

A humanist discussion of... DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use **reason, experience** and **respect for others** when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote happiness and fulfilment in this life because they believe it's the only one we have. Humanists believe in **treating other people as they would like to be treated themselves**, not in stereotyping or discriminating against entire groups of people. That means trying to **understand other people** and imagine how they might be feeling, and **treating them with consideration**.

Deep down, we are all the same

Like the vast majority of people, humanists accept the scientific theory of evolution, which means that that we human beings are **all members of the same species**, Homo Sapiens (which means "wise man!"), and **share the same ancestors**. We are all, in effect, distantly related to each other, so it is not surprising that we share many of the same feelings and needs, and have a great deal in common. We also evolved as **social animals**. This means that we live in large groups and have to learn to work and get on with each other, **regardless of race, nationality, age, sex, religion or appearance**.

What is prejudice?

Prejudice occurs when we judge other people or groups **without reason or knowledge**, and it often leads to **unfair discrimination**. It wouldn't be true to say that everyone is equal, when we are all so obviously different: some people are tall, others short; some people can run very fast; some are good at passing exams; some are male, others are female; some are black, others white; some are good-looking and others less so - and so on. But reasonable people, including humanists, believe that everyone should be treated with **equal consideration** and given **equal opportunities** in life.

What is discrimination?

Discrimination is not in itself a bad thing. It means something like "**careful judgement and choice, noticing differences**". If you're buying a present for a friend, it's a good idea to be a bit discriminating, to look carefully and choose something that you think s/he'd really like, not just the first thing you see.

Discrimination becomes unfair and harmful when it **stops people flourishing by making a big issue out of unimportant or irrelevant differences**, so that it affects their education, employment, housing, or status in society. If, for example, we decide that we aren't going to employ women to do certain jobs just because they're women, or that only people belonging to certain races can live in this country or on some housing estates, or homosexuals can't join the army, that is unfair



discrimination. Humanists believe in **treating people as individuals**, not in stereotyping and discriminating against entire groups of people.

Occasionally people may have reasons for discrimination. For example, a woman might be the most suitable person for the job of counsellor at a women's refuge. The law permits this kind of sensible discrimination.

Treating people with respect

Most people think that we should **treat others with respect** and try to avoid giving unnecessary offence. That is just politeness, and it allows people with many different opinions and worldviews to live side by side without too much conflict. Some words, as well as actions, are offensive and hurtful, encourage prejudice and discrimination, and are best avoided.

On the other hand, **sometimes it is necessary to criticise other people**, for example if they are discriminating unfairly or doing something that harms others. And **in a free society, it ought to be possible to criticise ideas of all kinds**, without individuals taking offence or feeling discriminated against.

Some "isms"

Some forms of unfair discrimination are given the suffix "**ism**": racism, sexism, ageism. Some people who support animal rights use the word "speciesism" to describe how we discriminate unfairly against other species. Not all forms of prejudice or discrimination have convenient labels, though: people can also be discriminated against because of their faith or religion (or lack of faith and religion) or political beliefs, physical disabilities or appearance, or their social origins (snobbery is a form of unfair discrimination).

Why do prejudice and discrimination exist?

Human beings like to feel part of a group. Sometimes, in order to achieve this, they put up barriers to protect the group identity and keep out outsiders. All groups, tribes and nations tend to do this, and religious communities do not have a very good record on this: they have discriminated against women and homosexuals, or people of different religions or races, and invented discriminatory caste systems. Human beings also tend to fear, or at least feel cautious towards, anything or anyone very new or different. This may be natural, but that doesn't mean it's good or that human beings can't progress beyond these rather primitive emotions.

Co-operation, not conflict

If we are all to be happy and prosper, **every individual needs the chance to flourish** and **play a part in society**. Society loses out if we prevent some of its members from contributing for no good reason, and it is in everyone's interest to oppose prejudice and discrimination, not just those on the receiving end of it. If we treated people of all kinds with respect, the world would be a more peaceful

and happy place.

Education can reduce the ignorance and fear that cause unfair discrimination and prejudice. We are fortunate nowadays to have media which can inform us about people and events all over the world - different people need not seem strange or frightening in the way they might have to our great-grandparents. If you look around you with an open mind, you will see that life is much more interesting because we are not all identical.

Questions to think about and discuss

- o What kinds of discrimination are against the law? What kinds are legal? Has the law got it right?
- o Have you ever disliked someone on sight, without really knowing him or her? Was this prejudice?
- o Do you have any friends who are: A different nationality from you? A different religion or worldview? A different age? A different race? Disabled or disfigured?
- o Can you think of any job that a suitably qualified man / woman / black person / old person could not do?
- o Can anybody do any job?
- o Are young people unfairly discriminated against?
- o What qualities make a good friend? A good neighbour? A good colleague?
- o How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further reading

A more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers, can be found in *Humanist Perspectives 2* available to buy at www.humanism.org.uk

Also available from the BHA's website –

- o Other BHA briefings: ***Thinking about ethics ; Human Rights, Evil & Suffering***, etc.
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), ***What is Humanism?*** (BHA)

Human Rights Act (1998 UK law)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (available from Amnesty International or United Nations Association)

Mary Warnock, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics*

Materials from: Commission for Racial Equality, Equal Opportunities Commission, Social Exclusion Unit, Council for Education in World Citizenship

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