

MORTALITY

THE BELIEF THAT THIS LIFE IS THE ONE LIFE WE HAVE IS NOT JUST A MODERN IDEA. SUCH AN UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE CAN BE FOUND FAR BACK IN HUMAN HISTORY.

“While life is yours, live joyously; No one can avoid Death’s searching eye: When this body of ours is burnt, How can it ever return again?”

CARVAKA, (India, 6th Century BCE)

Close your eyes and try to remember what life was like before you were born. Why would you think that it will be any different after you die?

This thought experiment was put forward by the Roman poet Lucretius to ask us to consider whether belief in a life after death is rational.

“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.”

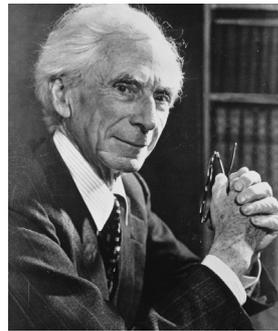


LUCRETIUS, On the Nature of Things (94-50 BCE)

THE HUMANIST UNDERSTANDING

Humanists believe this is the **one life** we have. We are **mortal**. They see no persuasive reason or good evidence to believe that we live on after death.

Some people believe that the idea of an afterlife arose from our fear of death or our need for consolation after the death of loved ones. Others draw attention to the fact that those in power had good reason to encourage such ideas, as they could be used to influence our behaviour.



BERTRAND RUSSELL, humanist philosopher

“All the evidence goes to show that what we regard as our mental life is bound up with brain structure... Therefore it is rational to suppose that mental life ceases when bodily life ceases. If we were not afraid of death, I do not believe the idea of immortality would ever have arisen.”



THE BRAIN

Scientific experiments reveal that our feelings, thoughts, and actions are dependent on our brains. Without a brain, all signs of conscious life disappear. Head injuries or dementia can greatly change a person. When the brain is damaged, personality can be transformed. Our brains are therefore essential to our identity.

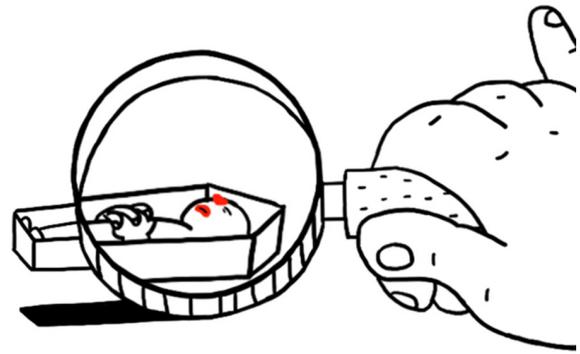
Who believes this is the one life we have?

48% of the population ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ don’t believe in an afterlife. This includes 66% of the non-religious and over 30% of Christians.

(Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 2018)

IS THERE ANY EVIDENCE FOR AN AFTERLIFE?

People give different reasons why they might believe in an afterlife. Some present what they believe is evidence that there is life after death. Other people reject these arguments and do not find the evidence persuasive. A humanist approach is to ask for scientific evidence. Without this, they believe we should be sceptical.



'EVIDENCE' FOR AN AFTERLIFE?

POSSIBLE HUMANIST RESPONSES

Holy texts make reference to a life after this one.

Such texts do not provide persuasive evidence. They were written a long time ago and are wrong about many things. Different holy texts make different contradictory claims about what happens when we die.

Lots of people believe in an afterlife.

Lots of people believing in something doesn't make it true. Lots of people have believed particular things in the past and have been mistaken (e.g. the belief that the sun goes around the Earth). Also lots of people don't believe in an afterlife.

Many people want it to be true.

Wanting something to be true is not the same as something being true. We can't wish something into reality.

People have seen ghosts.

There is no good scientific evidence. Many 'sightings' have proven to be hoaxes (they never happened). Our senses can also easily be mistaken or tricked, particularly when it is dark.

Mediums can communicate with the dead.

Mediums use a technique called 'cold reading'. This enables them to subtly gather information from their audience without them realising. The medium uses this information to make it appear that they have access to knowledge about someone who has died.

People have reported near-death experiences.

The experience may be genuine: there is evidence that such experiences can be brought on when the brain is deprived of oxygen. However, it does not give us any good evidence of an afterlife. After all, the person did not actually die.

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE

Many humanists believe accepting this is the one life we have can lead to positive consequences.

“If we put all our eggs into the afterlife basket instead of into this life then we are only living a half of a life.”

JEANEANE FOWLER,
Humanism: Beliefs and Practices

“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,
Patron of Humanists UK



QUESTION

- Why might a humanist believe that this is the one life we have?