

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS CURRICULUM SUPPORT

Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies

Morality in the Modern World:
Humanism

Staff Resource Pack

[INTERMEDIATE 2;
HIGHER]

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Introduction

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free enquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.

Source: International Humanist and Ethical Union,
<http://www.iheu.org/minimumstatement>

This unit provides teachers of Religious and Moral Education in Scotland the opportunity to gain an insight into Humanism and its values. This publication describes and explains the Humanist approach to some specific moral issues. The discussions of each of these issues are not comprehensive, but do provide an outline of some of the main principles and characteristics of the Humanist view.

To address some of these topics adequately, it has been necessary to take a broad approach to incorporate as many criteria and contingencies as possible.

The question of morality and human values is at the core of Humanism: Humanists believe that if humanity is to survive and successfully organise its societies with the maximum spread of a rewarding life for all, then morality will be a fundamental part of this endeavour. Beyond this general outlook, Humanists recognise that the successful working of society results from interaction between individuals, groups, and the customs and laws in existence. Any decisions taken on moral issues are to be taken with the awareness of the effect they will have on society as a whole.

Although Humanism has no 'prescribed' texts, it values and promotes a wide collection of literature written by Humanist thinkers worldwide since the time of ancient civilisations. From this store of writing, Humanism has been able to define its outlook and its philosophical drive, as well as its own set of guiding principles. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the world body for Humanist organisations; it centralises and promotes Humanist values worldwide.

Humanists have always valued intellectual integrity. This attribute influences all others and allows Humanists to benefit from the most reliable and sound knowledge available. Before deciding on any issue, Humanists seek out and consider all the relevant evidence, without preconceptions regarding the conclusions and where such conclusions may lead.

The fundamental principles of Humanism were laid out by the IHEU in the Amsterdam Declaration in 1952: this was updated at the World Humanist Congress in 2002.

Amsterdam Declaration, 2002

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and it gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows

1. ***Humanism is ethical.*** *It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.*
2. ***Humanism is rational.*** *It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free enquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.*
3. ***Humanism supports democracy and human rights.*** *Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.*
4. ***Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.*** *Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic,*

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imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.

5. ***Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.*** *The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.*
6. ***Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination*** *and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.*
7. ***Humanism is a life-stance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living*** *and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone, everywhere.*

Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilising free enquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

Source: International Humanist and Ethical Union,
<http://www.iheu.org/amsterdamdeclaration>

Section 1: Crime and punishment

Introduction

Humanists believe that if communities are to grow and prosper in relative harmony, those who live within them need to accept the rules and the responsibilities of being a member of that community. Therefore, laws and rules usually exist for the common good, and provide for order and security. When human knowledge and understanding changes, laws usually re-align with this new understanding. For example, British laws regarding child labour, divorce and discrimination have expanded and adapted to changes in society.

Humanists reject any law that is based on religious beliefs as this may cause confusion, inconsistencies or conflict between different religions. Consequently, crime and punishment should be based on sound knowledge and apply to everyone equally.

Humanists believe that, for social justice to be fair and effective, laws should follow the intellectual understanding of the time and society in which they operate. In the 21st century, Humanists consider a civilised nation to be one with proportionate, just and humane laws. The definition of crime and punishment is integrated with the objective of creating a society that strives to benefit everyone. Since crimes are actions that diminish the quality of life for all those concerned, all of us should continually strive to prevent them.

British and Scottish laws are intended to limit the effect of criminal actions on members of society. Other moral rules are at the discretion of the individual. Law breaking is a serious offence and Humanists believe that measures in place should deal with offenders. These measures should reflect the severity of the offence, while courts should be independent, effective and respected.

Humanists advocate human rights but these are always coupled with responsibilities; for everyone in Scotland to play an active part in society, it is everyone's personal responsibility to make themselves aware of the facts surrounding crime and punishment.

The purpose of punishment: On what grounds can punishment be morally justified?

