

A FAIR SOCIETY: FREEDOM, EQUALITY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

THE PLURAL SOCIETY

A plural society is one in which there live people from different cultures and traditions with a range of worldviews. Such a society raises certain challenges:

1. In a world where people have different beliefs, desires, and interests, how can we treat them all fairly?
2. If there is disagreement between people about the best way to live, can we create a world that keeps everyone happy? If so, what is the best way to do that?

WHAT IS A FAIR SOCIETY?

Imagine you were asked to cut up a cake and share it between yourself and three strangers. Some of us might be tempted to cut a bigger slice for ourselves.



Now imagine you did not know which slice you would receive. This would motivate many of us to make sure we divided the cake up evenly.

The philosopher **John Rawls** applied this idea to society. He asked us to imagine we were designing a society but we did not know what position we would hold in it once it had been created. We did not know what our gender, race, or sexual orientation would be. We did not know whether we would be healthy or sick, or suffer from any disabilities. We did not know whether our parents would be rich or poor. We did not even know what our tastes, passions, interests, and beliefs would be. Rawls described this as being placed behind a **veil of ignorance**.



Rawls believed that this condition would lead us to designing a truly fair society. By not wishing to disadvantage ourselves, we would need to ensure that no one was disadvantaged.

“A just society is a society that if you knew everything about it, you’d be willing to enter it in a random place.”

JOHN RAWLS,
A Theory of Justice



WHAT WOULD WE WANT?

Rawls believed that from behind the veil of ignorance we would all want **individual freedom** and **equality of opportunity**. Equality of opportunity does not mean that everyone has exactly the same. For example, it does not mean everyone should earn the same amount of money whatever job they do. But it means that society should not unfairly disadvantage or discriminate against particular people (e.g. on the basis of gender, race, belief, or sexuality). Sometimes this is called a level playing field.

Not all humanists agree with all of Rawls’ conclusions, but many agree that the right approach to thinking about how we should organise society is to use reason and empathy and to consider our shared human needs. Many humanists acknowledge that, even if we had equal opportunities, luck would still play a role in what happens in our lives, so we’d still have a responsibility to take care of those who were less fortunate than us.

“Sex and race, because they are easy, visible differences, have been the primary ways of organising human beings into superior and inferior groups... We are talking about a society in which there will be no roles other than those chosen, or those earned. We are really talking about humanism.”



GLORIA STEINEM,
feminist and political activist

HUMAN RIGHTS

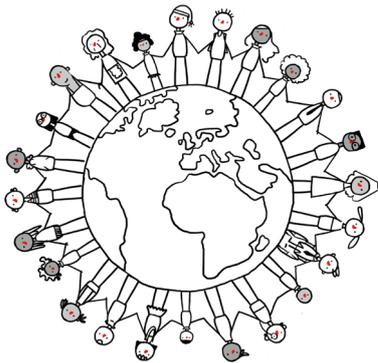
Many humanists support and campaign for **human rights**. Human rights are international laws based on our universal human needs. They are designed to guarantee us all the freedom to live our lives the way we wish and ensure we are all treated equally.

Some human rights:

- The right to freedom of thought, belief, and religion
- The right to freedom of expression
- The right to education
- The right to marry and start a family
- The right to respect for your private life
- The right to participate in free elections



QUESTION: How do these rights help support freedom and equality?



'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (1948)

'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a great affirmation of the humanist view that there are important moral values shared by all rational people, regardless of race, culture, or religion – because they are based on our shared human nature and needs.'

ANDREW COPSON,
Chief Executive of Humanists UK



'We don't care if other people believe different things, we actually really aren't looking to convert or change anyone, it's more about a world in which all those people can live productively together.'

EWAN MAIN,
humanist celebrant



'One of my humanist values, which has inspired me to work for human rights, is that when I leave the world, I want to leave it in a better shape. I don't want the generations that would come after me to face the same kind of challenges that my generation has been facing.'

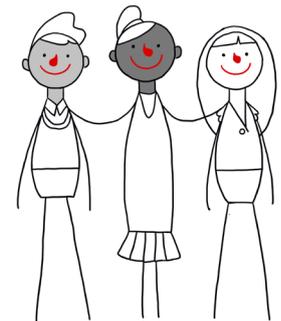
GULALAI ISMAIL,
human rights activist



A CASE FOR FREEDOM OF BELIEF

Humanist organisations are concerned about inequalities in society relating to religion or belief. The **Oxford Declaration** was adopted by Humanists International in 2014 to assert humanist support for the rights to freedom of thought and expression.

The veil of ignorance can help us to understand why this might be. If one did not know whether one was going to be born into a religious or a non-religious family, if one was unaware of what one's inclinations towards religion would be (or how this might change throughout one's life), then many humanists argue that we would wish to be born into a society where there existed freedom of belief. They also argue that children should receive an unbiased and balanced education about different worldviews. This would be a **secular society** in which one could freely choose what one believed and live according to one's beliefs without fear of persecution or punishment.



JUST A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT? OR A CALL TO ACTION?

‘The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts.’



JOHN RAWLS,

A Theory of Justice

We are not all born equal. Nor can society make everyone completely equal. However, many humanists believe we should work to remove those inequalities that are unfair and *can* be abolished by social reform.

For humanists, human beings alone are **responsible** for making the world a better place. We cannot expect help to come from elsewhere. There is no other life in which injustices will be put right. Therefore, justice needs to be worked for in the **here and now**.

Many humanists believe that thinking about the veil of ignorance can help us to see what goals we ought to work for in the real world. If we recognise that we would not be happy to be in the position in which other human beings find themselves, then we should commit ourselves to changing things. One does not have to be a humanist to support many of these goals. People of many worldviews are supporters of freedom, equality, and human rights.

‘It will never rain roses: when we want to have more roses we must plant more trees.’

GEORGE ELIOT,

(Mary Anne Evans), author



‘Humanism is a way of thinking and living that emphasizes the agency of human beings. Humanism stresses the fact that we, human beings, are capable of changing the world. That we have the power to make a difference in our lives, both individually and collectively, without recourse to some outside force.’

LEO IGWE,

Founder of Nigerian Humanists



HAVE WE MADE PROGRESS?

Human beings have made significant progress over the past few hundred years towards a fairer and kinder society. People have better access to healthcare and live longer than ever before. More people have a say in how their countries are run. A smaller portion of people live in poverty. More children have access to free education. Many countries have introduced human rights and freedoms for their citizens. However, these benefits are not available to everyone, and many countries still have a long way to go. For humanists, there is still a great deal of work to be done.



QUESTIONS:

- What is the purpose of the veil of ignorance thought experiment? Do you think it is helpful?
- Why might human rights be important to humanists?
- Why do humanists argue that there should be freedom of religion or belief?
- What motivates humanists to try to build a fairer world in the here and now?