

EXPLORING HUMANISM

ACCOMPANYING NOTES FOR COURSE LEADERS

Preparation. The course is presented in a folder, and this will have to be made up for each running of the course. It could be preceded by a 'Welcome Pack' for participants, which includes dates of the meetings, venue, timing of sessions, course participants, and course leaders with contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers).

Who can be a course leader?

There are no essential qualifications for this role! One of the original leaders of this course was an academic with a long-term involvement in Humanism, but the other had a career in business, and took a full role in developing and delivering the course despite knowing very little about Humanism at the outset. The only essential is that the two leaders can operate well as a team and create the 'warm, encouraging atmosphere' referred to by one of the initial course members in a feedback comment.

Organisation

Our experience is that numbers attending sessions should ideally be between 10 and 20 so that everyone can get to know each other reasonably quickly and for all to be able to have their say. We have found that tables are unnecessary, and that a horseshoe formation of chairs makes for effective discussion, with folders on knees. Flip charts or A2 sheet on the wall have been helpful in Sessions 1 and 4.

Finance

The course runs on a not for profit basis, and a small fee of £12 for the original course covered the cost of producing the folders and paying for room hire.

Course materials

These notes were written towards the end of the second running of the original course, and start by identifying the two key factors that the course leaders feel have made it successful.

a. It is an interactive course

- The course notes are written to create opportunities for interaction, and are given out to each member of the course at the first session in a folder for this purpose. All participants are encouraged to read the materials through in advance so that they come to sessions familiar with the material and ready with contributions or queries. For example, Session Two is planned to enable course members to explore their awareness of some of the historical roots of Humanism for themselves, and then prepare a contribution of their own for the session if they so wish.

- the materials include a large number of quotations that course members are encouraged to read out to the group and then comment on. A number of questions are posed for reflection, with the first one (or sometimes the first two) used as a focus for

discussion. This approach is developed further in Session Four by using the format of two separate group discussions based the course material, that are reported back to the whole group, leading to a question and answer plenary session.

- two interacting course leaders who alternate as presenters of the different components of each session and adopt an informal style encourage more general interaction by course members. They generally restrict their comments to brief introductions to the materials and appropriate comments during the discussions, and drawing together the issues that have been discussed during the session. As an example we provide below the concluding summary made at the end of Session Four on the application of Humanist morality (Example 1 below).

- the outcomes of a number of discussions, such as initial ideas of Humanism in Session 1 and principles for Humanism in the 21st Century in Session 4 are summarised and typed up for participants as a record of their discussions. The second list has been used in the second run of the course as a starting point for discussions in Session 5. It was interesting that one participant commented that the principles of Humanism were what they had come on the course to learn, but the impressive lists they produced made a very positive contribution to later discussions.

A(i) Example One.

Notes used for concluding summary by course leader in Session Four

We hope these points will help make sense of the purpose of this session from the viewpoint of learning about Humanism, and inspire you to further thoughts about these and other moral and ethical issues within a Humanist context. The two discussions have allowed us to reflect on some of the issues raised by 'Humanism in Action', and have drawn on several of the aspects of Humanism that we've explored during the first three Sessions. These include:

- the scientific method of reasoning in the light of our knowledge and experience, rather than the emotional and subjective responses that the issues inevitable arouse.
- some implications of the Golden Rule in particular contexts.
- freedom for human beings to make decisions for themselves as a matter of right – and the complexities raised when rights may be seen to be in conflict.
- the origins of our guiding principles of right and wrong since these are not derived from god.
- the issues surrounding moral relativism rather than absolute prescriptions.
- the value of lists of principles in tackling real and emotive issues.

b. there have been a number of revisions and improvements made to individual sessions.

- Session Two on the historical background was originally placed as session Four, but the presenters came to the conclusion that some knowledge of the development of

Humanist thinking provided a good basis for understanding Humanist morality and its application in Sessions Three and Four.

In the historical session the style of presenting the historical material has changed from surveying all the material in each of the four ‘building blocks’ of Humanist thought and action to brief ‘case studies’ of a major contribution in each area. These case studies of individual figures were selected in order to provide a focal point for discussion of each building block, while allowing the topics to be explored more broadly using the notes in the folders. The notes used for this purpose are included below as Example 2.

