Beliefs and Values: Humanism
Humanism

What is Humanism?

In 2011, 1,941,000 people answered the Scottish Census with 'no religion'. Humanism is a diverse movement which represents the views of millions of people all over the world who wish to lead good and worthwhile lives guided by reason and compassion.

Humanists do refer to themselves as a 'belief-group' and, Humanism believes in the right of human beings to think for themselves and reach their own conclusions about beliefs and values. Within this section you will find out about key Humanists and how their own beliefs and values influence their life and work.

What is it like to be a Humanist?

This video shows one young Humanist talking about what it means for him to be a Humanist in Scotland today.

Video

Watch Testimony – Humanism on YouTube - https://youtu.be/e-480xV0Q28
Watch Testimony – Humanism on GlowTV (Glow login required)

Reflecting on Humanism

- What questions might you ask this young Humanist?
- How has this young person’s life been shaped by his beliefs?
- What beliefs and values shape your life?
- Is it important to put your beliefs and values into action?
- How might you/do you put your beliefs and values into action?
- In what ways are your beliefs and values similar to/different from those of others?
- Why is it important to understand the diversity of beliefs and values in modern Scotland?
- What skills do you think are important when exploring beliefs and values?
- Why might understanding your beliefs and values and those of others be an important skill in the workplace?
Prominent figures in Humanism: Richard Dawkins

Clifton Richard Dawkins, more commonly referred to as Richard Dawkins, is considered to be one of the leading scientific minds in the world. He specialises in the area of evolutionary biology.

Dawkins describes his childhood as 'a normal Anglican upbringing', accepting Christianity until his mid-teens. It was as this point he decided that the theory of evolution was a better explanation for the complexity of life. From this moment on he stopped believing in God.

In an interview in 2003, ('Darwin's child', The Guardian, 10 February 2003), Dawkins outlined why he gave up his faith as a teenager. He came to realise that evolution was a far better explanation for the existence of the universe than that of a designer.

After completing school in 1959 Dawkins went to study zoology at Oxford University. During this time he became fascinated with the area of ethology and animal behaviour and continued his studies to achieve his doctorate.

Dawkins, a strong believer in the quest for understanding, took up a teaching position at the University of California where he spent a couple of years before returning to Oxford as a full-time lecturer. In 1990 he became Reader of Zoology, a position he held until 2008 when he retired his professorship.

Whilst at Oxford, Dawkins assumed the role of Simanyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. He took this very seriously, regularly giving keynote lectures at Oxford and around the world.

Upon retiring, Dawkins suggested he had plans to ‘write a book aimed at youngsters in which he will warn them against believing in anti-scientific fairytales.’ The Magic of Reality, published in September 2011, is Dawkins' first book aimed primarily at children.

Evolutionary Biology

Richard Dawkins is most famous for his work in an area called evolutionary biology. This is when scientists use biology to explore how life has evolved over time.

In this video Richard Dawkins talks about some of the evidence for evolution and why there is a need for further explanation of the evidence.

Video

Watch: Richard Dawkins: The Greatest Show on Earth at https://youtu.be/l-QWv_0Mjq0

[Please note: This video has not been uploaded to YouTube by Education Scotland1]

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1 By following this link, you will be moving away from the Education Scotland website. Education Scotland is not responsible for content on external websites. YouTube provides an open forum for users to post comments it is recommended that practitioners check the clips, and any appended comments, in advance so as to assess suitability before directing learners to them.

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As a scientist, Dawkins is trying to discover why some genes survive better than others. Through studying animal behaviour he has concluded that natural selection may actually come down to an animal's genes evolving.

Dawkins has written two well-known books on this topic, one called 'The Selfish Gene' and a second 'The Extended Phenotype'.

**Memes**

A word that Richard Dawkins has made famous is something called a 'meme'; a very strange word, but what does it actually mean?

A 'meme' is an idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. It is shortened from a longer Ancient Greek word 'mimeme' that means 'to imitate'. A meme acts like a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols or practices. A meme could be passed on through many different things, such as writing, rituals, speech or even gestures.

Examples of memes Dawkins includes in his book 'The Selfish Gene' are melodies, catch phrases, fashion and technology.

If we now link this view about memes with biological evolution we come to a very interesting conclusion. Through genes mutating and varying (memes), some characteristics survive and become more common and others disappear completely. According to Dawkins this is how evolution works.

**Dawkins' views on creationism**

Dawkins is a high profile critic of creationism. This is a belief that God created humanity, life and the universe. He has described this view as 'a preposterous, mind-shrinking falsehood'.

In his book ‘The Blind Watchmaker’ he attempts to dismantle a theory called the Teleological Argument proposed by the English Theologian William Paley. In this Paley suggests the universe, like a watch, is too complicated to exist purely by accident and therefore must have a designer. Dawkins responds to this theory by proposing that natural selection is sufficient to explain the complexity of the universe. (This is a view generally held by most scientists.)

Richard Dawkins has his own [website](#) where he explains his views further and discusses more fully science, reason and his views of life.

**Dawkins’ Atheism**

Dawkins has described himself as an outspoken, 'fairly militant atheist' and critic of religion. He believes that for him atheism is a logical conclusion because of his views of evolution. 'All I know is that God isn’t a good explanation (for the universe), so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better one.'

In 2007 he founded the 'Out Campaign' which was to try encourage atheists all over the world to declare they were atheists publically. Atheism is often viewed as people 'not believing in God', but for Dawkins it is more than this. He hopes that by atheists identifying themselves it would increase public awareness of how many people hold these views and reduce the negative view held on atheism.
In 2008 Dawkins officially supported the UK’s first atheist advertising campaign as part of his role as vice president of the British Humanist Association. The plan was to advertise atheism on the side of buses in the London area. He promised to personally match money raised up to £5,500 for the advertising. However the campaign was such a great success that over £100,000 was raised and in January 2009 buses covered London with the slogan:

‘There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life’.

Activities to support learning

- Using the information on Richard Dawkins, create a timeline showing all the important dates that have happened in his life, for example this could include books he has published, TV programmes he has appeared in as well as scientific discoveries. (If you need more information you can also search for information on the internet.)
- After reading the above information, make a list of ten words which best describe Richard Dawkins.
- Richard Dawkins is described as one of the leading scientific minds in the world today. In groups of two or three can you think of another three scientists you could describe in the same way?
- Dawkins believes that more science should be taught in schools, do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
- The Richard Dawkins Foundation has been set up to help schools make sure pupils learn about how important evolution is. Do you think this is a good idea?
- Many people in the world now describe themselves as atheists - what does this mean?
- Find out more about Humanist beliefs and values. How do you think the life of Richard Dawkins demonstrates these beliefs and values?
- In what ways are Humanist beliefs and values similar to/different from beliefs and values religions and other belief groups?
- How has learning about Humanist beliefs and values influenced your own developing beliefs and values?