

## Human nature, human potential: activity

### Introduction

- 1) Ask students to look at the word 'Humanism' and ask if they can see another word inside this word. Hopefully they will see the word 'human'.
- 2) Explain that humanism is a worldview that focuses on using our human capacities to try to lead good, happy, and meaningful lives. It asks, 'What are we?' 'What are we capable of?' and 'How should we make best use of our capacities?'.
- 3) Show the picture of the Happy Human on the slide and explain that this is a symbol used by humanist organisations around the world (note that the design varies). It symbolises our potential to find happiness in life.

### Animation

- 1) Explain that to illustrate a humanist approach to life, you are going to explore humanist beliefs about what we are, where we come from, and what we are capable of. You are going to connect these ideas to different parts of the human body to help them to remember.
- 2) Before watching the animation, you could ask them to think about some of our positive and negative capacities and behaviours and link them to parts of the body.
- 3) Watch the [Human nature, human potential](#) animation and discuss.
- 4) Show the Happy Human and point to the different parts of the body, asking students to connect these to what they have learned about a humanist understanding of human beings and how they believe we ought to live. Write their suggestions next to the parts of the body.
- 5) The slides also contain quotes to support students' understanding.

### Student activity

- 1) Ask the students to decorate their own Happy Human with the core vocabulary they have learned and any further words or pictures to support their understanding. (There are several example versions available on the slides that may work for different age groups.)

### Vocabulary

- **Natural:** being part of the natural world
- **Reason:** thinking carefully and critically
- **Empathy:** imagining how other people might feel
- **Agency:** having the freedom to make choices for ourselves
- **Optimism:** believing that it is possible to make the world a better place

### Questions for the classroom

- 1) How is a humanist understanding of our human origins, nature, and potential similar to and different from that of other worldviews?
- 2) What other positive and negative instincts, behaviours, and capacities do human beings exhibit?
- 3) Is humanist optimism about our capacity to build a better world overly naive or is a better world possible?

# Human nature, human potential

## 1) The feet: **natural**

### Question: What are we?

'Humanists try to keep one foot on the ground.' They believe that the world is a natural place with no supernatural side, and trust the scientific explanation of our origins. We are a product of nature and what we are made from will return to the natural world after we are gone. We are material and mortal creatures. This is the **one life** we have.

However, humanists also have a *cautiously* optimistic understanding of our human **potential**. We have evolved particular natural capacities that can support us to answer questions, consider and care for others, and lead full and flourishing lives.

## 2) The head: **reason**

### Question: How can we know what is true?

We are **curious**. We can ask questions and, in seeking answers, we are capable of using reason - thinking clearly, logically, and critically about our beliefs and about the claims of others. This has enabled us to develop the scientific, **evidence**-based approach to understanding, which has provided us with the most reliable way to answer questions about the world, to make progress in our knowledge, and to share in this collaborative endeavour. Humanists believe this approach gives our beliefs the best chance of being true.

## 3) The heart: **empathy**

### Question: How do we know what is good?

We have the capacity to empathise with others, to imaginatively identify with them, and to consider the potential **consequences** of our actions upon them. We can recognise that, despite our differences, human beings have many shared needs, feelings, and values. We are capable of **kindness** and compassion. Empathy can help us to consider how we should treat other people, and why we should try to act in ways that support the wellbeing of human beings and other sentient life. Humanists believe that is how to be good.

## 4) The hands: **agency**

### Question: How should we live?

We are agents. We can take action. We have the capacity to be the authors of our own lives and should not allow others to dictate how we must live. We are conscious creatures who can deliberate between options, can imagine alternatives, can make choices over how we act, can reflect on those choices, and can learn from each other. We are also **creative**, and we can delight in the creativity of others. Through music and song, painting and stories, dance and drama, cooking and comedy, the arts can enrich our lives, help us to make sense of our situation, and connect us to each other. Our creativity can also be the source of solutions to the many challenges we face. Humanists believe these **freedoms** enable us to find **happiness**, and to give **meaning** and shape to our lives in the here and now.

## 5) Taking action: **optimism**

### Question: What kind of world do we want?

For humanists, all these capacities are natural. They are, of course, not the only capacities we have. Other humanists may wish to highlight the importance of other shared talents or abilities. We also have many negative instincts, habits, and behaviours. We do not always use our capacities well. We can be irrational, unempathetic, and unhappy. Often this is a consequence of the conditions in which people find themselves.

Humanists believe we therefore have a **responsibility** to try to make a positive contribution towards building a better society. They do not believe that help will come from anywhere outside humanity. We should work for a world in which everyone has the opportunity to use their positive capacities to the full in the one life they have:

- A world in which we nurture and promote a scientific understanding of the world around us, and everyone has access to the riches of human knowledge through education
- A world in which we encourage connection, and kindness and concern for others, and support the welfare and fulfilment of human beings and other sentient animals
- A world in which everyone has the necessary freedoms, opportunities, and human rights to shape their own lives and find happiness in the here and now

A better world is not guaranteed. However, humanists will typically be *cautiously optimistic* about our human potential. That motivates them to take **action**. Over human history we have made great progress towards a better and fairer society. We can celebrate our achievements while recognising the work that is still to be done and understanding that progress is not a given. For humanists a better world is possible. It is up to us to build it.

