

Humanist Perspective

Animal welfare



Sometimes the word 'humanism' makes people assume that the humanist approach to life is only concerned with the welfare of human beings. In reality, humanists believe that we should consider the impact of our choices and actions on non-human animals. Humanists try to use **evidence**, **empathy**, and a concern for the **happiness** and **wellbeing** of sentient life when considering ethical questions. This means they will typically try to minimise the suffering of other animals. However, humanists may disagree on how far our obligations stretch.



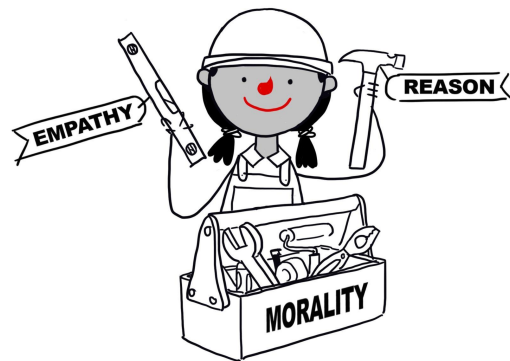
'To give preference to the life of a being simply because that being is a member of our species would put us in the same position as racists who give preference to those who are members of their race.'

Peter Singer, philosopher

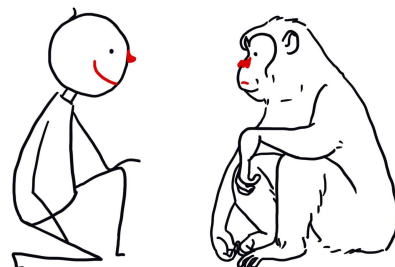
The humanist philosopher, Peter Singer, popularised the term 'speciesism' to refer to the practice of privileging human beings over other animals. Singer believes we should try to maximise happiness and minimise suffering and argues that there is no good reason not to include other animals in this calculation. Many humanists believe that, just as we are able to extend our circle of moral concern beyond our immediate family to other human beings, we should be able to extend it to other animals: our extended family.

'The only justifiable stopping place for the expansion of altruism is the point at which all whose welfare can be affected by our actions are included within the circle of altruism. This means that all beings with the capacity to feel pleasure and pain should be included.'

Peter Singer



We may sometimes feel that there is something special about the dividing line between human and non-human animals. However, genetic evidence shows us that there is more difference between a chimpanzee and a monkey than between a human and a chimpanzee. Some say our greater degree of intelligence divides us from the animals, but Singer asks, 'If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit non-humans?'



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The ability to suffer

'All the arguments to prove man's superiority cannot shatter this hard fact: in suffering, the animals are our equals.'

Peter Singer

A key question for many humanists is that raised by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham: Can animals suffer? It is hard to know exactly what animals feel, but research into the brains of many animals shows that their brains, nervous systems, and behavioral responses are quite like ours. The more like us they are, the more likely it is that they can suffer like us.

Empathy and **compassion** are important to many humanists and so **evidence** of animal suffering will play a strong role in their decisions about how we should treat animals.

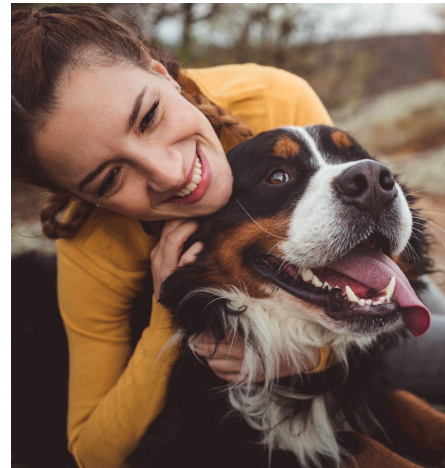


'Animals are not here for us to do as we please with. We are not their superiors, we are their equals. We are their family. Be kind to them.'

Ricky Gervais,
comedian, animal rights
campaigner, and patron of
Humanists UK



Question: Should our empathy be extended to non-humans?



Many philosophers have argued that animals are more like us than we realise, and so we have good reason to extend our sympathies towards them.

'Why should we think that they have inner natural instincts different from anything we ourselves experience?'

Michel de Montaigne

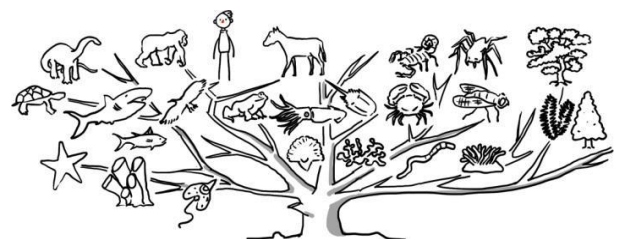
'We should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to these creatures.'