To answer this question, the reasons behind punishment must be considered, and people have different views on this. Many reasons for punishment are often underpinned by one philosophical view but, more often than not, attitudes to punishment emerge as a mixture of views from different philosophical stances. Outlines of some of the most common reasons for punishment follow, concentrating chiefly on rehabilitation and deterrence, and the philosophical theories such as Retributivism and Utilitarianism, while asserting the Humanist position in relation to these ideas.

The idea of **retributive** justice considers that victims have a right to retribution (revenge or payback) and also perhaps that the criminal deserves to be punished. The retributive stance frequently includes the notion of revenge. However, emotional responses such as this can sway or cloud judgement; therefore, an attitude of vengeance is viewed by Humanists as beneficial to no one and revenge as a reason for punishment does not feature highly in a Humanist outlook.

The **rehabilitation** reason for punishment asserts that by detaining offenders as a means to educating them, they are provided with more opportunities to find employment on release and so avoid further criminal activity.

Aspects like rehabilitation and restoration feature centrally in some Utilitarian attitudes to punishment because these outcomes bring about the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people (a common Utilitarian precept). Humanist views align closely with this type of view. Some Utilitarian theories challenge the retributive argument – punishment with no obvious or proven positive outcome is ineffective and only increases the overall amount of suffering. Thus, in both Humanist and Utilitarian terms, punishment is only justified in terms of the consequences that result.

Other reasons for punishment centre on the **deterrent** argument – when offenders are seen to be punished severely, others will be deterred from committing the same offence and thus society will be safer (this also includes the **protection** reason for punishment). The ‘revolving doors’ syndrome (offenders being released and then sentenced for further offences) is a sign that incarceration does not always work as a deterrent to offenders.

For Humanists, there appears to be no theory or reason for punishment that is completely satisfactory with regard to appeasing victims, deterring crime or acting justly and morally. Punishment usually includes aspects from some or all of the above theories.

Humanists find the rule of ‘treat others as you would like to be treated’ a useful guide in minor matters – it is based on knowledge of human nature and on the human need to be treated well and live in harmony with others. However, in order to justify punishment for serious and complex criminal acts, more robust principles are required. Consequently, before making decisions on punishment, Humanists regard it as their responsibility to consider the surrounding circumstances, especially if these could alter the view of what punishment is morally appropriate.

There may be social or economic circumstances that influence an individual’s behaviour – long-term unemployment, addictions or pressure from peers, among other things, can influence a person’s decision to undertake criminal behaviour.

Humanists see comprehensive and thorough investigations as part of the judicial process. If punishment is found to be the most appropriate response, Humanists tend to favour methods that lean towards an educative and rehabilitative approach. However, Humanists stress that in order for government and societies to reduce crime, more serious investigations are needed into the causes of crime (like poverty and exclusion) and more action is needed to address these issues. A common Humanist approach to the prevention of crime is that a more equitable life for everyone could be the best and most effective deterrent.

Capital punishment: Is it morally justifiable?

In 1989, the world umbrella group for Humanists (the International and Ethical Union, IHEU) stated its opposition to any form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. It called for the abolition of capital punishment (the death penalty) across the world on the grounds that Humanists have regard for the right to life as recognised by Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and they consider the death sentence to be a violation of those rights. This then is the underlying principle behind the general Humanist objection to all premeditated killing.

Humanists oppose capital punishment on the grounds that premeditated killing is seen as inhuman, especially as a punishment. Governments sanction killing in wars and for self-defence, but Humanists believe that when there is time to consider a response, every endeavour should be made to limit or minimise the killing of further people and to produce an alternative solution. This view holds true in judicial killing, when the decision is taken by a judge. This particular Humanist view is also held partly because errors can and do occur in court trials; when such judgements are made and the death sentence is carried out, the verdict and its result cannot be altered.