- In Session Three on Humanist morality a detailed analysis of selected ‘building blocks’ of Humanist morality in contrast to the approach of religious believers in the original course was replaced by brief statements of the Humanist position. The contrasting approach of religious believers now features as support material, largely because Humanists need to know the grounds on which they will be challenged and to have given some consideration to how to make an effective response. The course has benefited in the same way at several points from a clearer priority given to the Humanist position.

- Session Four on the application of Humanist morality was originally an analysis by the course leaders of similarities between the two issues, abortion and euthanasia, that are chosen as case studies, but this has been recast into group discussions of each issue that take suggested similarities into account.

These two subjects can be very sensitive for individuals, and we feel that it is down to the course leaders to encourage participants to approach the discussions from an academic and philosophical perspective whilst being respectful of others’ possibly strong feelings and personal experiences. Experience has shown that it is important for one course leader to sit in on each discussion and ‘steer’ it for these purposes if appropriate.

- Session Five on Purpose and Meaning was run on one occasion as a separate session with Harrow Humanists, and as a preparation for this the course leaders wrote introductory statements for two sections of the material. On each occasion it has been run introductory statements have not been required since the very terms ‘Purpose’ and ‘Meaning’ have created impassioned debate. But the last two sections on Spirituality and Purposes do benefit from inputs that enable the session to end coherently. The statements are included below as Example 3.

B(i) Example 2

Notes on the four historical figures used as examples in Session Two

Introduction

All these examples are Englishmen whose contributions to history and to Humanist thought were made within a period of 80 years – 1790 to 1870. This is quite

accidental, it is the outcome of setting up what we have called four ‘building blocks’ of Humanist thought and activity in the past 600 years, making lists of contributions in each area, then picking out as an example one very significant figure from each list. In different circumstances the four examples might be different: for example Galileo might replace Darwin if we were Italians, Voltaire might replace Tom Paine if we were Frenchmen. But the four figures we have chosen accurately reflect the fact that some very important things happened in this country at that time which have had a wide influence and are very relevant to us at the present time.

Please feel welcome after each example to raise any queries about either the person concerned, the area they represent, or any other items in that building block. Do also chip in with further information you think is relevant about any of the contributions mentioned, or any other contributions you think are relevant.

(i) Freedom of thought and secularism: John Stuart Mill

Mill wrote 150 years ago, but his reflections on liberty establish principles and identify dilemmas relevant to us all. He belongs to a tradition of free enquiry and independent thinking and expression that started, in Europe, with the Greeks and re-emerged after a thousand years as a struggle to gain freedom from the stranglehold of Christianity. This happened in all aspects of life: in religious terms with Protestantism in all its various forms, in the investigation of the realities of nature by scientific methods, in political terms with the overthrow of government by kings and nobility, and in artistic matters with the Renaissance in Italy and the Romantic movement. A theme that runs through all of these movements is individualism.

In his book ‘On Liberty’ (1859) Mill tied these themes of freedom and individualism together as a political philosopher. The book is a rallying cry for the principle of a free society. . We should be trusted with freedom to do whatever we wish – so long as we do not harm others. This principle is often summarised as the Golden Rule: in Charles Kingsley’s phrase ‘do as you would be done by’. Its roots are much older, in the thinking of the Greek hedonists, the followers of Euripides, who proposed the principle of avoiding harm as a guide to living 2,500 years ago. Mill developed this by arguing that we can cause harm to others by not giving them assistance when they need it, so the harm principle means that we should act for other people’s benefit too.

Moreover Mill was a democratic thinker – he argued for freedom of thought and speech for individuals. There should be no censorship even if speech causes offence, because unquestioned beliefs become dogmas and prejudices. This is important for Humanists, because it is secular and rational. Mill based his case for freedom and fair treatment of others squarely on the capacity of human beings to think for themselves as rational beings who can see the consequences of their behaviour. In this way he followed another important English thinker 50 years before him, Jeremy Bentham.

Mill's thinking has implications for a Humanist morality as we will see later, and also for human rights. He wrote passionately against slavery and in favour of the rights of women.

