

# Humanist Perspective

## Wealth and poverty

### A humanist approach

When considering ethical questions, humanists try to apply **evidence, empathy, and compassion** to inform their decisions. This is supported by a respect for **personal autonomy** and **human rights**, and a desire to support people's wellbeing. They believe that this is the **one life** we have and that everyone should have the **freedom** and opportunity to find **happiness** in the here and now.

Humanists believe that the **responsibility** for improving people's quality of life falls on human beings alone. Help isn't going to come from elsewhere. For humanists, this one life is the only opportunity we have to find happiness and fulfillment. For these reasons, many humanists oppose the vast inequalities and injustices which lead to poverty and hardship around the globe. Humanists believe that we should not just be observers of the world. Nor should we simply hope that things will get better. Instead, we need to take **action** to change society. Our actions can also influence the behaviour of others, magnifying the impact of what we do.

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

Rutger Bregman, historian

Many humanists recognise that supporting those in need can be personally enriching.



'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 costs you money, or makes you tired... it feels like you helped turn the world a little.'

Shaparak Khorsandi,  
Vice-President, Humanists UK



**Human dignity and rights:** Humanists recognise our common humanity and believe every person has inherent worth, and should have access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare, and education. Poverty undermines these fundamental rights.

**Compassion and empathy:** A humanist approach to life promotes empathy for others and seeks to minimise and alleviate suffering. Many humanists try to follow the Golden Rule, treating others the way we would wish to be treated in their situation. This can encourage compassion and support for those in poverty.

**Equality and justice:** Many humanists support social justice, believing that extreme economic disparities are unfair and prevent people from reaching their full potential. They often argue that societies should promote fairness and ensure equal opportunities.

**Human flourishing:** Poverty restricts individuals from fully developing their talents and contributing meaningfully to society. Humanists often emphasise the importance of creating conditions where everyone can thrive and make the most of their capacities.

**Looking at the evidence:** Humanists recognise that human beings are social animals who live in communities. Societies in which people find their basic needs are met and that have lower inequality tend to be happier and more peaceful.

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Humanists are often supportive of **human rights**. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says:

*'Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.'*

'Our destinies are in our hands... I believe that human beings have the power to turn situations of poverty into those of wealth and prosperity. We have the capacity to alleviate suffering, extend life, prevent diseases, and preserve our planet.'



Leo Igwe, founder of the Nigerian Humanist Association



'Being a humanist empowers me to live a meaningful life, to take a stand against inequality and injustices, and to create a better world for future generations.'

Maachelle Farley,  
Humanists Barbados

**John Boyd Orr** (1880–1971) was a Scottish humanist and the first Director of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) where he worked to combat the 'intolerable evils of war, poverty and disease'. He believed the ethical application of science and technology could help us to combat hunger and need. His efforts earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949 as poverty and malnutrition were seen as significant contributing factors to conflict and war.

#### Can we make a difference?

The challenge of global poverty is enormous and it is easy to feel defeatist and believe that as individuals we cannot possibly contribute in a meaningful way. Humanists, however, might take inspiration from the following story written by the humanist Loren Eisely.

#### *The Starfish Thrower*

One day a man was walking along a beach when he saw a girl. He watched as the girl reached down, picked up a starfish from the sand, and threw it into the ocean.

'What are you doing?' asked the man.

'I am throwing starfishes into the ocean,' said the girl. 'The sea has washed them up onto the beach. If I don't throw them back before the sun comes up, they will dry up and die.'

'But the beach goes on for miles and there are thousands of starfishes,' said the man. 'You'll never throw them all back. There are too many. You can't possibly make a difference.'

The girl listened politely, then picked up another starfish, threw it back into the sea, and said, 'I made a difference to that one.'



'People get a bit bent out of shape when they talk about equality, saying things like: "We can never have equality, and can never truly be equal, it's utopian." And to a certain extent that's true. But we can have *more* equality. And we can work towards reducing inequality gaps in various aspects.'

Kate Pickett, author of *The Spirit Level*

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### What is poverty?

There are two kinds of poverty. **Absolute poverty** exists where people do not have adequate food, shelter, income, or opportunities to improve their condition. **Relative poverty** exists where there are inequalities of wealth in a society so that those with the lowest incomes have a standard of living far below many of their fellow citizens. This kind of poverty can be found in even the richest nations.

### The situation today

According to the World Bank, almost 700 million people (8.5% of the global population) live on less than \$2.15 per day, the extreme poverty line for low-income countries.