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Capital punishment does not seem to deter people from committing murder. For example, the USA, which is one of the few democracies that retains capital punishment, has one of the highest murder rates in the world. So far, there has been no conclusive evidence that capital punishment as a deterrent works in general, even though it might work in some individual cases.

The Humanist stance on crime and punishment is that the best methods of dealing with convicted offenders at all levels of crime are: to treat them justly; to allow everyone accused of a crime a fair trial; to be treated humanely while in custody; and to ensure that the punishment fits the crime.

Section 2: Gender

Is the stereotyping of male and female roles morally justifiable?

The stereotyping of men and women, what they should look like, dress like, how they should behave and so on, can lead to discrimination or even exploitation. As with most stereotypical notions, there is little or no empirical support base. Humanists believe that although some practices have become habitual, there is no moral justification for them – neither men nor women should have to conform to unfounded ideas about their roles.

Stereotypes about gender roles have led to practices in some cultures of actively preferring and promoting one sex over the other, often boys over girls. The Chinese government has implemented a one-child policy. With boys being seen as the more important sex (the one that can work and does not require a dowry), female children have reportedly been aborted, abandoned, neglected or killed.

In some cultures, the practice of female circumcision is still common. The mutilation of a girl's sexual organs is painful and it can be life-threatening. The procedure is often carried out on babies or young girls at a time when they are unaware of the implications. Humanists believe that such mutilation is immoral and can not be justified owing to the pain and suffering created and the lack of informed consent.

Humanism views practices such as dowry-giving, arranged marriages and forced marriages as undervaluing human dignity and personal worth, as well as categorising people as possessions.

Although all the reasons for sexual preferences are not fully understood, Humanists feel that homosexual preferences cannot be changed at will; as long as no harm is caused to others, the Humanist stance is that the sexual preferences of men and women should be a personal and private matter. Humanists fully support the Gender Equality law that gives all persons legal and social gender equality.

Humanists are concerned that the stereotyping of gender roles can lead to problems for those who raise children alone. In the UK, the phrase

‘unmarried mother’ is common, whereas ‘unmarried father’ is rarely heard. There is still stigma surrounding single parents despite many being successful parents.

Although the traditional stereotyping of male and female roles still applies, in the UK today, there has been a move towards a new form of gender representation, with gender roles now in flux. Humanists believe that views and attitudes must adjust to accommodate these changes and there should be an expanding awareness of human behaviour.

Will economic equality between the sexes lead to a more just society?

Humanists hold the view that a more just society would not come about through economic equality between the sexes and nothing else, but adjusting this inequality would signal a significant move forward towards a more just society. In the 21st century, economic equality between men and women should be automatic.

Stereotypical ideas about the role of men and women have meant different salaries for men and women who do the same jobs and produce the same work. Stereotypes include ideals about women working in the home, providing for men, while men work outside the home, generating income for the family. Nowadays, this way of thinking is dying out, helped by the Equal Pay legislation in the UK as well as adjusting societal attitudes. The Humanist view allows for freedom of choice by both men and women. If men want to stay home and care for their children they should be able to do so without recriminations. If women prefer to pursue a professional career, they too should be able to choose this option with no economic disadvantages to either party.

There are still many obstacles to overcome in the area of gender stereotyping and although attitudes are changing, the new attitudes may also be based on stereotypes and thus still be morally unjustified. For these reasons, Humanists want the UK to uphold human rights and equality laws, ensuring that discrimination on the basis of gender is not tolerated.

Section 3: International issues

Globalisation: Is the process of globalisation morally justifiable?

The Humanist position put forward here outlines some of the issues and views pertaining to the globalisation phenomenon and weighs up these aspects in light of their moral justification.

To a varying extent, a type of international, cross-border trading has always been a feature of human activities, and it is usually mutually beneficial. The present practice of 'globalisation' only got properly under way at the end of the 20th century, following the collapse of the Soviet block and the onset of the world wide web.