(ii) Scientific explanation and reason: Charles Darwin

Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection' was published the year before Mill's 'On Liberty', and had even more impact. The book showed how the principle of natural provides the key to explaining the nature of life and all the variations (both similarities and differences) that can be observed in and between living things. Darwin took the idea from Malthus, an economist who believed that human beings are in competition with each other and have to constantly change in order to survive. Briefly it states that species evolve ways of meeting the demands of their changing or different environment, that the most successful adaptations mean survival and that the rest who don't inherit these adaptations eventually die out.

As is well known, Darwin built on the work of many predecessors. Not only did others explore and write about evolution, but another naturalist Alfred Wallace had exactly the same insight into the way that the principle of natural selection directs the whole process. What Darwin did was to demonstrate its application by the most rigorous and detailed investigation and analysis over more than 25 years. This is as good an example as any of the scientific method that now had a modern history of 200 or 300 years, of starting with an unexplained or unsatisfactorily explained problem, examining the evidence, creating a hypothesis and investigating that as rigorously as possible.

Darwin's contribution to Humanism also built on the work of his predecessors in other fields. The 'scientific revolution' that many think was a key factor in creating and shaping modern times had its roots three or four hundred years earlier in the revival of a Greek concept of a sun-centred observable Universe, and the developing proof of the truth of that theory by mathematics (Kepler), telescopic observation (Galileo), and the establishment of laws of motion and the working of a force of gravity by Newton. The key point here was that the theological explanation had put the Earth at the centre of all things, so that human beings were at the centre of all life as God's special creation endowed with souls and a capacity to relate to God. Replacing the earth by the sun also displaced man from the spiritual centre. No wonder the Church fought to suppress this thinking.

Now, Darwin took this further. The principle of natural selection, and the mass of evidence for it, might not answer where life came from in the very first instance, but it answers all the questions about how it has developed since. It's a natural process that doesn't need an intervening guide at every stage. This doesn't disprove God, but it certainly undermines Genesis – it's a better explanation. Equally certainly Human beings don't need a creator because we've evolved along with everything else, in our case along the same line of descent as the apes. Darwin didn't actually spell this out for another 13 years when he published the 'Descent of Man' in 1871, but religious opinion picked up on the implications of the 'Origin of Species' immediately. A furious public debate was held in Oxford in 1860 involving a bishop and a supporter of Darwin, T.H.Huxley, and the reverberations are still being felt with the passionate

campaigns of Creationists and the slightly more dispassionate arguments for Intelligent Design. This by the way, is why I think we can say that religious opinion is on the defensive, and Humanists are and have been for many years the active critics. It's not us who are on the defensive.

(iii) Non-religious morality: Jeremy Bentham

Humanist morality is centred on promoting human happiness. This is not a bland kind-heartedness, but a concept with many different levels of meaning. The Greeks defined it as living in harmony with nature, avoiding excess and finding true happiness in promoting that of others as well as your own (reciprocity). (As a species we follow something like the exact opposite of each of these principles at the present time, which may account for our situation being hardly a happy one.)

Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher, took this thinking further just over 200 years ago. His field was actually law, and his main concern was to find a basis for improving the laws of his time. He did this by proposing a principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people' as a criteria for judging the law. His view was that it was this that made laws useful, his principle was called that of Utility, and his approach was called 'Utilitarianism'. I think it is accurate to say that this was the principle that lay behind the introduction of legislation to improve living and working conditions in this country that began just after his death in 1832 and has continued ever since. I call this Humanism in action, based on the belief that life can and should be improved, and that changing situations mean that laws need constant change to maintain and develop those improvements.

But Bentham went further than this to develop the Greek ideas as a basis for a non-religious morality. He said that you have to measure the effect of laws to see if they are improvements or not, and you can only do this by looking at their consequences. His thinking is therefore known also as 'Consequentialism'. But the key thing was how he proposed to measure the consequences. This was by another simple process, the pleasure/pain principle which he proposed as a guide to living. Quote p.45. – the reciprocal principle of the Greeks is there again, with the need to look out for other people's benefit as well as your own.

