

UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD

'Humanists do not claim to know, we just ask you to be very wary of those who do claim to know. Who told them? What does their knowledge mean? Why should you trust them? Above all, don't take my word for it either. Don't take anybody's word for it. Find out for yourselves.'



STEPHEN FRY,
actor and author

A SCEPTICAL APPROACH

Many humanists believe everything should be open to question. We should not just accept everything we are told without thinking about it. This is called taking a **sceptical** approach. We should ask questions, think carefully about what other people tell us, and be prepared to challenge and question our own beliefs.

'Scepticism' =
questioning and investigating claims to assess whether they are true or false



We all have many different beliefs and those **beliefs can be true or false**. We can believe things for many different reasons. Information about the world arrives through our senses, from other people, and from books or the internet. Sometimes we might just feel things are true. But our beliefs can be mistaken. Sometimes we misremember or our brains trick us into seeing or hearing things that are not really there. Sometimes people lie to us or pass on incorrect information. And feeling something is true doesn't make it true.

Think about some of the things you believe. Where do those beliefs come from?

Can you think of an example of when your beliefs were mistaken? How did you realise? Why were you mistaken?

'We fool ourselves that something is right for all sorts of reasons – because it is comfortable to do so, because we've been conditioned to do so, because others think so, because it is fashionable to do so.'

JEANEANE FOWLER,
Humanism: beliefs and practices

REASONING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Humanists believe we should think for ourselves and make our own conclusions about what we do or do not believe. However, that brings with it a **responsibility** to think carefully and critically about the evidence for our beliefs. This is called **reasoning** and humanists believe it helps give our beliefs the best chance of being true.

'Sapere aude' = *'Have the courage to think for yourself'*

This phrase from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant became a motto of the Enlightenment, a period in history in which many human beings promoted science and reason as the best way to truth.



QUESTIONS

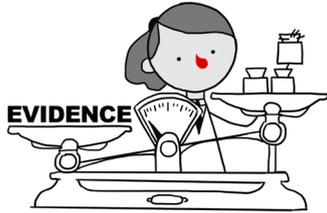
- What does it mean to take a sceptical approach?
- How can our beliefs sometimes be mistaken?
- How do humanists believe we can give our beliefs the best chance of being true?

SCIENCE



DAVID HUME,
philosopher (1711–1776)

'A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence.'



Just because we might sometimes be mistaken, doesn't mean that there are no truths about the world. There are facts about the world and humanists think there are ways to find them. When deciding what to believe, humanists argue that we need to look for **evidence**. We can begin with the evidence provided by our senses. Of course, our senses may sometimes be mistaken. However, human beings have found a way to test the evidence of our senses: **science**.

How science works – an example:

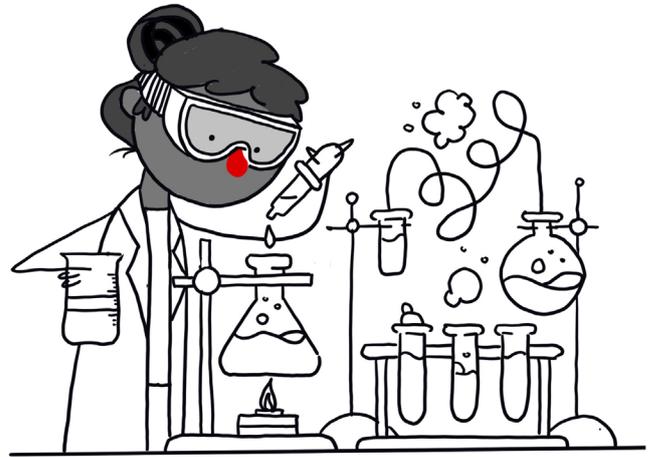
1. **Observation:** We see that the plants in our garden only appear to grow when it has rained.
2. **Hypothesis (an explanation for why things are the way they are):** Plants need water to grow.
3. **Prediction:** If plants don't get any water, they will not grow.
4. **Test (set up an experiment):** We put two plants into separate pots. We water one but not the other. All the other conditions are the same.
5. **Results (evidence):** The plant we watered grew. The one without water did not.
6. **Conclusion:** We now have some evidence that our hypothesis is correct (that our belief that plants need water to grow is true). However, to be more confident, we should repeat the test and try to think of other ways to test our hypothesis.



QUESTIONS

- Think of two claims: one that can be tested by science, and one that can't.
- Why do you think humanists value science?

Science provides a great way of looking for evidence and testing our beliefs about the world. We can never be certain that what we believe is true, but if a claim has been well tested by science, then humanists will often think we have a good reason to believe it. If there isn't any scientific evidence, then they believe we should be cautious. We can't always carry out a scientific experiment ourselves, but it is important that an experiment can be done. If a claim can't be tested, then we should be wary of that claim. For example, if someone told us that plants grow because they are built by invisible little green men, we should ask how we could test that claim. If they can't give us a way to test it, then we would have a good reason to doubt what they say.



Scientists sometimes make mistakes, but science checks its results so that mistakes can be found and corrected. It is a form of '**organised scepticism**'. It keeps asking questions about the world and is never satisfied that it has all the answers – it always remains open to further challenge.