This recent explosion in trading between countries can be seen as a purely economic process operated by large conglomerate international companies and banks as they exchange their wares on a global scale. From the view of wealthy nations, the result of this trading seems positive, providing consumers with cheap and varied goods and services. However, it is unclear whether such large companies are accountable, and if so, how or to whom.

Multinationals have been accused of exploiting the natural resources of poorer countries through de-forestation or the overgrazing of grasslands. Some of these companies have refused to pay to clean up any pollution caused by their extraction of resources. Human resources can also be exploited when large companies create factories in poor countries where the labour market is willing to work for low pay (and sometimes in atrocious conditions). Thus, the shareholders benefit, while their practices can have long-term and serious consequences for the social, cultural and physical conditions within the poorer host countries.

Some companies have made efforts to put back something into the communities and do hold themselves accountable to working practices in occupational health and standards. Unfortunately, others try to limit costs to the smallest amount possible. Nonetheless, in countries like Uganda, Vietnam and India (where so many UK companies have located their call centres), those who work there and indeed the governments are very grateful for the

economic benefits and career opportunities, and the general rise in the standard of living that such investment has provided.

The global exchange of goods and services is monitored by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which manages and regulates trade. These rules are more to support the integrity of trading agreements than related to moral values. Moreover, different versions of morality exist within national borders, so any international agreement on moral values has yet to globalise. Some governments and major economic enterprises do recognise that it is just no longer practical or ethical to treat parts of the undeveloped world as possessions. However, in everyday practice and financial transactions, many use aid and international trade as a method of manoeuvring the undeveloped world into a pattern of development that matches the needs of the developed world.

Humanists believe that if profits from global trade are returned to the wealthier nations, and little is given to the host country, this can be considered a corrupt and unethical practice. However, if those who profit from international trade take positive measures to help the development and progression of the poorer undeveloped nations (through appropriate job creation and fair compensation for employees and other resources), this can benefit all nations involved. Working in this way, globalisation can be a two-way process and thus can be morally justifiable.

International aid: Is international aid an appropriate moral response to world poverty?

Humanists are certain that international aid is needed in response to world poverty – such poverty has many causes and those afflicted by it are sometimes unable to help themselves.

Internal wars can tear a country's resources and its infrastructure apart; issues of corruption and inefficiency and the squandering of funds meant for worthwhile causes contribute to making poor countries poorer. Democratic countries usually have in place basic human rights: citizens can vote out poorly performing or corrupt governments and campaign for changes that give them better protection. In countries managed by a dictatorship and/or suffering a lack of disregard for human rights, leaders can use the country's resources for personal gain and leave the wider population in need (of food, water, shelter or personal safety).

Natural disasters (droughts, floods, eruption of volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis) devastate land and homes, and can inflict poverty. When these happen in some of the world's poorest areas and the people who live there

have no choice but to stay where they are, assistance is required quickly. This is when international emergency aid comes into play – it can only be effective in the short term. The most effective international aid is that which has long-term and wide-ranging benefits, for which support from other countries and their populations must be steady and constant. Ideally, developing nations will become self-sufficient – this is hard to tackle when natural factors can so severely affect daily survival.

Among the major contributors to poverty and lack of progress are population growth and an equitable share of the earth's resources among its population.

Countries like Africa and India are already dealing with increasing populations, which will increase even further over the coming years. Many of these people will aspire to a higher level and quality of goods and services, which is likely to increase the demands on the planet's resources.

Taking steps to reduce population sizes could be one of the most basic and yet effective ways of reducing poverty. Unless agreement can be reached on family planning and birth control programmes, then serious damage might be done to the prospects of human survival, with the planet being ravaged for its remaining resources. Thoraya Obaid, the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund, made this statement regarding progress in Egypt in 2004:

Today we know that if family planning, education and other health services are available, individuals will do what is best for themselves and their families. This, in turn, is leading to population stabilization in the long run; and it is reducing poverty within households and within nations.