The World Bank set itself a goal to eliminate extreme poverty by 2030. Huge progress has taken place since 1990 (when 2 billion people lived in extreme poverty). However, progress has slowed to a standstill in the 2020s. Many humanists celebrate the achievements made through human efforts, but recognise the enormous amount of work that still needs to be done to support everyone to enjoy the opportunity to lead full and flourishing lives.

There are also significant variations in wealth across the globe. The richest 1% own more than 95% of humanity (Oxfam, 2024). In the UK the figures are not quite so extreme, but the wealthiest 1% own as much wealth as the least wealthy 70% of the population (Oxfam, 2024).



### The consequences of poverty

Humanists believe we should look at the **evidence** when trying to assess a situation and in considering what we should do. There is widespread evidence that poverty and inequality can lead to misery and suffering, including harm to mental and physical health. While not the sole causes, poverty and inequality are also drivers of violence and crime within society. Scarcity of essential needs can lead to conflict, war, and the mass displacement of populations as they seek a better life elsewhere.



*'Societies that have greater levels of income inequality perform worse on a whole range of different health and social outcomes. That includes everything from physical and mental health, to how well kids do in school, social mobility, teenage pregnancy rates, but also things to do with social cohesion, like trust, levels of violence, and imprisonment.'*

Kate Pickett, humanist  
and author of *The Spirit Level*

The opportunity to find **happiness** in the one life you have is important to humanists. Some people say that money can't make you happy, but the evidence would appear to indicate that being both absolutely and relatively better off does improve people's general satisfaction with their lives. Data on the wealth and life-satisfaction of people in different countries around the world show that the richer a country is, the happier its population tends to be. As countries have become richer over time, their populations have become happier. That doesn't mean that money is the only thing that is important, or that it guarantees happiness, but it does indicate that increasing prosperity and equality is one important factor in supporting people to lead happier lives.

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### Why does poverty exist?

Humanists favour **evidence-based** approaches to solving societal problems, including poverty. Poverty has many causes, and opinions differ about which are the most important. Humanists hold a diversity of political views and so may have differing opinions on what are the most likely influences.

### Who or what is responsible?

Sometimes people are responsible for their own situation. Poor choices that people make can certainly play a role in leading them into poverty. However, often the responsibility is not entirely their own. There are a great many other factors beyond our individual control that can place people in situations of hardship.

### Potential causes of poverty

- Lack of education
- Unemployment or low wages
- Unfair trade
- A scarcity of natural resources
- Exploitation (historic and current)
- Undemocratic systems
- Corruption
- The denial of human rights
- Gender or racial inequality
- Unavailability of birth control
- War and conflict
- Disease
- Natural disasters
- Environmental degradation

Believing that the world operates under **natural** laws, humanists would discount explanations for poverty such as fate, divine punishment, or karma (the idea that these might be causes is particularly disturbing to many humanists as it potentially removes the incentive to support those in need).



A significant factor that is responsible for inequality is unearned wealth. Many people who work hard are justly rewarded with good pay (although, of course, many other people work hard and are significantly less well rewarded). However a large amount of people's wealth is unearned. It has been inherited or is the result of investments in property or other assets. Money generates more money. It also brings power and influence. That is why reducing inequality is such a significant challenge.

Today our actions can have an impact on the wealth and poverty of people across the globe. Humanism has always been an internationalist movement. For many humanists, that means we need to think about fairness and justice on a global scale.

### The problem of suffering

Extreme poverty and injustice in many parts of the world can sometimes make humanists (and indeed many other people) question the likelihood of the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent deity. They ask, why would a good and all-powerful god allow suffering on such an overwhelming scale?

**Question:** How might we address each of the different potential causes of poverty?

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### Rational solutions

For humanists, decisions on the best solutions to poverty and inequality need to be **evidence-informed**. Humanists believe we are responsible for our own choices and so people should do what they can to avoid getting themselves into poverty. However, many experience poverty through no fault of their own and so we have a responsibility to help others. Humanists believe we need to consider what works most effectively. Giving to **charity** can help, and surveys have revealed that most humanists give money or donate some of their time to charities. However, often the solution requires putting systems in place to prevent people from falling into poverty in the first place. Prevention can be easier and often more effective than cure.

Universal access to high-quality **education** is of significant importance to many humanists. It not only supports us to develop the knowledge and skills required to secure meaningful and well-paid work, it can also inform us about how to avoid falling foul of the many temptations and traps that can lead people into poverty.

Challenging prejudice and discrimination so that everyone has **equal access** to education and work enables more people to develop their talents and can increase the prosperity of society overall. Better global education for girls, for example, has boosted economies through their career contributions, and led to smaller, wealthier families.

Humanists support **democracy** and **human rights** which give the less well-off in society a political voice. Democracies tend to be more equal than autocratic states where corruption and exploitation can go unchallenged.