The only problem with his thinking was that he felt any pleasure was as good as any other – 'pushpin is as good as poetry'. Now while this is very democratic because not everyone will enjoy poetry, it leaves quite a lot out that Humanists would value. John Stuart Mill argued that we should go a lot further, and that poetry is much better than pushpin and ought to be valued more highly. We should aim for the highest level of happiness: 'better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.' Bentham is therefore often dismissed as too simplistic a thinker, and obviously we have to go further, as Mill did. Indeed other thinkers and psychologists like Maslow have explored the nature of happiness since, analysing various levels of happiness to which we should aspire. It can be argued that in our present situation where happiness is facing grave threats from our own irresponsible behaviour we need to reconsider the whole concept and certainly add well being if not survival to our understanding of happiness.

But I've chosen Bentham as a non-religious moralist because he made two decisive contributions to the debate on happiness that were suggestions about how to promote it, and these are still relevant to any consideration.

(iv) Human rights: Thomas Paine

I've left Thomas Paine, one of the most well-known and effective of thinkers and activists in the Humanist tradition to the last, because the Humanist concept or building block that he promoted most effectively is the most recent – Human Rights. Paine stands at a very early stage in the thinking about Human Rights, and is probably the most original of our four contributors. He was certainly the most effective communicator and the most convinced democrat of the four, writing passionate, clearly expressed and immensely popular pamphlets. He also had an immediate impact, though strangely enough this was in America and France much more than in England.

This was because Paine was a republican. He was deeply involved in politics – Humanists are often activists – on two continents. He spent much of his life in America, where he wrote a very influential pamphlet 'Common Sense' supporting the American colonists during the period of their struggle for independence from British rule. He was regarded as a hero by Americans at all levels, but was regarded with loathing by authorities in Britain where he was seen as a friend of the enemy. Briefly returning to England he faced imprisonment for his continuing radical publications including 'The Rights of Man' published in 1791 in support of the French Revolution. He avoided trial for libel and sedition only by escaping to France, where as an honorary citizen and member of their National Convention he saw his ideas have some influence on the Declaration of the Rights of Man - though he was nearly guillotined during the later period of 'the Terror' which he passionately condemned. But this did nothing to endear him to the British authorities who now saw him as a friend of two enemy countries. He spent the rest of his life in France and then America.

Paine's book 'The Rights of Man' did build on some earlier writing, chiefly of John Locke a hundred years earlier who first coined the term 'inalienable rights' based as all else in this survey on what I call a Humanist tradition of belief in the equal value of human beings as thinking creatures. Locke defined the rights as life, liberty and possessions. Paine inspired the Americans to replace the last of these rights by happiness (another link between our 'building blocks'). He went on to demand democratic government, progressive taxation, universal and free education and a minimum wage, together with compensation to all agricultural workers made landless by enclosure of common land into private farms. As this shows, Paine believed that rights need to be put into practical effect, and not surprisingly he was also a strong opponent of slavery.

B (ii) Example 3

Notes used as introductions to the last two sections in Session 5 on Purpose and Meaning

(i) Meaning is the spiritual dimension.

You may have been surprised to see this section in the working papers. We've tried to explain why it's there, and that this is as a help to finding meaning in existence. As an introduction to this part of the session it's important to stress that it's got absolutely nothing to do with anything 'supernatural'. That is by definition above and beyond anything we can observe, test and experience and explain as human beings: it's a region of mysticism and religion. As Humanists our explanations are natural ones, based on human nature and capacities.

But there's a problem here. Humanists usually pick out our reasoning power and compassion as driving forces, but are these enough? The suggestion here is that they are only enough if we accept that there is a 'spiritual' dimension to our nature. This is surely essential to being human – and it is our capacity to feel positively about others, to love and care for others, to enjoy and be inspired by Shakespeare and Wordsworth, Beethoven and Mozart, Verdi and Puccini, Michelangelo and Henry Moore, Tolstoy and Charles Dickens. These are the things that distinguish us from other animals and make us fully human. We shouldn't be worried when the materialists among us define it all as electromagnetic forces and chemical reactions in our brains – this doesn't make the experiences any less rewarding.