In Cairo, the ability of women to control their own fertility and make decisions free of discrimination, violence and coercion were proclaimed as cornerstones of population and development policies. Today, reproductive rights are considered central to women's empowerment and advancement.

There are many such advance planning measures that can be taken to reduce population numbers and at the same time improve the situation for the existing population. However, many cultures object to family planning or contraceptive measures. Teaching abstinence from sexual activity is often preferred, but Humanists see this as ineffective and against the natural inclinations of young people. Humanists advocate education programmes for both women and men in methods of birth control and the advantages this holds for their future.

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In 2005, a conference between eight of the richest countries in the world (the G8) was held in Scotland to deal with the issues of international trade and poverty. At the end of the conference, the UK government and others made significant pledges as to how their countries would help to reduce poverty in Africa. Unfortunately, little progress appears to have been made since these statements of intent.

Humanists believe that it is part of our moral obligation to alleviate world poverty through aid – and any promises made should be kept.

Section 4: Medical ethics

Genetic engineering: Can any form of human genetic engineering be morally justified?

A short Humanist response to this question might be – yes, but only if proper scientific testing is also done, all the benefits for and costs to humans are carefully considered, and it can be demonstrated that the advantages outweigh any disadvantages.

Genetic engineering and genetic modification (GM) are terms used to explain the manipulation of genes with specific purposes in mind. One use of GM involves the modification of crops in order to produce new characteristics, for example by making a plant resistant to particular chemicals or insects that might otherwise kill it, or growing high yielding crops that help to feed the world's poor, such as rice with added vitamins. The process of producing GM foods appears relatively easy but the ethics surrounding the process will continue to cause controversy. One basis for this ethical concern may be the perception that the ones who will benefit most from this advance in technology may be multinational corporations.

Genetic engineering is beginning to be used to create animals with human-compatible organs for transplantation because this method is faster and more specific than traditional selective breeding. Some of this genetic manipulation combines genes from different species, and would be impossible any other way. The concerns that arise from such research focus on what the effects will be on the environment, natural selection and human health.

The cloning of human beings is another moral issue of genetic engineering and it is one that is strongly debated. Those who agree with cloning argue that it is quite natural, like the process bacteria use to reproduce in order to make identical copies of themselves, or a plant grown from a small cutting of another plant. According to this view, cloning is just another reproductive option, and those who wish to research cloning (or indeed to be cloned) should not be stopped.

Others argue that cloning is morally acceptable but not practical. Yet others argue that cloning is unnatural and immoral (or 'playing God'). Humanists

wish to discover the facts regarding the advantages and disadvantages of these techniques, and then formulate a view based on that information.

Research in the area of biotechnology is still in its infancy, and it is, as yet, unclear whether it brings major benefits and/or considerable costs to society. However, it is also an area where there is much public concern about the possible consequences of such research. The debate is complicated because the general public's understanding of the scientific facts behind GM is generally limited.

By experimenting with genes, experts may find cures for diseases such as cancers and cystic fibrosis, and develop weaker reactions or immunities to certain conditions. Some diseases are caused by gene mutations that result in a protein not being made at all or in the production of an abnormal protein. It may be possible to intercept such mutations, as discoveries are continually being made about which human genes are responsible for which characteristics. In the future, more diseases and disabilities will become detectable or predictable a lot earlier, sometimes even before birth. Many gene-related diseases are very complex, involving many different genes as well as environmental factors, or may not be treatable, and these factors also raise new issues in medical ethics.

Humanists are interested in the facts and in incorporating the most reliable and up-to-date scientific position in their outlook. However, scientific discoveries arrive with human values attached to them. They increase our knowledge of the world, but they contain no indications of what we are to do with that knowledge. It is up to us to commit to the research that allows us to decide the How, What, When, Who and Why to apply this scientific knowledge. Genetic research and engineering may have important contributions to make to human happiness and human wellbeing and most Humanists would have no qualms in supporting them, unless they felt the costs (including environmental and social costs) were too great.

