Humanist ethics: overview (age 11+)

Big question: How can I know what is good?

Key vocab: welfare, flourishing, shared values, consequences, reason, empathy, the Golden Rule, responsibility, evolution, social animal, instincts

Knowledge outcomes: Students should know about the following common features of **a humanist approach to ethics**		
Believing that the origins of morality lie inside human beings	**Aiming to improve human welfare and happiness in the here and now**	**Thinking for ourselves about how to act, using empathy and reason**
- Recognising that many animals display altruistic behaviour - Recognising that empathy evolved naturally from our nature as social animals who live in communities - Recognising we have also evolved less friendly instincts - Understanding that biology does not tell us how we should act, but it can help explain the origins of our moral instincts and capacities - The belief that we don't need to believe in a god to be good	- The absence of belief that morality is about doing what some agent outside humanity wants of us – instead believing it is about our responsibilities to other people - Rejecting the claim that right and wrong are just a matter of personal preference - Recognising that we have evolved many shared needs and values, and these help us to think about how we should treat each other and to decide which outcomes are better than others - Considering the wellbeing and suffering of all human beings, and other animals - Recognising that moral dilemmas arise when our values come into conflict with each other - The belief that life is happier, fuller, and richer when we are good to each other	- Recognising that rules can sometimes be helpful but unquestionable rules can create problems - Considering the consequences of our actions - Taking responsibility for our own choices and actions - Recognising that reason doesn't give us the answers to moral questions but it can help us to assess the evidence and be consistent - Treating other people the way we would like to be treated (the Golden Rule) - The belief that hearing stories about other people can help to broaden our empathy

Introduction

- Begin with the 'A humanist approach to life: a summary' slide to introduce/recap the core features of a humanist approach to life.
- Explain that you are going to explore why humanists believe we should try to be good and how they decide how to act. You could start by asking the students what they think the word 'good' means.
- Show the 'Think for yourself, act for everyone' slide and discuss its meaning with students.

How do humanists decide?

- Show and discuss the What makes something right or wrong? film.
- Show and discuss the How can we know what is right and wrong? film in which a selection of humanists answer the question.
- Digging deeper: Show and discuss the Moral standards film in which A C Grayling describes how humanists might find answers to moral questions.
- Share and discuss the Being good information sheet and discuss the humanist approach to ethics (considering our shared needs and values, using empathy and reason, and taking responsibility). Note: There are two Being good information sheets (lower and higher). Which is more suitable will depend on the age and existing knowledge of the students.
- You could also share the What is a humanist approach to being good? information sheet.

- Show the The life you can save film (www.youtube.com/watch?v=onsIdBanynY&t=2s) about humanist philosopher Peter Singer's charity and discuss how he tries to use empathy, reason, and evidence to persuade people to do good.
- Digging deeper: carry out the Moral dilemmas activity to explore how humanists might approach different situations using a variety of moral principles.

Evolution of morality

If you do not have time to cover all of this, it is important that students at least understand that humanists believe that the origins of morality lie inside human beings, rather than coming from an external source – our moral capacities have evolved through our nature as social animals.

- Digging deeper: Share and discuss the Evolution of morality information sheet.
- Digging deeper: Share and discuss the Are atheists immoral? information sheet and explore the question.

Summary and assessment

- Choose one or more of the following:
    - Share and discuss the Multiple choice questions.
    - Carry out the Fill in the blanks activity.
    - Ask students to complete the humanist responses activity.
- Review the knowledge outcomes above.
- Ask the students what questions they would like to ask a humanist.