

MAKING LIFE MEANINGFUL

'If there's no ultimate meaning of life, that doesn't mean our existence needs to be meaningless; we can determine for ourselves what is meaningful.'



LOLA TINUBU,

Association of Black Humanists

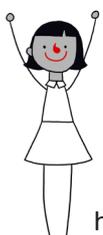
Many humanists do not think there is some 'ultimate' purpose to life and the universe. Many don't even like the question 'What is the meaning of life?' as it can imply there is an answer 'out there' that can be discovered. Some worry that this can distract us from pursuing our own goals in the here and now. They believe it is up to us to **make our own meanings in life**. Some therefore prefer to ask the question 'How can I make my life meaningful?' or simply 'How should I live?'.

''You're not 'meant' to be here. Your existence was not preordained. You're not part of some supernatural plan for the universe. Your very existence is unlikely, with so many chance events along the way. You're lucky to have this life: you can give it meaning... The meaning of life is not created by the promise of something after death; it's created by us, right now. Every day, you can become a better version of yourself.'



ALICE ROBERTS, scientist

Humanists believe this is the **one life** we have so we should make the most of it by seeking **happiness** and supporting other people to do the same. For humanists, there is **no one single answer** to the question of what makes a happy or meaningful life. It is up to us to decide. We all have different talents, tastes, and ambitions, and what makes us happy can change as we grow.



Happiness is often not just about seeking pleasurable experiences (such as eating cake or playing games) – although they can be important ingredients of a happy life and we do not need to deny ourselves these pleasures. A happy and fulfilling life also often includes things that don't make us happy in the moment (such as learning a difficult new skill, hearing a painful truth, or having the freedom to make mistakes). These can contribute to us feeling happy with our lives as a whole.

''Imagine a room filled with your friends and family and even people you know but aren't friends with – the bus driver, the newsagent, for example. You're in the room, but you have to leave early. Would they be sad that you'd gone? Would someone tell a story about how funny it was when you said or did something? Would someone else remember a time when you'd helped them out? Would people think of you as kind or unkind? I try to live as though this room exists, and I'd like my friends and family to be proud of how I behave.'



NATALIE HAYNES, author

'As a humanist, I think there's no inherent meaning to the universe... But that's not the end of that statement or that conversation. We can create meaning and order and structure and beauty and art... It's a declaration of autonomy. If we want to have beauty and structure and meaning in our lives then we have to provide it.'



FRANK TURNER, musician

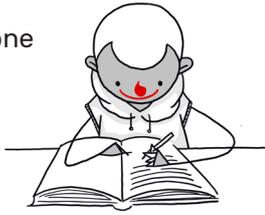
Credit: Morne Van Zyl

FREEDOM

Humanists believe that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find happiness.

We should not let others decide how we must live.

We should be the authors of our own stories. This is sometimes called **personal autonomy**. A **humanist naming ceremony** will often emphasise the freedom a new child has to shape his or her own life. Many humanists believe, however, that our freedom should not extend to causing harm to others or restricting their freedom.



RESPONSIBILITY

For humanists, freedom brings with it a **responsibility**. We cannot delegate decisions about how we should live to someone else. Of course, we are not completely alone – we can learn from other people – but we always need to think for ourselves. We have a responsibility to think carefully about our choices and the impact they have on other people, animals, and the planet. There needs to be a balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility.

**THINK FOR
YOURSELF,
ACT FOR
EVERYONE**

Freedom also requires us to be **tolerant** of other people's alternative choices about how to live as long as they cause no harm. Humanists support freedom of belief. Many believe it is a good thing that we all have different tastes and talents as it leads to a diverse and interesting society from which we can all benefit. **Diversity** should be celebrated. However, where there is evidence that people's choices lead to suffering, we should be able to argue against those choices and encourage them to act differently.

Not everyone is happy or feels their life is meaningful. Many people around the world do not have such freedom or opportunities. **Equality** is important to many humanists and they believe that we should work to create a world in which everyone, regardless of their place of birth, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality, has the opportunity to find happiness and fulfilment in the here and now.

'I would like to live to the full, right now, and I hope that I live in such a way that the world is a little bit better after I leave it than it was when I arrived.'



PHILIP PULLMAN,
author

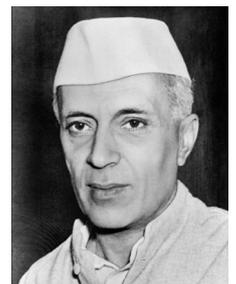
CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

If you were reading the book of your life, what would you want to happen next? Are there things you wish you could do, things you would like to say, places you wish you could go? Do those things, say those things, go to those places! You are not reading your story, you're writing it. You're writing it even this minute.

Of course you can't control every twist of the plot. And there will be sad and painful moments along the way – they're part of every story. But you know where you've come from. You know where you're going to. There will be love and laughter and joy whatever else there will be. Put down this book and step back into your own. The choices there are yours to make, they're waiting for you, and you have all you need to make them.

from the Little Book of Humanism

'There is no end to the adventures that we can have if only we seek them with our eyes open.'



JAWAHARLAL NEHRU,
first Prime Minister of India



QUESTIONS

- Do humanists believe life has any meaning?
- How much freedom do humanists believe we should have to live how we want?

WHAT MAKES A HAPPY AND MEANINGFUL LIFE?

Humanists will differ on what they think makes a life happy and meaningful. However, many will highlight some of the following features:

- Making connections and building relationships with other people
- Being creative
- Curiosity and exploration
- Experiencing nature or the arts
- Achieving our goals
- Making other people happy
- Helping make the world a better place (e.g. challenging injustice, relieving suffering)

For many humanists, it is the **connections** we make in life that enrich our experience and help make our lives meaningful. Even if we are not religious, we can still feel connected to something bigger than ourselves.



- The emotional relationships and attachments we make with friends and family and the experiences we share with them can fill our lives with meaning
- We can feel rooted in human history with a shared past and an ongoing future – we may seek social justice or to pursue intellectual or artistic ambitions, with the knowledge that our contributions might continue after we are gone
- We are connected to the natural world and the universe that surrounds us – we can feel a sense of being at home within it



‘One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others.’

MARGARET ATWOOD,
author



Credit: Larry D. Moore

‘The satisfaction of creative achievement... the excitement of discovery... relationships with others... the life of the emotions... the enjoyment of beauty in art and nature... These are the things which enrich our experience.’

RICHARD NORMAN, humanist philosopher

‘The secret of happiness is this: let your interests be as wide as possible and let your reactions to the things and persons that interest you be as far as possible friendly rather than hostile.’

BERTRAND RUSSELL, humanist philosopher



‘Only by walking hand in hand with nature, only by a reverent and loving study of the mysteries forever around us, is it possible to disabuse the mind of the narrow view, the contracted belief that time is now and eternity tomorrow. Eternity is today. The goldfinches and the tiny caterpillars, the brilliant sun, if looked at lovingly and thoughtfully, will lift the soul out of the smaller life of human care that is of selfish aims, bounded by seventy years, into the greater limitless life which has been going on over universal space from endless ages past, which is going on now, and which will forever and forever, in one form, or another, continue to proceed.’

RICHARD JEFFERIES, nature writer



QUESTIONS

- How might a humanist find happiness and make their life feel meaningful?
- What connections might a humanist feel to something bigger than themselves?