As with all other subjects, the practice of acting responsibly will always be foremost for a Humanist. Therefore, obtaining and understanding the facts, assessing the risks realistically, and balancing the possible benefits against the possible harms in each case, would be the guiding principles of any decision made around the genetic modification of foods or genes.

Humanists want to see improvements in the quality of human lives but, like everyone else, have no way of knowing whether some aspects of genetic science will or will not achieve this. Open and well-informed debate is essential, and should be based on good evidence and research rather than irrational fears. Humanists aim to distinguish between likely problems and those that are highly unlikely (because the science would be too complex and

costly). Ultimately, each development will be judged on its own merits and constantly reviewed as knowledge increases, and the risks and consequences become clearer. Nonetheless, few human activities are without risk, and a small amount of risk may be justified if the gains are important.

Can any forms of euthanasia be morally justified?

The central Humanist concern for quality and respect for life and the Humanist support for the personal autonomy of an individual mean that Humanists believe that euthanasia can be morally justified only when the person concerned has decided that they have lived long enough. Humanists believe that the independent freedom to choose a course of action would help many ill people avoid extreme pain or suffering or the prolonged misery endured when the capacities that made their life worth living are gone. It would also ensure the person retains some degree of personal dignity.

The arguments on both sides of the euthanasia debate are partly fuelled by the many different words and phrases that have cropped up when discussing and explaining the topic, all of which have different meanings and values attached to them. Some of these words and phrases are emotive, such as (In)Voluntary Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide, Mercy Killing, Death with Dignity, and many more. Whatever the meanings associated with these terms, the Humanist view on whether Euthanasia is morally justified can be found by considering and weighing up the costs and benefits to all the people concerned.

Voluntary euthanasia is when the sufferer has made it clear that they wish to die and has requested help because they are unable or unwilling to do so themselves.

Involuntary euthanasia occurs when no consent or wish to die is expressed by the sufferer. These instances can include those in comas, infants and cases of extreme senile dementia.

Passive euthanasia is where patients are allowed to die by withholding treatment that would keep them alive (including nourishment). Although any kind of assisted dying is illegal in the UK, some people believe that this practice is widely carried out and generally judged to be within the law.

Active euthanasia means taking specific steps to cause the patient's death, such as injecting with poison, or an overdose of painkillers or sleeping pills. The difference then between 'active' and 'passive' forms of euthanasia is that in active forms something is **done** to end the patient's life and in passive forms something is **not done** that might have preserved that life.

Indirect euthanasia is also believed to be widely practised in the UK and generally considered legal as long as killing is not the intention. It is sometimes referred to as the 'double effect' and provides treatment (normally a kind of pain relief like morphine) that has the side-effect of hastening death.

Depending on the circumstances, Humanists would support all of the above methods of euthanasia, all with strict procedural rules and safeguards.

Arguments about euthanasia often hinge on human rights, either to life or to death. Societies have yet to settle the question of what should be done when seriously ill people prefer to end their lives. Should they have a right to make this choice?

On the one hand, sufferers sometimes wish to end their lives but lack the physical strength or the means to do it and therefore need help. Helping such sufferers to die can be seen as a merciful release and is thus different from other suicides. On the other hand, where an individual is constantly suffering, has no quality of life and expresses a wish for it to come to an end, prolonging that suffering for the sake of the personal beliefs of other people appears cruel, especially when the individual concerned does not agree with these beliefs.

There may be a moral distinction between allowing someone to die and actively assisting them to die. However, allowing someone to die is still taking action – just different action. Deliberately bringing about someone's death is often less painful and less emotionally traumatic for the patient who otherwise might have to endure the prolonged route that death can sometimes take. This trauma often extends to family members. It may be considered less burdensome for doctors to withdraw or withhold treatment than to administer a lethal drug.

Humanists believe it to be wrong to force doctors and nurses to take actions they consider morally wrong. However, if a patient has made the decision to die, they should not be forced to travel abroad in order to get this help.

