

# BEING GOOD: A HUMANIST APPROACH

## WHY SHOULD WE BE GOOD?

### REWARDS AND PUNISHMENT

Some people believe that our actions will be rewarded or punished after we die. Humanists don't believe that. However, we can still be rewarded and punished in this life. If we are kind to others, then they are more likely to be kind to us. And if we misbehave, we might be punished by our parents, our teachers, or the law. However, if this was the only reason to be good, then there would be no reason not to steal or cheat if we knew we wouldn't get caught.



### RULES AND LAWS

Some people say we should be good because there are certain rules we must follow. Rules can be helpful to create a fair and peaceful society. However, in some situations following a rule can lead to more harm than good.

Humanists don't have any rules in a holy book. However, every country has laws. These have often been agreed on by the people who live there. Many humanists believe we should not break the law, but we should be free to speak up against those laws we disagree with and be allowed to campaign to change them.

'Don't lie' is generally a good rule. But what should you do if a bully asks you where your friend is and you know they want to hurt your friend? Should you tell the bully the truth or is it OK to lie?

“There's only one rule that I know of... you've got to be kind.”

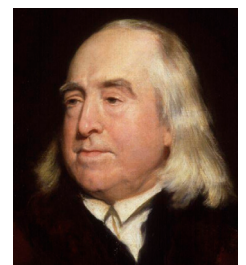
**KURT VONNEGUT**, author

## A HUMANIST APPROACH

Humanists believe there are other reasons to be good. The main reason to be kind and helpful rather than violent and cruel is because of the **impact** our actions can have on other people's feelings and wellbeing. We all have certain shared needs. We want to be happy. We want to be treated with warmth and respect, and none of us wants to be harmed or treated unfairly. Humanists believe this is the **one life** we have and so we should try to promote happiness and reduce suffering in the here and now.

Many humanists believe that non-human animals should also be treated well because, like us, they can feel 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)

Do we all have similar needs and feelings? Think about how you would feel in the following situations. Would other people feel the same? Can this help us to think about how we should act?

1. Someone helps you to do something you find difficult
2. Someone bullies you
3. Someone gives you a smaller piece of cake than everyone else
4. Someone lets you choose to do what you would like to do

## HOW DO HUMANISTS DECIDE WHAT TO DO?

Humanists don't believe that we need to believe in a god to know what is good. Many different people have written about how to be good and we can learn from them. However, no one has all the answers. Humanists believe we need to think for ourselves. We have to take responsibility for our actions. Thankfully, they believe we have several tools that can help us.

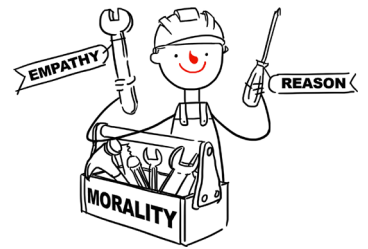
### EMPATHY

We can imagine how other people might feel. Hearing stories and spending time with other people can help us to develop empathy.

### REASON

Reason means thinking carefully. We should consider the consequences of our actions on other people, animals, and the planet. We can also think about whether we are treating people differently when there is no good reason to do so.

THINK FOR YOURSELF,  
ACT FOR EVERYONE

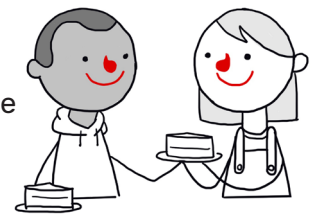


### Many humanists try to follow the Golden Rule

'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.'

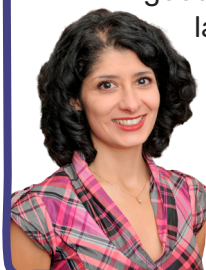
Many humanists accept that we are not always good. Sometimes we make mistakes, and sometimes we even deliberately choose to cause harm.



However, we are all capable of being good, we have the right natural capacities, and many of us are good most of the time.

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

“I have learned that there is no such thing as helping someone and not getting anything in return, because helping someone makes you feel good inside. Even if it makes you late for work, or costs you money, or makes you tired... it feels like you helped turn the world a little.”



**SHAPPI KHORSANDI,**  
comedian



## QUESTIONS

- What reasons might a humanist give to be good?
- How might a humanist try to decide what is the best thing to do?