



UNDERSTANDING HUMANISM
Resources for Education

What does it mean to be atheist and agnostic?

Learning objectives:

To understand key words
To know humanists
attitudes towards atheist
and agnostic

Certain, definite, probable, possible

What do these words mean?

- 1) Certain
- 2) Definite
- 3) Probable
- 4) Possible

Can you think of sentences
that use each word?

'Belief or non-belief in god' scale

I am 100% certain that a god exists.

I believe it is highly unlikely that a god exists and live my life as though there are no gods.

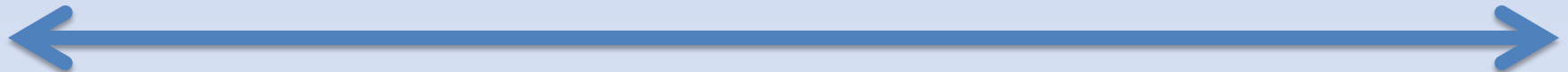
I am uncertain but feel that it is more likely a god doesn't exist than one does.

I am completely undecided.

I am uncertain but feel that it is more likely a god exists than one doesn't.

I am 100% certain that there is no god.

I believe it is highly likely that a god exists and live my life as though there is a god.



Atheist

Theist

Atheism and agnosticism

Agnostic (without knowledge)

- We cannot know for sure whether a god exists or not

Atheist (without god)

- Don't believe in a god or gods
- Live life as though there is no god or gods

Agnosticism

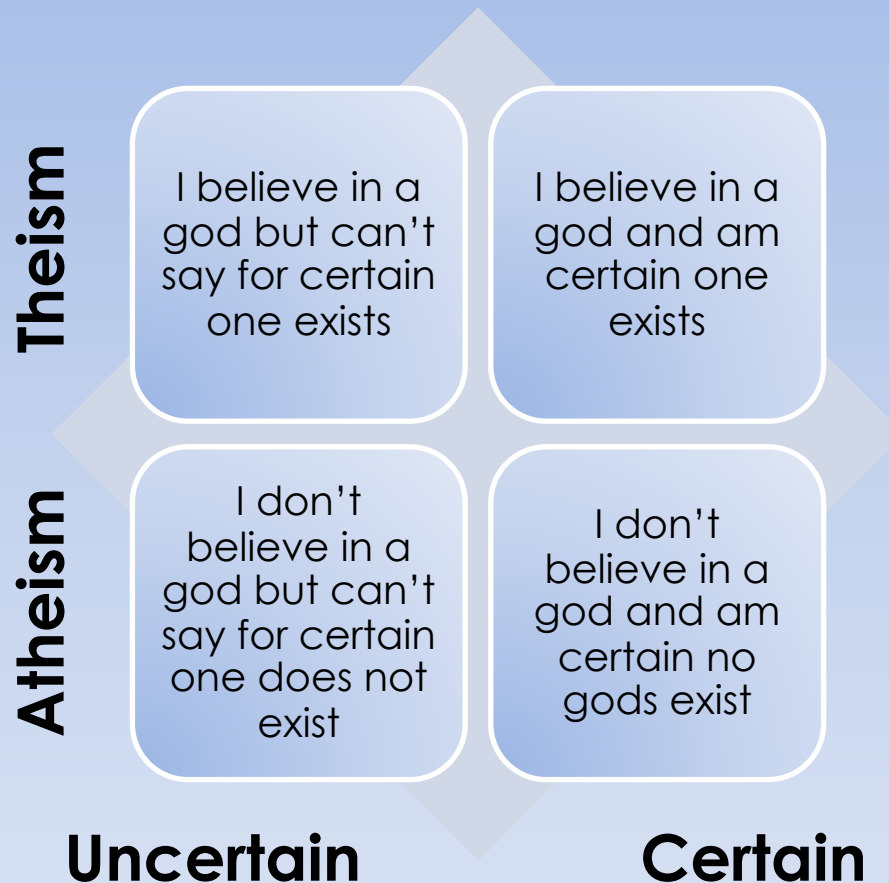
‘An Agnostic may hold that the existence of God, though not impossible, is very **improbable**. He may even hold it so improbable that it is not worth considering in practice. In that case, he is not far removed from atheism.’

Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1970)

‘Agnosticism as a term is not quite as vague and non-committal as generally thought – it is belief that one cannot have certain knowledge about things for which there can be no evidence.’

TH Huxley (1825 – 1895)

Belief or non-belief in god



Is it still possible?

If the following events happened...

a) Is it still possible that a god exists?

b) Is it still possible that a god doesn't exist?

- 1) The prime minister announces that he/she believes in god.
- 2) An earthquake kills thousands of people.
- 3) Someone in your family is cured of a serious illness from which you did not think she would recover.
- 4) You pray asking for a sign that god is truly there, and nothing happens.
- 5) A friend tells you they can hear god talking to them inside their head.
- 6) We discover an alien species on another planet and they tell us they used to believe in gods but no longer do.

Extensions questions:

Would any event make it certain a god exists?

Would any event make it certain a god does not exist?

Is it possible to be certain about the existence or non-existence of god?

The invisible pencil-eating monster

At the end of a lesson you notice that your pencil is missing. 'It must have been eaten by the pencil-eating monster,' says your friend. When you say you have never heard of a pencil-eating monster, your friend explains that pencil-eating monsters sneak into school classrooms and eat any pencils they can find.

You say to your friend that you did not see a monster in the classroom. 'That is because the pencil-eating monster is **invisible**,' says your friend. When you explain that you didn't hear one either, your friend tells you that it is also **silent**.

You then point out that the door and windows have remained closed throughout the lesson and ask your friend how the monster got in and out. Your friend says that pencil-eating monsters are **intangible** (they can pass through doors and walls and nobody can feel them).

- 1) Do you believe the pencil-eating monster exists? Why or why not?
- 2) Is it possible to prove your friend is wrong?
- 3) If you found your pencil or discovered someone else had stolen it, would that prove the pencil-eating monster did not exist?
- 4) Even if you can't prove your friend wrong, does that make it reasonable to believe them?



The invisible gardener

You arrive at school one day and notice a small, new plant growing in a patch of dirt in the corner of the school yard. 'It must have been planted by a gardener,' says your friend. But when you ask your teacher, she tells you the school has no gardener. Your friend says, 'There must be a gardener or where did the flower come from?' When you say that perhaps the flower just grew on its own, your friend replies that it must have had a gardener to help it.

The next morning you notice the flower has grown a little bigger and there is a second flower in the dirt. 'You see,' says your friend, 'there must be a gardener! He must visit in the middle of the night.'

You still don't believe your friend so you decide to stay up all night and watch the patch of dirt. You see no gardener, but the following morning, the first plant has grown some more and there are several other flowers. 'The gardener is invisible,' says your friend. You tell your friend that you didn't hear anything either, but your friend replies that the gardener must work silently. When you ask if it's possible to smell the gardener, your friend says no.

The next night you stay awake again and you stand in front of the patch of dirt so that if there is a gardener you can feel him walking past. You feel nothing all night, but in the morning the flowers have all grown some more. Your friend tells you that the gardener must be **invisible**, **inaudible** (you can't hear him), and **intangible** (you can't feel him).

- 1) Do you believe the gardener exists? Why or why not?
- 2) Is it possible to prove to your friend that the gardener does not exist?
- 3) Even if you can't prove your friend is wrong, does that make it reasonable to believe them?
- 4) Is it possible the gardener exists and does not exist?
- 5) Is an invisible, inaudible, intangible gardener different from no gardener at all?

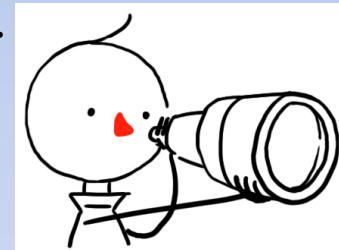


The invisible teapot

The philosopher, **Bertrand Russell**, proposed a thought experiment to illustrate the **burden of proof**.