The development of euthanasia has partially come about due to medical advancements, and thus longer life spans. Now, even if a cure is not available, doctors and surgeons can keep patients alive much longer. Therefore, the codes of conduct for medical practitioners that were formulated (sometimes even centuries ago) cannot necessarily be applied to all 21st century issues and developments.

Switzerland and the Netherlands have adapted to this change: 'assisted suicide' has been legal for around 20 years. In Oregon, USA, doctors can

prescribe lethal drugs to patients who are terminally ill and judged to be in their last six months of life. There is also an active movement called Death with Dignity campaigning in the USA to change laws in various states.

One method of ensuring one's wishes are taken into account is for each individual to write a 'living will'. This way, medical staff and family members can all be made aware of the patient's wishes, especially if the circumstances are such that the patient can no longer express them. Postponing death where there is no apparent benefit appears neither compassionate nor moral. However, Living Wills have yet to attain full legal status and there is no compulsion on health authorities to accept them and no moral obligation on families to respect them.

So in general terms, Humanism supports most forms of euthanasia, while it also upholds the need for stringent safeguards where there may be other (immoral) motives involved. However, if people in possession of full information and sound judgement decide that their continued life has no value, then Humanists believe their wishes should be respected. Of course precautions are crucial. Before proceeding with any act of euthanasia, it is necessary to ensure that there is: adequate counselling for the people involved; the prevention of pressure on the patient; clear witnessed instructions from the patient; the involvement of at least two doctors; and no reasonable hope of recovery.

Humanism ignores the argument which often arises in these cases that medical intervention is somehow meddling with natural processes or 'playing God'; in a Humanist's view all medical interventions, even taking an aspirin for a headache, can be considered in this way. Humanism does not agree that all medical intervention at all times is necessarily the correct thing, but euthanasia can be morally justified as long as it is always subject to scrutiny and evidence and the decision is taken in the interests of seeking the most humane and humanitarian outcome for those involved.

Section 5: War and peace

Responses to war: Is war ever morally justifiable?

Some people say that war is a natural phenomenon and that as humankind is tribal in nature it will always want to protect territory and tribes. Humanists feel that intelligence and ability to reason can overcome humanity's primal instincts, and non-violent solutions should always be sought first. However, in the same way that it can sometimes be justified for an individual to resort to violence in self-defence or to protect the lives and rights of others, then it is possible that to do the same on a national level means that war can in some cases be morally justified.

Peaceful solutions are not always easy to find or to enforce. However, each nation should make efforts to seek peaceful solutions. In this endeavour every Humanist organisation strongly supports the work of the United Nations, an organisation aimed at resolving conflicts between nations as peacefully as possible. Humanists had some part in helping to set up this organisation and continue to uphold it and strengthen its effectiveness.

When the United Nations was established in 1945, the participating countries agreed on a Charter, which is regularly updated. The following is its Preamble.

We the peoples of the United Nations, determined

- *to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind,*
- *To reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small,*
- *To establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained,*
- *To promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, – And for these ends*
- *To practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours,*
- *To unite our strength to maintain international peace and security,*

- *To ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest,*
- *To employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,*
- *have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims.*

As liberal democracies have a good track record of not starting wars, increased democracy across the world should make war less likely.

It can be argued that if it is always wrong to intentionally kill the innocent, then all wars that kill must be morally wrong. For example, many modern conflicts involve the bombing of highly populated areas, in which innocent civilians are bound to be killed. More fundamentally, is it possible to make the distinction between those who are ‘innocent’ and those who are not? Although this distinction between the innocent and the less innocent can be a difficult one to make, Humanists say that there is something especially wrong with the deliberate targeting of civilians. Modern sophisticated weaponry can destroy whole towns in a short space of time and kill all inhabitants. However, such technology also has the capacity to pinpoint targets with deadly accuracy so that there is minimal life lost. Humanists are only able to decide how and when the use of such weapons is justified when they have discussed and evaluated each situation.