David Hume

'The question is not, "Can they reason?" nor "Can they talk?" but can they suffer?'

Jeremy Bentham

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection taught us how we are related to all other animals – we are part of one extended family.



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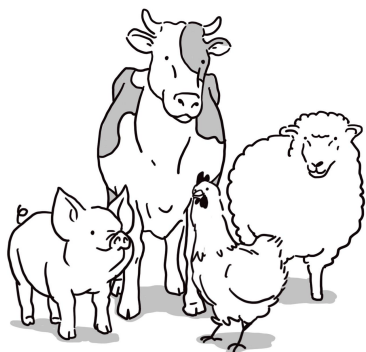
Vegetarianism and veganism

Disagreements exist between humanists on whether we should eat meat. Some are vegetarian or vegan, but others feel that eating meat is acceptable. What many humanists will disapprove of is the way we treat many of the animals we breed for food. Some campaign for the humane rearing and killing of animals, and will therefore only eat 'free range' meat or animal products. Many think that there should be a ban on some forms of traditional ritual slaughter, where animals are bled to death without pre-stunning, and therefore suffer unnecessarily.

Humanists will also highlight the evidence for the harmful environmental effect of farming animals on our planet. Raising meat uses up a lot of land, and can be particularly destructive of forests and grassland. Animals also use land and food that could be used to grow vegetable crops that could feed many more people much more efficiently and economically. In a world where some people do not have enough to eat, some argue that eating meat is a luxury we can do without.

'By ceasing to rear and kill animals for food, we can make so much extra food available for humans that, properly distributed, it would eliminate starvation and malnutrition from this planet. Animal Liberation is Human Liberation too.'

Peter Singer



'Rational arguments need to be used alongside emotional appeals to persuade people to reduce their consumption of animal products.'

Diana Fleischman,
evolutionary psychologist

Other uses of animals

Humanists would prefer not to cause unnecessary suffering to sentient animals (animals able to perceive and feel things), and so discussion on the use of animals tends to focus on what they might consider unnecessary, and which animals are sentient.

Many people think that fur clothing is an unnecessary luxury and that the suffering involved in farming or hunting animals for their fur cannot be justified. Many also think that hunting for sport is unnecessarily cruel. Many oppose using animals for our entertainment, for example in zoos and circuses. Some object to keeping pets. However, many pets can be of great value to people and can live long, happy, and healthy lives.

Perhaps the most challenging question is whether we should be allowed to use animals in experiments. Many humanists feel the testing of new cosmetics on animals is an unnecessary luxury. But medical research raises more difficult questions. Many effective medicines and treatments have been discovered and refined in tests on non-human animals, and some humanists would accept such testing as long as the benefits outweigh the costs - although they recognise that this is not always an easy calculation to make.

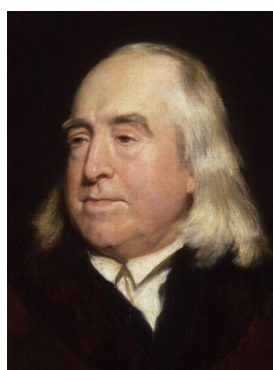
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A history of humanist campaigning

Many humanists and non-religious people have claimed that our treatment of animals should consider the impact of our actions on their happiness and suffering, and there is a long history of support for the welfare of non-human animals.



The philosopher **Jeremy Bentham** (1748–1832) defended the rights of animals, and looked forward to others also recognising that we have a moral duty towards them. In 1789 he wrote: 'The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but,

Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?'

The writer and humanist **Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928) was firmly against animal cruelty, and believed that Darwin's theory of evolution had clear implications for our treatment of animals. He said, 'Few people seem to perceive fully as yet that the most far-reaching consequence of the establishment of the common origin of all species is ethical... the application of what has been called "The Golden Rule" from the area of mere mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom'.

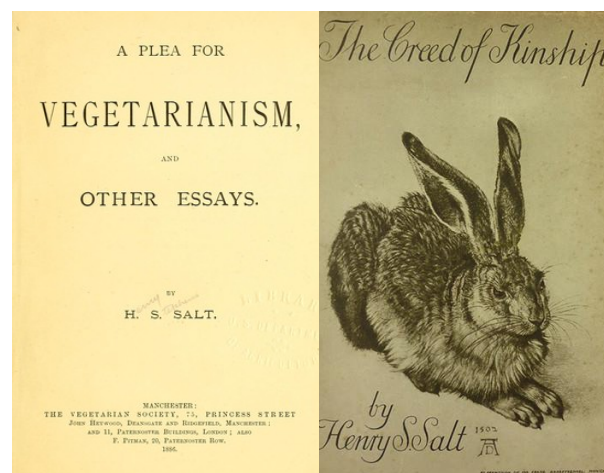


From the early days of **Humanists UK** (founded in 1896 as the Union of Ethical Societies), there were members who were passionate about how animals were treated. Members debated about vegetarianism and vivisection. Not all agreed on the conclusions, but it was clear that humanist beliefs and values motivated concern for animal welfare.

