

“Exploring Life – A Non-Religious View”: Two discussion Workshops

Around 30 people attended one of two Guildford events led by David Savage in March and April. David explained the aim was not to proselytise or persuade but to look at things from a non-religious viewpoint. The evening got off to a lively start with David presenting various non-religious perspectives and asking which, if any, “could you most empathise with?” and whether any “made you feel uncomfortable?”.

To explore “how do you think you have got your moral values?” people were split into groups to consider the case study “Is IVF (in vitro fertilisation) morally justified?” They were asked to spend 5 minutes coming up with 3 statements on why IVF is wrong and then the same on why IVF is right. Responses against IVF included questionable screening (e.g. recently a deaf couple wanted to create a deaf baby), unwanted embryos and anonymous donors resulting in unknown biological backgrounds. On the other hand IVF can alleviate huge suffering experienced by infertility or high genetic risk from incurable diseases. Being requested to come up with arguments for both sides is challenging and instructive as you start to realise that you are deriving moral stances through balancing what you would want in certain situations (e.g. if you were infertile wanting a child) with what the effect meeting your needs would have on other people.

Possible non-religious perspectives?

- Thinking for yourself about what is right and wrong, based on **reason and respect for others**.
- Finding **meaning, beauty and joy in the one life we have**, without the need for an afterlife.
- Looking to **science instead of religion** as the best way to discover and understand the world.
- Believing people can use empathy and compassion to **make the world a better place for everyone**.

Different moral perspectives

- Leadership role of women
- Suicide, assisted dying
- IVF treatment, stem cell research
- Use of condoms, birth control
- Homosexuality, same sex marriage
- Religious tolerance
- Religious discrimination
- Money lending, usury
- Blasphemy, free speech
- Genital mutilation
- Alcohol, meat, diet

David highlighted two ethical approaches that people can have which are not necessarily in accord: one based on a moral relationship between human beings centred on mutual empathy (the Golden Rule e.g. “Do not do to others what you would not like for yourself” - Confucianism 500 BCE) and the other based on a moral relationship between ‘man’ and God by appeal to ancient sacred texts and religious leaders. This can result in conflicting viewpoints e.g. on issues such as leadership role of women, homosexuality, free speech, condoms and assisted dying.

We were challenged further with whether the age old question “What is the meaning of life?” is the right question. Perhaps rather than trying to answer it by searching ‘out there’, we should be focussing instead on the question “What gives my life meaning?”

The evenings included Sue Willson giving insightful answers to questions about her experiences as a humanist celebrant providing funerals, baby namings, weddings and civil partnerships; Jennie Johnson recounting on what it can feel like to be non-religious; and Mike Adams talking about the different UK and International non-religious and secular organisations.

The two evenings hosted in the Guildford Institute also generated considerable interest in going ahead with plans to start a new humanist group in Guildford. If you would like to know more about this then please ring Mike on 01483 233324 or email mike@wood-street.fsnet.co.uk [*Jennie Johnson*]