It may never be possible to wholly justify war in a moral sense. Consequently, responsible and politically concerned individuals should do all they can to ensure that governments consider all options and all alternative methods of resolving conflict before any decision on war is taken on the population’s behalf.

The last note on this subject comes from those who are most affected by wars – members of the armed forces. Most soldiers, sailors or aircrew have little say in whether they go to war or not: it is part of their job; it is what they sign up for when they join their nations’ forces and defending their country might include sacrificing their own lives in that process (whether or not they agree with the principles that led to the war in the first place). The following is an extract from the UK Armed forces Humanist Association Constitution:

‘In battle, and all other operations, high morale equates to the moral strength which gives true ascendancy over the enemy. The duty of bearing arms, of being prepared to fight, kill and if necessary die in carrying out orders, carries with it the responsibility only to do so in a just cause. All service personnel have direct and unique responsibility for life and death. Individually, all service personnel are subject to international and

national law, and must discharge their duties not just according to orders and law, but consciously and clearly for the greater good. Commanders must ensure that all subordinates understand these responsibilities of their service, and that their cause is just. This entails proper understanding of the Laws of War, Humanitarian Law and Rules of Engagement; but it also means an underlying deep comprehension of the moral and ethical responsibility of bearing arms. British servicemen must obey their orders confident that the ends, ways and means are right morally as well as militarily.'

Modern armaments: Can the use of any types of modern armaments be morally justified?

Today, many countries, including the USA and the UK, have an array of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons at their disposal and other countries are working towards having similar weapons.

There is an argument that such weapons are required for defence so that other countries will be deterred from instigating an attack. There is also a strong economic argument for the manufacture and sale of such weapons. The production of sophisticated modern weaponry needs modern technology and its manufacture provides many jobs. Moreover, there are thousands of people and government departments whose funds and savings and investments are tied up in the arms trade. If this trade ceased, all these people and institutions would need to find alternative ways of generating money. Poor countries cannot afford to manufacture modern armaments; some countries with the required funds lack the technological expertise. These less advanced countries become markets for out-of-date weaponry, allowing the manufacture of more modern and more destructive weapons to continue elsewhere.

Humanists do not believe in any afterlife(s) so their lives are highly valuable to them – they think carefully and morally before supporting any war. Wars are seen as hugely destructive not only in killing people but also in damage to the environment.

Humanists believe that individuals must decide whether weapons are strictly necessary. If more and more are made, then other countries will follow this lead and develop the techniques further. In this case there would appear to be only one result.

Conclusion

Humanism asserts that humankind is responsible for its own success or failure, so that outside of the physical and natural laws of the universe, the future of humanity rests in humanity's hands. As part of this future, the five issues discussed in this resource should concern everyone, but there are many more concerns that humanity needs to turn its attention towards, and urgently: for example, environmental issues and international conflicts.

Humanists urge the world's populations and governments to engage in a 21st century dialogue about morality. For these conversations to be productive, all involved must consider the arguments and scientific insights humanity has accumulated. On a political level, democracies and freedom of speech should be strengthened as the universal moral values necessary for humanity to progress and prosper. Only then can decisions on the above issues and others be morally justified.

Useful resources

International Humanist and Ethical Union

<http://www.iheu.org/>

British Humanism Association

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/>

Humanist Society of Scotland

<http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk/>

The American Humanist Association

<http://www.americanhumanist.org/index.html>

New Humanist Magazine

<http://newhumanist.org.uk/>

The Institute for Humanist Studies

<http://www.humaniststudies.org/>

Wikipedia – Humanism

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanism>

Jim Herrick, *Humanism: An Introduction*, Prometheus Books: New York, 2005

Paul Kurtz, *What is Secular Humanism?* Prometheus Books: New York, 2006

Richard Norman, *On Humanism (Thinking in Action)*, Routledge: London, 2004