Of course, the above do not guarantee that people won't fall into poverty, so many humanists believe that state welfare and charity are often still likely to be necessary.



### Are humanists capitalists or socialists?

Capitalism has generated huge prosperity for millions of people around the world, has led to significant developments in life-enhancing technology, and has pulled many people out of poverty. Trade is often a positive sum game, meaning that both sides benefit. Some humanists might believe that problems connected to wealth and poverty are therefore best left to the market economy.

However, not everyone has benefitted, and there exist enormous inequalities in society. Others humanists therefore believe that state intervention is needed to tame some of the excesses of capitalism. For many humanists, the best approach requires a combination of both – it is about trying to rationally work out what works best, rather than sticking to an ideology.

Recognising that not everyone is personally responsible for their own situation, and that, even in fair societies, bad luck can still play a role, humanists will typically be supportive of **welfare programmes** and **health care systems** that provide people not just with support in times of need, but also the means to pull themselves out of poverty.

Many humanists would have sympathy with the ancient Chinese proverb, 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' Such an approach is behind the work of much of the modern humanitarian aid sector.

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#### Humanists and charity

Humanist charities and organisations tend to focus on specific goals to which they can make a unique contribution, often relating to freedom of religion and belief, equal treatment of the non-religious, and ethical issues where the non-religious voice might differ from that of religious institutions. That is where they believe they can best make a specific contribution towards human welfare and rights.

However, individual humanists' concerns are often much wider. Humanists can be found actively working for peace, education, and the protection of the environment, and against poverty, conflict, injustice, and disease.

Therefore, while humanist charities often do not tend to focus on aid work connected directly with poverty, humanist individuals can often be found contributing to those charities that do. Many of such charities (such as Oxfam, Save the Children, and the Fairtrade Foundation) are secular, meaning they are not tied to any particular worldview, religious or non-religious.

'Most humanists prefer to work for good causes with others (of all faiths and none) and to donate time or money to charities that do not discriminate on grounds of religion (or non-religion) or promote one particular worldview.'

Humanists UK

'Humanists have always been actively involved in organisations dedicated to tackling the challenges of global poverty and injustice. Humanists UK encourages its members to continue that tradition of involvement, but has rightly avoided duplicating the organisations which are already active in the field.'

Richard Norman, humanist philosopher



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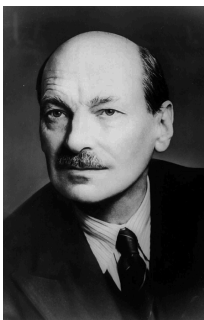
### The welfare state

Three non-religious figures who held humanist values had a considerable influence on the establishment of the welfare state in the UK: William Beveridge, Clement Attlee, and Aneurin (Nye) Bevan. Of course, these were not the only people involved in its creation but their contributions were significant.

**William Beveridge** wrote, in 1942, the report that invented the **welfare state** in the UK. It called for state-organised care for all citizens from birth to death that would protect people's economic and social wellbeing. It advocated for the expansion of National Insurance and the creation of a National Health Service. Beveridge's first-hand experiences of seeing poverty and squalor in the East End of London motivated him to do something to promote social justice and eradicate hardship.



'There should be something in the daily life of every man and woman which he or she does for no personal reward or gain, does ever more and more consciously as a mark of the brotherhood and sisterhood of all mankind.'

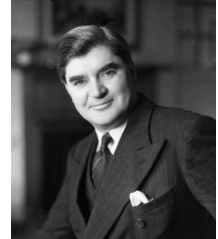


Following the Second World War in 1945, **Clement Attlee** became Prime Minister in a landslide victory for the Labour Party. He achieved far-reaching innovations in social welfare, enlarging and improving **social services** and the public sector in post-war Britain.

*'He was a great humanist whose religion lay in loving his fellow men and trying to serve them.'*

Jennie Lee on her husband Nye Bevan

Born in a mining town in South Wales, **Nye Bevan** became Minister for Health and Housing in Attlee's post-war government and was the architect of the **National Health Service** founded in 1948. Bevan believed the new health service should be publicly funded and free at the point of use, saying, 'No society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means.'



**Jennie Lee** was another politician and humanist, who worked hard to increase the opportunities of working class people. Her biggest success was the creation of the **Open University** in 1969, motivated by the

desire to widen access to a university education, and a belief that education provided a path out of poverty. It enabled thousands of people to obtain educational opportunities previously inaccessible.

*'An open university in Great Britain's circumstances today is not a dream, is not a luxury: it has become an urgent necessity.'*

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### What is fair?

