

CRITICISMS OF A HUMANIST APPROACH TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE

A number of criticisms are made of the humanist approach to making our lives meaningful and the belief that we should be free to decide for ourselves what makes a happy and fulfilling life.

Have a think about the criticisms below and consider how you think a humanist might respond.

Then look at the humanist responses. Do you think humanists can satisfactorily answer their critics?



HUMANISTS JUST WANT AN EXCUSE TO EAT, DRINK, AND HAVE A GOOD TIME.

Many humanists believe that there is nothing wrong with pursuing sensory pleasures as long as we take our health, the wellbeing of others, and the impact on the environment into consideration. However, for many humanists a happy life involves more than this. For many humanists, a fulfilling and meaningful life also involves making the most of your talents, building relationships, being good to others, and learning more about the world.

Interestingly, a way of life that indulges in sensory pleasures at the expense of other goals is often called Epicureanism, but this was not what the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, believed was important in life: he believed that knowledge, peace, and friendship were the ingredients of a happy life.

‘The pleasures of the flesh are an important part of a good life and pointless self-denial is to be avoided... Equally, however, pleasure comes from creativity, from relationships with others, from intellectual endeavour and a plethora of other sources. Balance and moderation in the pursuit of them all are also seen as important.’

ANDREW COPSON, Chief Executive, Humanists UK



HUMANISTS BELIEVE WE SHOULD BE FREE TO LIVE AS WE CHOOSE. SO ANYTHING IS ACCEPTABLE. THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY TO LIVE SO WE CAN'T OPPOSE THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO BE VIOLENT OR CRUEL.

The belief that no approach to life is more right or wrong than any other is called relativism. Humanists will typically oppose this position and believe that not all ways of living are equally acceptable.

Humanists value the freedom to choose how we live our lives, but believe our individual freedom should have some limits. They believe we need to consider the consequences of our actions and try to avoid harming other people, animals, and the planet through the choices we make.

‘For me, freedom is one of the most important things in life: the freedom to believe what I choose and to live my life however I wish, as long as I don't cause harm to others.’

IMTIAZ SHAMS,
Co-Founder, Faith to Faithless





HUMANISTS MAY BELIEVE THEIR LIVES ARE MEANINGFUL, BUT THEY ARE MEANINGLESS AND INSIGNIFICANT FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE UNIVERSE. IF ONE DAY WE WILL ALL BE DEAD AND GONE, THEN IT ALL MEANS NOTHING IN THE LONG RUN.

Many of the day-to-day things that concern us (buying the right gift, giving good advice to a friend, finding the best words to use in a sentence) mean nothing from the viewpoint of the universe. This might make us feel small and insignificant or our lives feel meaningless. However, we are all part of something bigger than ourselves: we are part of a community, part of human history, and part of the natural world. The achievements and contributions we make in life can survive our death and so our lives can continue to have meaning for others after we are gone.

It is true that we will all die in the long run, but a humanist might say that this criticism focuses in the wrong place. Yes, we will all die. But we will all live too. It is the fact that people have lives (like our own) and are capable of pleasure and pain that should motivate us to improve the quality of those lives in whatever way we can.

Additionally, we can accept that humanity may represent merely a blip on the timeline of the universe, but also recognise that this is not the timescale on which most of us make sense of our lives. Humanism can bring us back down to earth. Things might not have meaning on the scale of the universe, but they have meaning within our lives and within the lives of others.

‘The universe may not care about us, but people care about us, and we care about them.’

STEVEN PINKER, psychologist

‘I don’t feel the least humble before the vastness of the heavens. The stars may be large, but they cannot think or love; and these are qualities which impress me far more than size does.’

FRANK PLUMPTON RAMSEY, philosopher



IF THERE IS NO BIGGER ‘ULTIMATE’ MEANING OR PURPOSE, THEN THERE IS NO CONSOLATION FOR THOSE WHOSE LIVES ARE FULL OF SUFFERING AND PAIN.

Many humanists acknowledge that much of what happens in our life is subject to circumstances beyond our control. Many people’s lives are hard and contain few opportunities for happiness. For those of us who begin with more fortunate circumstances, our ambitions may fail and our lives may fall apart at any time. Happiness is fragile. Humanists have to accept the possibility of tragedy without the belief that everything might be made better after we die.

However, many humanists will not see this as a reason to despair. Lives do not have to be free from struggle to feel worth living, and hope can be found even in the darkest of places. When things go wrong, it can be better to try to pick ourselves up and look for new ways to achieve our goals rather than believing that our failures were all part of some greater plan. Perhaps most importantly, many humanists will see the existence of suffering as a motivation to act. Rather than hoping things will be made better in a future life, a goal of many humanists is to try to make things better in the here and now.

‘We can’t all be happy. That is reality. But more people could be happy and, as a humanist, I believe we should work towards that.’

SANDI TOKSVIG,
broadcaster