Ouida (Marie Louise Ramée; 1839–1908) was a writer, activist, and a fierce defender of animals. As well as writing articles and pamphlets against animal experimentation, she used her novels as a way of trying to extend sympathy beyond human beings. In her 1870 book *Puck*, a talking dog narrates his views on society, and criticises the use of dogs as mere ornaments in a house.



Henry Stephens Salt (1851–1939) was the founder of the Humanitarian League, a humanist organisation which fought for reforms of all kinds, including animal welfare. He argued strongly against cruelty to animals and advocated for their rights, influencing many fellow humanists. He was also on the advisory committee for the League for the Prohibition of Cruel Sports which campaigned against animal suffering in sport.



Works by Henry Stephens Salt, advocating vegetarianism and kindness to animals.

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Mona Caird (1854–1932)

was a writer and feminist, who argued passionately against the mistreatment of animals. She believed that it was the responsibility of human beings to use their reason and compassion to make ethical progress and positive changes in society, including when it came to animal welfare.



'I feel that the spirit which would bring justice and relief to the suffering among human beings is really the same as that which would hasten the salvation of the tortured among animals.'

Lady Florence Dixie (1855–1905) had once been an avid hunter, but later changed her mind and campaigned for the abolition of blood sports. She became a member of Henry Salt's Humanitarian League, and was Vice President of the London Vegetarian Association.



Brigid Brophy (1929–1995) was a writer and activist, whose humanism underpinned her veganism. She was a prominent voice for the rights of all sentient creatures.



'We are the species uniquely capable of imagination, rationality and moral choice - and that is precisely why we are under an obligation to recognise and respect the rights of animals.'

Humanist action and advocacy

Animal welfare has remained a consistent concern for many humanists and for Humanists UK. Over the years, Humanists UK has developed policies or made statements on various animal welfare topics, often driven by its members' concerns. These have related to:

- Calling for higher standards in animal agriculture.
- Supporting efforts to reduce and replace the use of animals in scientific experiments, and ensuring humane treatment where animals are used.
- Opposing practices that cause unnecessary suffering for sport or entertainment.



As humanists, we thoroughly endorse...

THE FIVE FREEDOMS FOR ANIMALS

UNDER HUMAN CONTROL

The Five Freedoms say that humans must take steps to ensure every animal under their control has...

FREEDOM FROM HUNGER OR THIRST by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.

FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

As humanists, we support the reduction of animal suffering resulting from human behaviour and see compassionate attitudes to animal suffering as a hallmark of a humane society. While we don't seek to duplicate the work of specialist animal rights charities, we have supported every major animal welfare law to ever come before the UK Parliament.

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Humanist Phil Brooke is the Research and Education Manager for the [Compassion in World Farming](#) organisation, a charity that campaigns to end all factory farming practices.



We keep animals for a range of reasons – as pets, for food, for entertainment or education, and to experiment upon. These animals experience a range of treatment, both good and bad. Farm animals may be kept in free-range systems, which have the potential, given good care and husbandry, to provide a good life.

Unfortunately, most of the world's nearly eight billion laying hens are kept in cages that severely restrict their movement. Similarly, most breeding female pigs are kept in cages when suckling their young, and in many parts of the world they are also confined for all or part of pregnancy.

At Compassion in World Farming, we think animals should be treated as sentient beings. In other words, as ones who have feelings that matter to them. This can include the capacity to experience feelings, such as hunger and pain, as well as emotions, such as fear and joy; they have the capacity to suffer, but also to experience pleasure.

As a humanist, there are a range of good reasons to think farm animals deserve better. Compassion is a virtue that benefits the giver as well as the receiver. If you believe in the 'golden rule', you would wish to treat animals the way you would wish to be treated. This would, at the very least, prohibit factory farming, live exports, and inhumane slaughter.

Jeremy Bentham, a humanist and utilitarian philosopher, argued the case for animal welfare since animals have the capacity for suffering.

Minimising suffering is ethically important to humanists and so keeping chickens in better conditions, ideally free-range, would therefore be preferential. This capacity also leads many humanists to argue that animals deserve rights. This philosophy emerges out of human rights, including the idea that we matter as individuals irrespective of any group we belong to, whatever our race, sex, abilities or culture. Considering our place in evolution, many humanists argue that this principle does not magically break down at the species barrier. In animal rights thinking, if it is wrong to do it to a human, it is wrong to do the same thing to a non-human animal.