Humanists believe in **social justice**. This is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities. It includes the need for wealth to be apportioned in a fair way – sometimes called **distributive justice**. Poverty might not always be an injustice, but it is if it stems from unfairness.

### Freedom and equality

Humanists will typically be supporters of freedom and equality. However, freedom and equality can sometimes appear to be in conflict with each other. Allowing people complete freedom can lead to inequalities in society stemming from people's different talents and opportunities. Ensuring that everyone is equal requires restrictions on people's freedom to live as they wish. Often it's about striking the right balance and thinking carefully about what sort of freedom and equality we value.

For many humanists, and many other supporters of equalities, fighting for equality is not about trying to ensure that everyone has the same income or wealth. Humanists try to look at the **consequences** when deciding how to act and these reveal that there can be good reasons to pay people different salaries depending on what they do. It can motivate and reward hard work. Society also benefits if, for example, people spend time and effort to train to become doctors, or to build successful businesses that can create jobs. It can therefore be in everyone's interest to pay these people well in order to give them an incentive to make that career choice. Economic incentives can benefit us all. Of course, recognising that paying people different salaries can have positive consequences doesn't mean we always get this right – sometimes people are paid much more or less than the level to which they benefit society. For many humanists, the equality we should be working for is ensuring that everyone has **equal opportunities** to train and earn.

Some might say that what is important is **fairness** rather than equality. That means everyone having equal opportunities and being rewarded appropriately for the contribution they make. Treating everyone equally means everyone has to use the stairs; treating them fairly means older people or people with disabilities get to use a lift. Treating everyone equally means giving all students the same grades; treating them fairly means those students who work harder get better results.

The philosopher **John Rawls** argued that we should try to create a society that respects individual liberties and equality of opportunity. For Rawls, inequalities in society were acceptable as long as they benefitted the worst off in society (Rawls called this 'the difference principle'). Rewarding those who contribute positively to society with good pay could therefore be justified.



'Injustice is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all.'  
John Rawls

### Do we get what we deserve?

If what we receive is based on compensation for time and effort put in, then this can often be considered deserved. However, it is harder to argue that people with more natural talent or skill deserve more on that basis alone. How can we be said to 'deserve' the talents we are born with? Not everyone is therefore rich or poor because they deserve to be. Factors outside our control play a role.

For many, it is the inequalities in unearned wealth (such as inheritance) that are more problematic than inequalities in income, as these are often the result of factors that are not of our own making.



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### How far do our obligations stretch?

#### The life you can save

The philosopher Peter Singer has a very humanist approach to ethics, believing our moral decisions should be based on our understanding of human needs, and the application of empathy and reason.

*Imagine you were walking past a pond and saw a child drowning. Would you wade in to rescue them? What if doing so would ruin your expensive new shoes?*

Singer argues nearly all of us would sacrifice our shoes to save the child. We have a natural instinct for **compassion** and **empathy**. He also argues that we have a responsibility to act.



'If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.'

*What if, instead of buying that new pair of shoes in the first place, you could donate the money to charity and save the lives of children dying from malnutrition or disease around the world?*

Singer argues that, **thinking rationally**, we should see that this is no different to the situation of the child drowning in the pond. For Singer, the distances between us and the children make no moral difference. The suffering is just as bad. It's about more than charity - we have a duty to do what we can to help.

'People with more than enough have a moral obligation to help those who, through no fault of their own, are living in extreme poverty. It's not hard to do.'

Singer lives out his ethics and donates a significant portion of his income to charity. He set up the charity *The Life You Can Save*, which encourages people to give at least 1% of their income to charity - more if they can afford it.

### How much should I give?

The extreme conclusion of Singer's argument is that we ought to give away everything we can until the point at which giving away more would lead us to suffer more than the people we are trying to help. Is that asking too much? Singer himself recognises that we have moral obligations to our families and other people close to us, and, in practice, our efforts to do good in the world can sometimes be more effective when we are working to help those whose lives we can most directly affect.

A humanist approach to life, however, is one that also values the opportunity for individuals to live a **personally meaningful life**. People have goals and aspirations for themselves, and each of us has different priorities for how we want to spend our time in order to feel we are living a fulfilling life.

'A meaningful and satisfying life is one in which we can find the right balance... and in which individual fulfilment and responsibilities to others come together as inseparable aspects of a good life.'

Richard Norman, humanist philosopher

Getting the balance right between individual autonomy and social responsibility is not always easy but, for humanists, it is at the heart of what it means to lead a good life.

### Questions

- 1) Do we have an obligation to do everything we can to help others?
- 2) Must we always consider the impact of our actions on a global scale?