

# HUMAN POTENTIAL AND RESPONSIBILITY

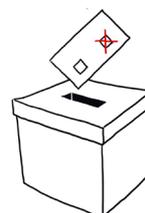
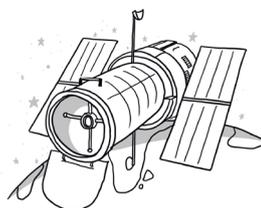
Human beings are limited in many ways: how fast we run, how much we know, and how long we live. We can be selfish, cruel, and unfriendly to those who are different from us. We have been responsible for many terrible things: war, inequality, discrimination, and the destruction of the environment. Many humanists believe it is important to recognise this. We are far from perfect.

However, many humanists recognise we have also evolved **positive capacities**. There is a lot we can **celebrate** about being human. We are conscious, curious, and creative creatures. Humanists believe that all our capacities evolved **naturally**.

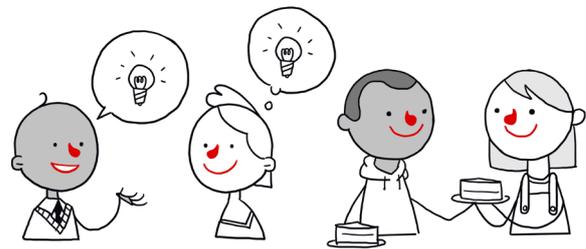
Working together, we have been able to overcome many of our limits. We have developed technology and medicine, created art and music, and established democracy, education, and human rights. The world may be far from perfect but, for billions of people, life is better now than in the past. Many humanists believe we can be cautiously **optimistic** about human beings and celebrate human progress, as long as we recognise that there is still more work to be done.

Many humanists argue that we have a **responsibility** to think about how we use our capacities. They ask how we can overcome our negative instincts and make the most of our positive **potential** in the one life we have. By doing this, and encouraging other people to do the same, we can make the world a better place. For humanists, if we want a better future, it is up to us to make it happen.

## human achievements



1. We can ask and answer questions about the world.
2. We can be creative and we can imagine how things could be different.
3. We are capable of empathy, kindness, friendship, and love.
4. We can use language to communicate with each other, and can share our ideas, knowledge, and experiences.
5. We can plan for the future and reflect on our choices.
6. We can be happy.



'The fact is that no species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility. In our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth.'

**DAVID ATTENBOROUGH,**  
natural historian and broadcaster



Credit: John Cairns

# WHAT HUMAN CAPACITIES MIGHT HUMANISTS CELEBRATE?

## EMPATHY

We can imagine how other people might feel. This gives us the ability to think about how we should treat other people. It doesn't answer all of our questions about right and wrong, but it gives us the capacity to think about those questions and to behave in ways that are not completely selfish.

## SHARING IDEAS

We have the ability through language and education to share our ideas. This allows us to collaborate and make progress. It enables us to pass on our knowledge and skills. It even provides a way for something of us to survive our deaths – the ideas and contributions we leave behind.

## REASON

We are often irrational, but we have the potential to be rational – to think carefully and critically about what we believe. We have the ability to ask questions about the world around us and to uncover truths about it. We can use science to form hypotheses and test them to see if they fit with reality.

## CONSCIOUSNESS

As conscious creatures we can weigh up options, imagine alternatives, make choices, and evaluate and reflect upon them. We can think about how we should live. We can have hopes and aspirations and can predict and plan for the future. We can be the authors of our own lives.

“We do have special abilities that mean we have the power not only to understand but to transform the world around us. We can manipulate our environment in ways and to a degree that no other animal can or has been able to do... Our conscious appreciation of who we are and where we've come from brings with it a huge responsibility. We are not just like every other animal: we are both incredibly powerful and aware of our impact.”

**ALICE ROBERTS,**  
President of Humanists UK



“Our destinies are in our hands, not predetermined. And it's left for us to shape our lives and destinies to reflect our best hopes and aspirations. We have the capacity to alleviate suffering, extend life, prevent diseases, and preserve our planet... Human beings are creative beings. We have the power to generate new ideas, new solutions, and new cures. It is in our nature to create anew, to be inventive and innovative.”

**LEO IGWE,**  
founder of Nigerian Humanists



Many humanists believe the better we understand human beings (our flaws and capacities), the better equipped we are to make the most of our potential in the one life we have. The humanist challenge is to build a positive approach to life from a scientific understanding of human nature.

“[Humanism] is an attitude towards the task of thinking about how to live a life worth living, both for the person living it and for its impact on others. And the attitude is this: do this thinking on the basis of the best, most sympathetic, most generous and realistic understanding of human nature and the human condition that we can muster.”

**AC GRAYLING,** humanist philosopher



## QUESTIONS

- What do humanists think we can celebrate about being human?
- Where do humanists believe our capacities come from?
- How do humanists believe we should use our potential?
- Do you think it is possible for humanists to build a positive, fulfilling, and meaningful approach to life from a scientific understanding of human beings?