7 Investigating a non-religious worldview: what is sentientism?

Overview

These activities introduce students to the non-religious worldview known as sentientism; it is committed to using evidence and applying reason to grant moral consideration to all sentient beings.

As its name suggests, sentientism takes *sentience* – a being's capacity for physical and emotional experiences that matter to them, either positively or negatively – as its central principle in deciding how to live, and how to act towards others. So sentientism is a non-religious sentiocentric worldview. There can also be sentiocentric worldviews within religions, e.g. Jainism, which has a strong focus on *ahimsa* (non-harm to sentient beings, which includes animals).

Sentiocentric worldviews challenge anthropocentric worldviews – those that prioritise and privilege human interests, and which tend to be dominant and unconsciously held worldviews in many societies.

This unit enables students to appreciate that non-religious worldviews are diverse and complex, and can intersect and overlap for some people. It builds students' understanding of sentientism as a non-religious worldview which is attracting a global community of people.

Context

For students studying RS/RMPS courses, these activities will enhance understanding of content relating to non-religious perspectives, such as issues relating to the value of human life and the moral status of animals.

The activities are also ideal for inclusion in non-examined RE/RMPS provision.

Essential knowledge

Substantive knowledge:

- There are significant contemporary debates about animal welfare/animal rights, which are increasingly informed by advances in our understanding of sentience in non-humans. Sentientism is a non-religious worldview which responds directly to these issues.
- Sentientism is an example of an embodied non-religious worldview: that is, a practice-based ethical belief system which affects how those who identify as sentientists live their lives.
- Students will consider how far anthropocentricism and speciesism are dominant and often unconsciously held (implicit) worldviews, to which sentientism presents a direct challenge.

Ways of knowing include:

- Critically examining philosophical and theological thinking around attitudes towards non-human animals, in the light of current scientific evidence on sentience of other species
- Recognising how knowledge develops through dialogue, debate and disagreement within and between people holding similar and diverse worldviews
- Using reasons and evidence to argue for a point of view, responding thoughtfully to differing perspectives, and applying this to students' own thinking.

Teaching and learning

1. Who matters most?

a. Use the images in online Resource 7.2 to make a card sort. Ask students, in groups, to rank the images in order of who matters most. At this stage don't give criteria for the rankings – give students the freedom to interpret the brief for themselves.

b. Invite feedback from each group. Compare group choices and discuss carefully. Was it easy to rank each image individually, or were there some that students could not differentiate and ranked as equal? How did they decide? What criteria did they use, and how easy or difficult was it to agree? Are there some images that simply don't matter at all? (Alexa and the alien will probably feature here – but were there also some animals that some/any students thought didn't matter?)

c. Ask how they interpreted 'who matters'? What does 'matter' mean? Introduce the term 'moral consideration'. Put simply, this means considering the impact of our actions in relation to others. Most of us probably exercise greater moral consideration for those close to us. It is common, and natural, to have greater moral consideration for other human beings than for beings of other species. The task students have completed will most likely highlight this.

d. Ask pupils to focus on the 15 in the middle. How did they make choices when ranking? Did they feel these 15 beings deserved different levels of

moral consideration? Why/why not? Ask them to think about whether their original decisions were based on their knowledge of science/biology, their experience, emotions, traditions, how appealing the animals look and so on. Did they apply a set of criteria in their choices, or did they make decisions more haphazardly?

2. Thinking critically about criteria

Discuss the different criteria students used to rank the images. How consistently and honestly did they apply the criteria? E.g. if the outward expression of intelligence was the benchmark for giving moral consideration, then Alexa might be seen by some people as ranking quite highly, and pigs would be ranked as more intelligent than dogs and perhaps even human babies. If, however, the central criterion was the ability to form social groups, then ants would rank highly there, and so on. The point here is that our decisions on what or who we value are often neither consistent nor rational. Ask students to think of what would be a good basis – that is, one that could be consistently applied and make sense in deciding upon the degree of moral consideration given different beings.