However I think we Humanists do have a real problem about spirituality, and that's ownership of the concept. Religions have managed to take it over as their preserve as a 'higher state' to which they claim only people with religious faith can aspire. We obviously have a choice here: do we accept this and reject the 'spiritual' side of life as we reject religion, or do we work to reclaim the concept as an essential means to enjoying life to the full for everybody, for us all to make the best use of our time here on earth? The argument used here is that to reject the 'spiritual' as something supernatural is just accepting the hi-jacking and abandoning something that most human beings will recognise as significant to them, whether religious or not. It also reduces the resources available to us to discover meaning in our individual lives.

(ii) Happiness as the Humanist Purpose

Now, back to purpose. The first point is to explain and justify why we've chosen to treat it after meaning. This is the answer to one of the questions posed at the end of the section in Support Paper 5.5: 'What is the relationship between meaning and purpose?' Not so much which comes first, chicken or egg, because this is probably unanswerable; instead which is it most useful for us as Humanists to think about first? Our view is meaning first, then purpose. The thinking is that if we look for meaning in life with so far as possible an open mind, then various purposes will offer themselves as means of extending our understanding and putting it to good use for others. But if we put purpose first, that is something that shapes or dictates the meaning of things. This closes down a search for meaning and understanding, we just accept someone else's version. And that purpose will often have been taken on board as a kind of 'gut

feeling' – a matter of faith! That's why we've shaped this session to consider meaning before purpose.

The second point refers to what we've written and quoted in the session notes about happiness as a key to a purposeful life, summed up in the BHA logo, the 'Happy Human'. It may perhaps sound pretty bland, almost not needing discussion. But the theme of happiness runs like a main thread through human thinking since the Greeks.

It's been the focus for much careful analysis of its very nature, eg by Epicurus in Athens and then by John Stuart Mill in England nearly 2000 years later. They both pointed out that to create happiness we need to avoid causing misery to anyone else, and that isn't as easy as it sounds. Mill also pointed out that there are different levels of happiness, and we ought to try for the highest level we can reach (which takes us back to Aristotle's idea of self-fulfilment, and forwards to Maslow's idea of self-awareness). We certainly need to add contentment to happiness as a purpose.

Happiness also has many implications for organising society to bring it about. Jeremy Bentham defined the key strategy as attempting to secure the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number', and that obviously isn't easy. Not everyone is going to be happy with what you do when you propose to change the laws, and a minority may well feel a lot less happy as a result. One current example of that would be pressure for changes in the laws relating to abortion and euthanasia. This reminds us that happiness is intimately related to issues of life and death that can affect any one of us, and that in the most general sense it is a key element in the quality of our lives (a major concern for Humanists). But this soon leads us back to the last point, that achieving the maximum happiness is going to be hard work because situations are so complex and outcomes so unpredictable. But there are must be best possible outcomes for humanity in each circumstance that are worth working for, as Bentham proposed.

Finally, looking at the context of climate change and global warming, we ought surely to add well-being to happiness as a purpose for humanity in the 21st Century. Not only can no one can be happy without well-being, but it's our very pursuit of happiness through making life ever more comfortable and convenient for ourselves by harnessing nature to our needs and desires that's reduced well-being for very large numbers, and indeed nor threatens our continued existence – certainly of life as we in the rich part of the world know and enjoy it. Maybe we need to reconsider the whole notion of happiness as a pre-condition for human survival, certainly the assumption that it's related to material possessions, as a pre-condition for human survival.

However, these considerations on happiness surely help to provide Humanists with an overall guide to purpose or purposes in our lives.

Some further uses for the Course

- the course has been found useful for initial meetings in Manchester of a Humanist group where it was initially trialled, and to launch a regional sub-group.

- the course can be adapted for other purposes. For example the Tameside Local Authority in Greater Manchester is interested in Humanism being included in the revised RE syllabus for schools, and the adviser for RE has asked that we prepare an awareness-raising session and two or three follow-up sessions for all those teaching RE in Tameside schools.

Some feedback from the first run of the course

‘Brilliant course – well written, well delivered, warm encouraging atmosphere.’

‘Very good course indeed. Very well prepared, very comprehensive.’

‘I’ve enjoyed finding out what Humanists ‘believe’. I found the group discussion following some introductory thoughts very stimulating.’

‘The workbook is excellent.’