

PROGRESS: A HUMANIST PERSPECTIVE



'If you had to choose one moment in history in which to be born, and you didn't know in advance whether you were going to be male or female, which country you were going to be from, what your status was, you'd choose right now.'

BARACK OBAMA, former President of the USA

Many people think the world is getting worse. They will point to the news, which highlights the many problems, dangers, and disagreements around the globe. However, the news often only shows one side of the story.

Many humanists see good evidence that life is far better for people today than it was for people in the past.

'We, as a species, have made progress in just about any dimension in which you could measure human wellbeing. We live longer. We are felled by fewer diseases. More of us are literate. More of us are educated. Our lives are safer. We're less likely to be murdered. We are less likely to die in war. Thanks to the growth of labour-saving devices we have more time to enjoy ourselves. And on average we're getting happier – not everyone, everywhere, but in a majority of countries in which happiness has been measured over time, there have been increases.'



STEVEN PINKER, psychologist

Steven Pinker argues that the forces responsible for the progress we have made are **reason, science, and humanism**.



However, life is not better for everyone. Humanist ambitions for a fairer, more free, and more peaceful world have not been realised in many parts of the globe. Many humanists recognise that there is still much work to be done.

'To put it simply, humanists believe that human beings produced the progressive advance of human society and also the ills that plague it. They believe that if the ills are to be alleviated, it is humanity that will have to do this job.'



ISAAC ASIMOV, author

Progress is also not inevitable, and many humanists believe we must not be complacent. Every bit of progress requires hard work to maintain. New technologies might also create new problems and more inequality in society if not used wisely. There will always be risks to human health and happiness from natural disasters and disease.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic made life worse for many people. However, a humanist might ask whether we would prefer to face such a threat today (when we have science, modern medicine, and a health service to defend us) or in the past (when none of these existed). Progress is not about eliminating all our problems, but about the ability to solve them when they arise. Humanists tend to be forward-looking and cautiously optimistic. Many believe that we have the potential to address the challenges we face or are at least better placed to address them today than we were in the past.

Utopia is the name given to a perfect world. Many humanists accept that we may never have a perfect world, but they believe we can have a better one.