3. Anthropocentricism and speciesism

a. Write or display the word 'anthropocentricism' where students can all see it. Do they know what it means? Examining etymology can help students to remember vocabulary. Explain that anthropocentricism means putting human needs and interests above all else. Ask students to reflect on steps 1 and 2. Did their choices reflect anthropocentric worldviews?

b. Ask students to create a 'Y' diagram on anthropocentricism. In the space at the top, they should list examples of anthropocentricism, and in the two sections below, to the left, list items under the heading 'implications – positive' and on the right under 'implications – negative'. Encourage students to discuss their ideas in pairs, before discussing them as a class.

One consequence of anthropocentricism is that humans see other animals in terms of their use to us, and may give them less or more moral consideration based on that rather than on the characteristics of the animal. This is called *speciesism* – a term coined by Richard Ryder and popularised by Peter Singer. An example of speciesism is how pigs and dogs are treated in the West: while both animals are highly social and intelligent mammals, it is regarded as acceptable to farm and kill pigs for food, but when dogs are treated this way in some Asian countries it causes moral outrage in many Westerners who happily eat pork. Speciesism does not imply that every animal should be given the same moral consideration, but that there should be a sound ethical basis for differentiating.

4. What is sentience, and is it a basis for giving others moral consideration?

Sentience means having the capacity for feeling, e.g. being able to experience positive and negative feelings such as pleasure, joy, pain and distress. Scientific understanding of the inner lives of non-human beings is constantly evolving. It is generally accepted that many animals, certainly those with a complex central nervous system are indeed sentient. Discuss this and ask students to re-order their ranking based solely on sentience. How different does their spectrum look in comparison to their former rankings?

Introduce the term 'sentiocentric' – this refers to worldviews which put sentience at the centre of moral consideration. Sentiocentric worldviews can be regarded as in strong contrast to anthropocentric worldviews. Use the timeline of ten key thinkers (online Resource 7.3) to enable students to consider the summaries of each thinker's view on animals, on a spectrum of anthropocentric to sentiocentric. Exchange views as a class. Challenge students to write a statement of their own, setting out their own position on moral consideration for animals. Where would they place this on the same spectrum?

5. Interview with Jamie Woodhouse

Read the interview with Jamie Woodhouse (Resource 7.1, pp. 32–33), a sentientist and a humanist. Challenge students to sum up in five bullet points what they understand about sentientism as a worldview from what Jamie says here.

Sentientism shares features with other worldviews mentioned in the interview. Use a three-circle Venn diagram to compare sentientism with humanism and ethical veganism.

6. Think PINC thought experiment: 'The majority of people in the UK become sentientists'

See online Resource 7.4 to support students in responding in groups to a thought experiment, before concluding with an evaluative piece of writing on 'Sentientism: A Worldview for the Future of Humanity?'

RESOURCE 7.1

Interview with Jamie Woodhouse, sentientist

Jamie is working to develop sentientism as a worldview and as a global movement. He hosts the Sentientism Podcast and YouTube channel. He has published articles and presented academic seminars on sentientism and its implications. He is building a range of global sentientist communities (open to all) that so far span over 100 countries. You can find him on Twitter @JamieWoodhouse and @Sentientism. More information at sentientism.info

What is sentientism? Would you describe it as a non-religious worldview?

In a few words, sentientism is 'evidence, reason and compassion for all sentient beings'. It's a worldview that tries to answer two of the biggest and most important questions: 'What's real?' and 'Who matters?' When it comes to working out what's real and what we should believe, sentientism suggests we should use a naturalistic approach. That means using good quality evidence and reasoning rather than supernatural revelation, faith or dogma. That's why most people see sentientism as a non-religious worldview.

When it comes to the moral question of who matters, sentientism says we should have compassion for every sentient being. That means every being that can have experiences – whether bad experiences, which we might call suffering, or good experiences, which we might call flourishing. A simple way of thinking about whether a being is sentient or not is to ask the question 'Can they suffer?'

You are a humanist as well as a sentientist … how does that work?

There's plenty of common ground between sentientism and humanism when it comes to thinking about what's real, because both take a naturalistic approach based on using evidence and reason. The difference is more about the 'who matters' question. Most humanists and humanist organisations focus on the human species. Sentientism instead insists that we extend our compassion beyond humanity to all sentient beings – why should it be only human suffering that matters?

