit: Ian Scott



**A C GRAYLING,**  
humanist philosopher