Science also doesn't always agree with what we might want to be true, and many humanists believe that following the evidence means being prepared to change our mind.

Humanists believe science provides us with the best method of answering questions about how the world works. Every time we switch on a light, are cured by a medicine, or safely take a plane journey, we are provided with further evidence that we have good reason to trust the scientific method.

'The scientific method... can be summarized in one sentence: Do whatever it takes to avoid fooling yourself into thinking something is true that is not.'

NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON,
astrophysicist



Sometimes people make claims based on faith, revelation, or authority.

Humanists do not believe faith or revelation provide reliable evidence. People may have faith in different things or experience different revelations and there is no easy way to test who might be correct.

We often believe things on the basis of authority (e.g. things our parents, teachers, and experts tell us). We can't work out everything for ourselves. But many humanists believe we should always be able to ask for evidence, and we have good reason to be suspicious if we are told we must not ask questions.



QUESTION

- Which doctor would you have more reason to trust: one who offered a medicine based on experiments or one who offered a medicine based on faith or revelation?



MAKING PROGRESS

Humanists are often forward-looking. Rather than looking to the past for answers, they believe we make **progress** in our understanding by continually asking questions, testing our beliefs, and checking our results. This does not mean that **wisdom** cannot be found in the words of many different people from history, but wisdom is also something that develops over time. For humanists, something is not wise because a particular person said it, but because it has stood the test of human experience.

A SOURCE OF WONDER

The scientific approach means that humanists need to be comfortable with uncertainty. Many humanists believe we need to be patient for answers and we need to accept that some questions may remain unanswered forever. However, it is **uncertainty** that drives many people to keep looking for answers, believing we can get closer to the truth. Many humanists believe that **curiosity** is a virtue – it can also be one of the great pleasures in life. For many, a scientific understanding can add beauty to the world. Science can be a source of **wonder** and joy.

'Learning about the nature of space and time or the structure of atoms fills me with awe and wonder; it makes me want to learn more. I see a beauty in the laws of nature that can be explained by science.'

JIM AL-KHALILI,
physicist



'I am among those who think that science has great beauty. A scientist in his laboratory is not only a technician: he is also a child placed before natural phenomena which impress him like a fairy tale.'

MARIE CURIE,
chemist



WHAT DO HUMANISTS BELIEVE?

Humanists believe the world is a **natural** place. They think we should try to explain how the world works without relying on anything supernatural. When we have questions about what happens around us and why, they believe we should look for natural explanations.



There is no scientific evidence for the existence of supernatural beings (such as ghosts or spirits), supernatural powers (such as mind reading or seeing into the future), or supernatural forces (such as magic or miracles). Some supernatural claims can be tested scientifically, but we lack good evidence (e.g. the claim that someone has magical healing powers). Others can't easily be tested (e.g. the claim there are invisible spirits). In both cases, humanists therefore see good reason to doubt such claims.

ATHEISM AND AGNOSTICISM

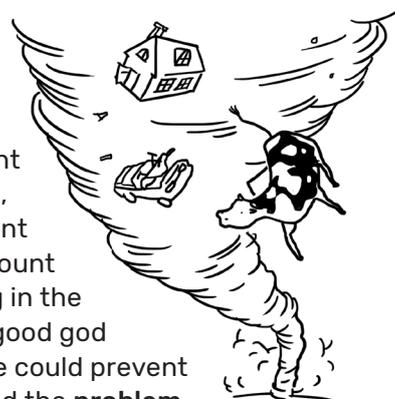
Humanists don't believe in a god. Many accept it is impossible to know for certain whether a god exists or not. However, they don't see any good reason or evidence to believe. They may recognise that there are many stories about gods in holy books such as the Bible, but they believe these are just stories, not true stories. They will be sceptical about claims based solely on faith or revelation. Humanists will therefore be atheist or agnostic – sometimes they will use both words to describe themselves.

'Atheist' = *somebody who does not believe in a god*

'Agnostic' = *somebody who accepts we can't know whether a god exists or not*

Many humanists accept that it is not possible to *prove* there are no gods. However, they think that the responsibility should lie on the believer to provide good evidence that something does exist, not on the non-believer to prove that it doesn't.

If asked why they believe it is unlikely that an omnipotent (all-powerful), benevolent (all-good) god exists, humanists might point to the enormous amount of pain and suffering in the world. Why would a good god allow this if he or she could prevent it? This is often called the **problem of suffering**.



Religious believers have attempted to come up with answers to the problem. However, for many humanists, the problem is most simply solved by assuming there is no god.

'Could the humanist understanding of reality be wrong? Of course. But, the more important question for humanists is not 'Is this definitely true?' but 'Is this probably true?'

SANDI TOKSVIG,
broadcaster



Although humanists don't believe in a god, they recognise that many people do. Humanists support **freedom of belief**. We should be allowed to question each other and disagree. However, we should not tell people what they must believe. We should not let our disagreements get in the way of friendship.



QUESTIONS

- What kinds of things might a humanist not believe in?
- Why might a humanist not believe in a god?