When I was just a humanist, I thought I cared about other people because they were human. Now I'm a sentientist I realise I care about other people because they're sentient – because they can suffer and flourish. The fact we happen to be the same species doesn't seem so important to me any more. But because all humans are sentient, I care about all of them too – so I think I still count as a humanist as well as a sentientist.

The humanist movement itself is starting to think more seriously about non-human sentient animals. But as with humanity as a whole, changing social norms about ethics is a frustratingly slow process. Nearly all of us are brought up to believe that exploiting and farming animals is normal, and it can be hard to switch to thinking from the animals' perspective.

Isn't sentientism just ethical veganism, but with a different name?

Ethical veganism is about trying not to cause animal exploitation, suffering or death. That makes sense from a sentientist perspective because the animals we farm and exploit are sentient and suffer terribly at our hands. Boycotting the products, practices and industries involved is a simple step that nearly everyone can take to put our compassion into practice.

However, there are some differences between ethical veganism and sentientism:

- First, sentientism is naturalistic, whereas people with both supernatural and naturalistic worldviews can be vegans.
- Second, veganism focuses on the word 'animal' whereas sentientism focuses on 'sentient beings'. In everyday terms these are pretty much the same thing, but there are some very simple animals, like sponges, that don't seem to be sentient as they lack any kind of nervous system. We might also one day create or encounter sentient beings that aren't animals as we know them, whether aliens or artificial intelligences.
- Finally, veganism focuses on avoiding and ending human-caused harms like animal farming. Sentientism, however, extends compassion to all sentient beings, whether or not they are being harmed by humans. For example, there may be quadrillions of sentient animals living in the wild that aren't impacted much by humans. Sentientists think their suffering and flourishing matters too. Of course, many vegans would agree.

Is sentientism new, or does it have a long history?

The word 'sentientism' is fairly new (1975 is the earliest use I've found) but its ideas are very old, maybe even pre-human! Within human thought, naturalistic and sentience-focused philosophies have deep roots in many regions and cultures – largely pre-dating modern religions, and influencing many of them.

These themes can be found in African, Asian (see *ahimsa*'s 'do no harm') and Ancient Greek thinking, for example. Some thinkers even combined these themes into something very much like an ancient form of sentientism. One example is the blind Arab philosopher poet, Al-Ma'arri who lived over a thousand years ago. He used a naturalistic approach to challenge religious thinking and wrote about the ethics of veganism long before the word 'vegan' was invented.

If we want to push things even further back, long before humanity evolved, palaeontologists have found clues that strongly suggest that non-human animals used 'evidence and reasoning', co-operated in families and groups to survive and reproduce, and felt compassion, at least for their young and their companions. That may have been the start of a basic sort of morality that humans have since built on. Of course, quadrillions of non-human sentient animals still do these things today.

How does being a sentientist affect your everyday life?

Most people would probably point to my veganism, but that's only because it's still quite unusual … for now. Things are changing quickly, because already many people in our Western culture say they don't want to hurt, exploit or kill sentient animals – and it's never been easier or more important to stop, for the animals, for us humans and for the environment we all share.

More broadly, sentientism affects my everyday life and thinking in a few ways:

Freedom: I don't feel tied to any particular set of rules or people in authority. I can think for myself and act for everyone (all sentient beings!).

Compassion: trying to really imagine what it's like to be other sentients, whether people or animals. Also, remembering to be compassionate to myself, those around me and even people I disagree with.

Collaboration and community: wanting to work with others (whether sentientist or not) to make things better for all sentient beings.

Curiosity: wanting to keep on learning, particularly when I'm wrong about something. Wanting to spot and challenge my own biases. Being comfortable about not knowing, and trying to find out more – instead of believing reassuring, made-up answers.

Awe: having a sense of constant amazement about the universe we all share and how we're all connected – not by magic or spirits, but by physics!

Resources and links

Jamie's website gives extensive information: **sentientism.info**

Additional links are available here: **www.natre.org.uk/investigating-worldviews**