Imagine you were told that there was a **teapot** floating in space. Then, imagine you were told that this teapot was always located on the exact opposite side of the sun from the Earth so that we would never be able to detect it with our telescopes or in any other way.

- 1) Would you believe such a teapot existed?
- 2) Could you prove that it didn't exist?
- 3) Is it possible to prove that a god doesn't exist?
- 4) Is it possible to prove anything doesn't exist?
- 5) If we can't prove something doesn't exist, does that make it is reasonable to believe it does exist?
- 6) Should the responsibility be on the religious believer to prove that there is a god or gods or on the atheist to prove that there aren't any?



The burden of proof

'Even though there's no scientific evidence at all for God's existence, it's also impossible to prove that God doesn't exist (or that anything doesn't).'

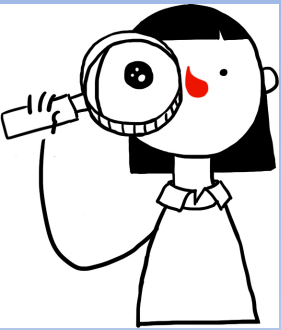
Ariane Sherine, writer and patron of the British Humanist Association

Humanists accept it would be **impossible to prove that the something invisible, inaudible, an intangible did not** exist (it's impossible to believe anything does not exist)...

...but believe it would be **perfectly reasonable to doubt it** and to be suspicious of those who claimed it existed.

Humanists believe the **responsibility should lie on those believing in something, to prove it exists**, not on those who doubt it, to prove that it doesn't.

The important question for a humanist would be: **is there any good evidence** such a thing exists?



Humanists

Humanists are **atheists** or **agnostics**

They don't see any good **evidence** for the existence of a god or gods and live their lives as though there are no gods.

Humanism involves more than just the absence of belief in a god, they also believe:

- We can use reason and evidence to answer questions about the world
- This world and life are the only world and life we know we have and we should therefore make the most of them
- Human beings should try to live full and happy lives and help others do the same
- We can create our own meaning and purpose in life

The bus campaign



Questions about the campaign

1) What do you think was the purpose of the campaign?

- To turn people into atheists?
- To make people worry less?
- To get people thinking?
- Anything else?



2) Is the message atheist or agnostic? How do you know?

3) Why do you think the specific words were used in the advert?

4) How do you think different people reacted to the campaign?

5) What is the key difference in the follow up Christian bus campaign?

6) Do you think this sort of advert should be allowed? Is it OK to publicise our beliefs and question the beliefs of others?

The follow up Christian bus campaign



The background of the slide features a light blue gradient. On the right side, there are large, abstract, organic shapes in a light orange or peach color. These shapes overlap and flow together, creating a sense of movement and depth. One prominent shape has a circular cutout near the top right.

‘The time to be happy is now.’

Robert Ingersol (1833 – 1899)

Design your own campaign

Express your own beliefs about whether there is a god or not, whether you don't know either way, or whether you think such beliefs are private.

Express what your beliefs mean, and whether they matter, for how people should live their lives.

Questions to think about:

- 1) Would they want to express certainty or uncertainty about their belief or non-belief in god?
- 2) What would they want to say to people about how they should live their lives?
- 3) Do they think what one believes matters when thinking about how we should live our lives?
- 4) Would their campaign have a similar or different tone to the bus campaign? Why?
- 5) Would they advertise on a bus or somewhere else?

Humanists

For humanists the most important thing is not whether you believe in a god or not, but **how you live your life**.

Humanists believe **we can all live ethical, happy, and meaningful lives**.

Although many atheists and agnostics might not define themselves as 'humanists' (they may never even have heard of the word), many will still live their lives according to humanist beliefs and values.



Humanist responses

How might a humanist respond to these questions and statements about atheism, agnosticism, and Humanism?

- 1) Agnostics just can't make up their minds.
- 2) You can't be certain there isn't a god.
- 3) A humanist is just somebody who doesn't believe in god.