

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE

'We have two lives and the second begins when we realise we only have one.'

CONFUCIUS,
ancient Chinese philosopher



Humanists believe this is the **one life** we have. For many of us it will be around 1,000 months long, for some it will be much shorter. That motivates many humanists to try to **make the most of life** in the here and now, and support others to do the same. Some humanists worry that a belief in an afterlife might potentially distract attention away from seeking happiness in this life and from working to make the world a better place to live. Accepting that we do not have another life after this one, they argue, can have positive consequences in this life.



'Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him.'

E M FORSTER,
author

Some people worry that accepting our **mortality** will lead us to behave badly or to fall into despair, but many humanists do not believe that this has to be the case. The philosopher Spinoza compared this to learning that we cannot keep our bodies healthy forever and so doing nothing but stuffing ourselves full of poisons and deadly food. Most people don't live this way.

'There's no reason to suppose that anything of your personality or mind survives beyond death: this is the one life you have. Grasp it – live it as well as you can.'

ALICE ROBERTS,
scientist



'Some people think that believing this life is all there is makes for a rather upsetting view of our existence. If you stop and think for a while, the opposite is true. I throw everything I have into living as much as I possibly can, for if this is the only life we have it makes sense to try as much as possible to live life to the absolute full.'

STEPHEN FRY, author



'The finite nature of my life gives it structure and shape. It provides a sense of urgency to make the most of this life, the one life I know I have, in the here and now. And given other people's lives are as finite as my own, it helps motivate me to do what I can to support them to do the same.'

SANDI TOKSVIG,
broadcaster



HERE & NOW

The following poems reflect a very humanist understanding of death:

Is it so small a thing
To have enjoy'd the sun,
To have lived light in the spring,
To have loved, to have thought, to have done;
To have advanced true friends, and beat down
baffling foes;
That we must feign a bliss
Of doubtful future date,
And while we dream on this
Lose all our present state,
And relegate to worlds yet distant our repose?

Matthew Arnold, *Hymn of Empedocles*

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

A. E. Houseman, *The Cherry Tree*

For humanists it is the fact that it will come to an end that makes life so valuable. Good things are precious because they come to an end. A cake or a book that went on forever would eventually lose its appeal. The fact that someone might want to live longer does not necessarily mean that he or she would want to live forever. Nor would an infinite life necessarily be more meaningful. For many humanists, it is the finite nature of life that gives it meaning, value, and shape.

“The value of life lies not in the length of days, but in the use we make of them.”

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, (1533-1592)

“Perhaps the root of all our trouble, the human trouble, is that we sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.”

JAMES BALDWIN, author



QUESTIONS

- How might not believing in an afterlife affect the way a humanist lives his or her life?
- Does the absence of an afterlife mean our lives are meaningless?
- Which do you think is more meaningful: a finite life or a life that goes on forever?