

BEING GOOD: A HUMANIST APPROACH

Humanists don't believe in a god. They don't have a holy book or any figures of authority. So how do they make decisions about what is right and wrong? Many humanists believe we need to think for ourselves about the best way to act.

“ ‘Morality is not a set of non-negotiable rules handed down to us from on high, nor is it just a matter of personal preference. Instead morality is rooted in our nature as human beings. Our shared values give us ground on which we can build.’ ”

SANDI TOKSVIG, broadcaster



SHARED VALUES

There are certain facts about **human nature** that can help us to think about how we should treat each other. Many humanists believe we need to consider what human beings are like and what makes us happy. We have evolved many **shared feelings, needs, and values**. We all experience pleasure and pain. We need love and friendship and want to be treated fairly and with respect. Most of us value kindness, freedom, honesty, and justice. It is possible not to share these needs and values, but it is rare. These shared values open up the possibility for discussion about how we ought to treat each other and they can help us to see that some answers are better than others.



HUMANIST GOALS

For humanists, morality is not just about following rules. It's not about satisfying the wishes of some agent outside humanity. It is about our responsibilities to other people. Humanists believe we need to consider the **impact** of our actions on people's welfare and flourishing. They believe this is the one life we have and so we should aim to promote **happiness** and reduce suffering in the here and now.

Many humanists believe that non-human animals should also be valued and treated well as they too are capable of pleasure and pain. However, humanists will have different opinions on the question of whether we should eat meat.

“ ‘The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?’ ”

JEREMY BENTHAM,
philosopher (1748 - 1832)

Many humanists try to follow the Golden Rule

‘Treat other people as you'd want to be treated in their situation.’

‘Do not treat others in a way you would not like to be treated yourself.’

A HUMANIST APPROACH

Many people in history have written about being good and we can learn from them. However, no one has all the answers. Rules can also often be helpful to guide our behaviour, and laws can be good for society. But rules occasionally need flexibility, as following them can sometimes lead to harm.

Humanists believe we need to think for ourselves about the best way to act. Thankfully, we have evolved several tools that can help us.



“ ‘About the moral problem there is nothing mysterious; it is simply the old, old question of how best to live together. We no longer believe in an unchanging moral law imposed from without... we must work out our law from within.’ ”

JANE ELLEN HARRISON,
classicalist (1850-1928)

EMPATHY

We can imagine how other people might feel and recognise their needs and desires. Empathy can give rise to **compassion** and **kindness**. Empathy comes naturally to human beings, but the more time we spend with others, the better we can understand other people's feelings. Hearing stories about other people can also help us to develop empathy.

REASON

Reason means thinking carefully and logically. Reason alone doesn't give us the answers to moral questions, but it can help us to think about them. We can consider the facts of the case, and the likely **consequences** of our actions. We can imagine what the world would be like if everybody acted the same way as us. Reason can also help us to see whether we are being inconsistent – for example, treating people differently when there is no good reason to do so.

CAN RELIGION HELP?

Humanists will typically be wary of answers to moral questions that are defended on religious grounds or use justifications that lie outside humanity. That does not mean that religious answers cannot be good answers. It means that many humanists believe that, if they are good answers, it is because they support wellbeing and happiness, not because they have come from a religious source.

“Some religions say things like, ‘You must love one another.’ Others seem to say things like, ‘You must kill everyone who doesn't agree with what this religion says.’ The trouble is that some religions say both kinds of thing. The only way we can judge what's useful and good, and what's crazy and cruel, is by stepping outside religion altogether, and just judging by human standards: which is a better way to live?”

PHILIP PULLMAN, author



Credit: KT Bruce

Many humanists believe there can be other benefits to being good. Making other people happy can also make us happy. And being good can sometimes be contagious. It can persuade other people to be good too.



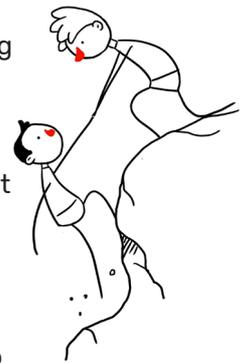
RUTGER BREGMAN,
historian

‘Every good deed is like a pebble in a pond, sending ripples out in all directions... Kindness is catching.’

Credit: Simone Padovani/Awakening, Getty Images

CAN WE ALWAYS FIND ANSWERS?

Most of the time we have a pretty good idea of what is the best thing to do and we just do it. However, sometimes it is not so obvious. Sometimes the interests of different people come into conflict with each other. So, sometimes, do our values: happiness can appear to be in opposition to freedom, honesty, justice, or individual rights. This gives rise to moral dilemmas.



Sometimes there won't be one right answer. But, for humanists, that does not mean that some answers won't be better than others. Humanists will sometimes disagree about what is the best thing to do. They will, however, typically reject the idea that what is good is all just a matter of personal preference. Humanists believe the best approach lies in considering our shared human needs and values, doing our best to use empathy and reason, listening to the views of others, and reflecting on our choices. They see nowhere else outside of humanity we can turn to for answers. We have to accept the **responsibility** to think for ourselves.



QUESTIONS

- Can we be good without a god?
- What are shared human needs and values? Do you think they exist?
- Why might a humanist believe we should be good?
- How might a humanist decide what is the best thing to do?