

'Think for yourself, act for everyone'

A humanist approach to life in six words – and what those six words leave out

Humanists UK sometimes uses six words to sum up a humanist approach to life: 'Think for yourself, act for everyone.' It is a slogan rather than an argument, and six words could never explain everything humanists believe. But many humanists think it is a useful place to start when working out what to believe and how to live.

THINK FOR YOURSELF

Humanists believe it is up to us to decide what we believe. We each have a responsibility to work things out for ourselves: to ask questions, to not just accept what others tell us, to think carefully, to look at the evidence.

They trust science to answer questions about the world, because science is a process that tests its claims and can correct its own mistakes.

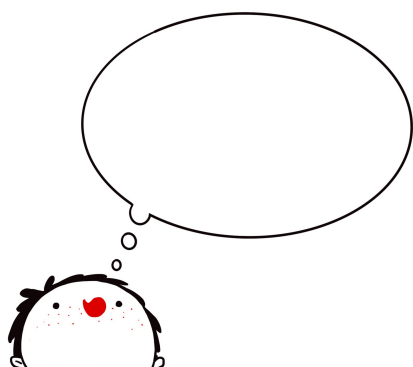
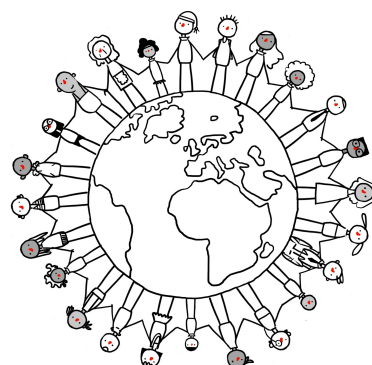
ACT FOR EVERYONE

Humanists believe this is the one life we have and that the responsibility to make the world a better place falls on human beings alone. Help isn't going to come from elsewhere.

Many humanists therefore believe we should use empathy and consider the consequences of our actions, not only for ourselves, but for other people, other animals, and the planet.

'Humanists do not claim to know, we just ask you to be very wary of those who do claim to know. Who told them? 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, author and actor



'If "humanism" means anything at all, it must surely embrace respect and concern for all human beings, whether they are members of our own family or group or society or are people on the other side of the world whom we do not know and will never meet.'

RICHARD NORMAN, humanist philosopher

NEITHER HALF IS EASY

Thinking for yourself takes time and effort. Acting for everyone means trying to think about people you will never meet. The phrase is much easier to say than it is to live up to, and humanists, like everybody else, can sometimes fail to act in the way they believe they should. However, many humanists would say that something being difficult is not a reason to give it up. They believe that thinking for yourself and acting for everyone can often be satisfying and contribute to a happy life.

What the six words don't mean

Short phrases can sometimes lead to misconceptions.

'THINK FOR YOURSELF' DOESN'T MEAN...

- **...that anything goes.** Thinking for yourself does not make a belief true. It does not mean our beliefs are just as true as anyone else's. If we want our beliefs to be true, we need to look at the evidence and try to think rationally.
- **...thinking by yourself.** We sometimes need to consider the wisdom of others. Humanists place great value on the knowledge we have built up together through science. Other people can enrich our thinking, so listening and conversation matter.

'If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.'

ISAAC NEWTON, scientist (1642–1727)

However, thinking for yourself does ultimately mean that the decision about what to believe is up to you. No one can tell you what you must believe. The claims of others should always be open to question.

'ACT FOR EVERYONE' DOESN'T MEAN...

- **...never prioritising those close to you.** Sometimes we may need to prioritise ourselves, or those close to us. Many humanists think it's sometimes OK to give special treatment to friends or family.
- **...giving up everything.** Humanists typically reject the extreme position that we should give up almost all we have in order to help others. Many speak instead of trying to balance our concern for the needs of others with the need to live a happy and meaningful life ourselves.
- **...pleasing everyone.** Acting in the interests of some people sometimes acts against the interests of others. What we can try to do is think about whether we are treating everyone fairly.

However, acting for everyone does ultimately mean that we cannot ignore the consequences of our actions on the wider human and natural world.

SO IS IT STILL WORTH SAYING?

Six words will rarely settle a difficult question, and a phrase that fits on a badge can be an imperfect recipe for a good life. Even so, many humanists think it is a phrase that can be helpful in many situations. It emphasises two things that are important to humanists, reason and kindness, and asks them to always keep them in mind. However, humanists will often recognise the need to think more deeply.

QUESTIONS

- What do humanists mean by 'Think for yourself'? Why do they think it matters?
- Why might a humanist consider the consequences of their actions for people they will never meet?
- Where do you think the balance lies between thinking for yourself and listening to others?
- Where do you think the balance lies between acting in our own interests, people close to us, and everybody else?
- How would you sum up your own approach to life in six words?