As a child I was surrounded by animals. I knew instinctively that my dog was sentient. If she wanted something, she really wanted it. Her insistence was entirely clear; her motivation was certainly no less than my own. The evidence shows that we have evolved from the same common ancestors as the other animals with which we share the planet. We share the same physiological and cellular structures – and the same bodily structures with mammals and other vertebrates. With so much shared biology, it should not be surprising if many of the things which make us matter are shared with other sentient animals. The more behavioural scientists study animals, the more amazing abilities become apparent. For example, chimps and other great apes can pass the mirror test – they can learn that the image in front of them is of themselves, not of another individual. So can elephants, dolphins and magpies – even fish such as wrasse and manta rays have shown this ability.

I think treating animals well is good for people too. I believe the emancipation of the various races and sexes is enriching for all, even for a privileged white male such as myself. In the same way, I believe that compassion for animals is enriching for people. We grow when we think and act as though we aren't the only species on this planet that matters.

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Humanism and veganism

Dave Powell



For me my humanism goes hand in hand with my veganism.

The Humanists UK definition of a humanist includes a concern not just for fellow human beings but for all sentient beings. Humanists are becoming increasingly aware of their

responsibilities to non-human animals, and this seems to be indicative of a wider societal shift. This revolution has been a long time coming, but it has certainly been building momentum in recent years.

It isn't hard to understand why it has taken so long. Meat eating has been part of the human story as long as there have been humans, and people see it as a natural and necessary part of their diet. But the growth in factory farming has seen the availability of cheap processed meat rise to such a level that people eat it on a far more regular basis than ever before. And this has had far-reaching implications, not only on the lives of the animals, but on the planet and on people's health.

For me, veganism is fundamentally an ethical decision, a reflection of the value that I place on the life of other sentient beings. We engage in a certain amount of cognitive dissonance when we divide animals up into those that we pet and those that we eat. But the truth is that pigs and cows have the same intelligent, playful nature and concern for their social group as cats and dogs. So if you acknowledge that farm animals aren't emotionless meat-producing robots, you must by necessity acknowledge that they have personalities, the ability to suffer, and a whole range of emotions that we naively assume to be

uniquely human. To ignore this is at odds with humanist principles of compassion and concern for other sentient beings.

Parallels can be drawn with other social justice movements. The fight for animal rights is also the fight for human rights when you consider the conditions under which our food is produced. Gruelling labour conditions, with exposure to agricultural chemicals, leads to a lower life expectancy for many farm workers. As with beef, huge areas of rainforest are cleared to produce monoculture crops such as palm oil, and indigenous families are often forced off this land at gunpoint. All food production has some environmental impact, but the cost for producing meat has a far greater environmental impact. Omnivores are responsible for nearly 2.5 times as much global warming as vegans. It seems like we have little control over these vast monolithic businesses, but as individuals we do have power over where we spend our money. And as the history of other social justice movements has shown us, change always starts at the grassroots level.

So you should go vegan for the animals, and for the environment. However, if being vegan is part of a more ethical, considered world view, a way of living with more intention and purpose, it makes sense to extend that concern to yourself and your own health and wellbeing. There are certain things that vegans need to keep an eye on, specifically getting enough vitamins B12 and D, calcium, iron, and omega-3.

As an ethical vegan, diet isn't the only thing to consider. Animals are still used as entertainment, and for testing cosmetics and drugs. Of these, drug testing is probably the biggest ethical dilemma. But questions about the efficacy of animal testing are increasing, 92% of drugs that prove safe in animal trials fail in human trials, and other non-animal options are now available, including in vitro studies on human cells, computer models, and epidemiological studies, which have rendered a lot of animal research obsolete.

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Disagreement in veganism centres around the abolitionist versus welfare debate. The abolitionists believing that arguing for anything less than the complete dismantling of the animal holocaust machine is damaging to veganism. But recent moves have seen a more nuanced, pragmatic approach; for example, the writer Tobias Leenaert argues that we need an evidence-based strategy with regard to the most effective way of promoting veganism. Moralising and guilt-tripping has been shown not to work. Comparing the slaughter of millions

of chickens a week to The Holocaust, even if you believe it's a fair comparison, is going to upset people. Pointing out people's cognitive dissonance won't necessarily make them do anything about it, but you might be able to entice them with a vegan sausage roll.

So if you decide to become vegan you'll be in good company; a recent survey suggested that 40% of humanists are already either vegetarian or vegan, a much higher percentage than the rest of the population.