

HUMAN BEINGS: WHERE DO WE COME FROM?

HUMANISTS BELIEVE THE WORLD IS A NATURAL PLACE.

Humanists don't believe in a god or that human beings were created. They look for **natural explanations** and believe that science provides the best way to answer questions about where we come from.



THE BIG BANG

The Big Bang theory explains the history of the universe. Everything was once squashed into a tiny space smaller than the full stop at the end of this sentence. Then, suddenly, the universe got bigger, very quickly, and over time formed everything we see today – first the atoms that make up everything else, then stars, planets, and life.

EVOLUTION

Human beings, like all living things, **evolved** over millions of years through the process of natural selection. First there were simpler, single-celled organisms, then more and more complex life evolved. Small changes in each generation led to big changes over time. Human beings are animals, and, while we are different from other animals, we share many of our behaviours with other species.

The scientific approach is to look for **evidence**. There is a huge amount of evidence for the Big Bang (from astronomy) and for evolution (from fossils and genetics). We don't know exactly how the universe or life began, but humanists believe we should keep looking for a **natural explanation**.

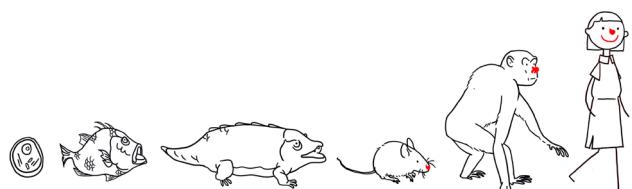
'We're not the pinnacle of evolution. Instead, we are connected with all other species; part of the huge, copiously branching tree of life. As conscious beings, we must surely endeavour to look after each other – and the planet.'



ALICE ROBERTS,
Evolutionary biologist and
President of Humanists UK

We are made from the same materials as everything else in nature. Humanists don't see any good evidence that we have a soul or an afterlife. They believe this is the **one life** we have.

Some people say science explains how we came to be, but not why. However, many people believe we don't need to ask 'why?'. They see no need to believe there is any other reason why we are here – no evidence for any intention, plan, or purpose behind what happened.



“‘We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs... because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher answer’– but none exists.’*”*

STEPHEN J GOULD,
Evolutionary biologist



A SOURCE OF WONDER

For some, the scientific story can make human beings appear small, insignificant, and alone in a vast and hostile universe. However, for others it provides a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. The matter we are made from was first formed inside stars. When we die, the atoms that make up our bodies will return to nature and become parts of new things. For humanists, the natural explanation of how we came to be can be a source of **wonder**: both in the story itself and in our capacity to answer questions about where we come from.



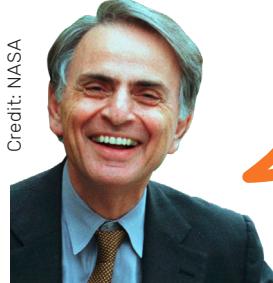
'Our entire bodies and brains are made of a few dollars' worth of common elements... Assemble them all in the right proportion... and the result is our feeling, thinking, striving, imagining, creative selves. Such ordinary elements; such extraordinary results!'



JAMES HEMMING,
President of Humanists UK (1977-1980)



Credit: NASA



'The calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.'

CARL SAGAN,
Astronomer



ALICE ROBERTS,
Evolutionary biologist and
President of Humanists UK



QUESTIONS

- How might a humanist try to answer questions about where we come from?
- What is the scientific explanation of our origins?
- Why do you think a humanist might find wonder in the scientific story?