

## 'Thinking About Ethics' : a humanist perspective

---

Humanism is an approach to life based on humanity and reason. Humanists recognise that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone: concern for others does not necessarily have an external source, as religions tend to assert. Humanists do not refer to sacred texts or religious authorities when making moral decisions. They do not believe in a life after death that will compensate for earthly suffering by rewarding the good and punishing the bad. Humanists do not believe in a god who gives us moral codes or values, and they base their lives on guiding principles, not dogmatic rules. Despite that, humanists do not believe that basic moral principles are simply matters of personal preference or that they can vary much from place to place or time to time - humanists are not relativists (see downloadable pdf, 'Relativism')

Humanists value ideas for which there is evidence, and the things inside and around us that make life worth living. Humanists believe that it is reasonable to enjoy the good things in life if we can do so without harming others or the environment. They think we should all try to live full and happy lives, and that one way to do this is to help other people to do the same. So humanists believe in making responsible choices.

*"...happiness is the only good;...the time to be happy is now, and the way to be happy is to make others so."*

Robert G Ingersoll, 19th century American humanist

Humanists value individual freedom, because choice and freedom contribute to human happiness, but they are aware that individual choices, especially lots of individual choices, can have effects on society and cause unintended problems. For example, choosing the sexes of one's children would seem to be a matter of personal choice, not something other people or the Government should interfere in. A small number of such choices, perhaps for medical reasons, would have some good outcomes (fewer children born with inherited illnesses or disabilities) and no bad effects on society. But if everyone chose, and tended to choose one sex above the other (probably, for reasons of tradition, boys), this could have disastrous effects on society and so becomes a matter of moral concern.

Many moral dilemmas today are complicated. Some are new, caused by advances in science or medicine, and changes in the way we live; codes of conduct formulated centuries ago (for example, the Ten Commandments) are not necessarily helpful. Humanists believe that we should review moral codes in the light of our principles and of developments in society and human knowledge. The fact that we can do certain things does not mean that we ought to, but who is to decide what we do? Scientists?

---

---

Doctors? Politicians? Moral philosophers? Religious leaders? Each individual?

### **Humanism as a 'set of tools'**

Philosophers throughout history have made a distinction between ethics and religion, and have suggested rational arguments for morality. Many philosophers respected by humanists have thought that reason is what distinguishes human beings from animals and that we therefore ought to use reason to solve problems and make life better.

### **What motivates humanists?**

Humanists value happiness, freedom and justice, and will be motivated by the desire to increase these and to leave the world a better place. Humanists believe that we should make the best of the one life we have, and that any rewards and punishments we may receive are here and now. Decent people do generally earn the affection and respect of others, and don't live in fear of disapproval or punishment, and so are generally happier; those who actively care about other people and act on it usually have better relationships and more rewarding lives. Of course the world is full of injustice too - bad people do often prosper and good people suffer. Nevertheless, it isn't naïve or stupid to be good, as some cynics would have it, but actually a sensible and rational response to the problems of living with other people. Most people do in fact live decent lives and benefit from the fact that others do so too: most of us go about our daily business amongst strangers quite safely, sometimes even meeting with great kindness, compassion and helpfulness.

### **How should we tackle difficult moral questions?**

There are some actions, like murder, that we can generally accept as wrong - we do not have to weigh up the pros and cons every time we are faced with a murder. And, in a democratic nation like the UK, we should obey the law. If humanists think a law is immoral, they work to change it.

But there are many moral situations where we do have to think for ourselves. Humanists consider carefully the particular situation and the effects of choices on the happiness or suffering of the people (and sometimes animals) concerned and the wider community. They weigh up the evidence, the probable consequences of the action, and the rights and wishes of those involved, trying to find the kindest course of action or the option that will do the least harm and will not compromise their personal principles or integrity. Often humanist perspectives on moral issues are not very different from those of liberally-minded religious people. However, a humanist view is explicitly based on reason, experience, and empathy and respect for others, rather than on tradition or deference to authority, which often influence religious views.

---

All this may seem like simple common sense, but it is far from simple in its application. Although many people (including many religious people) do make moral decisions this way, others decide very differently. Some people just obey the teachings of their religion; others accept the conventional wisdom of the day. Some people adopt rigid rules which they apply in all circumstances; others avoid thinking about moral issues at all or let individual personal preference decide the issue. We are all confronted sometimes with moral choices, perhaps because the situation involves us, or because we are in a position to decide for or advise other people - even voting in an election or shopping might involve making moral choices. As intelligent rational beings, we ought to think about how we make these choices.

### Where do moral values come from?

When we are discussing what is right and wrong or making moral decisions, we don't usually worry about where our moral values came from. We are more concerned with what they are and how to apply them in a given situation. If we do stop to consider where they came from, we tend to credit our upbringing or our education. But where did the moral values of our parents and teachers, and of our legislators and rulers, come from?

The most common answer to this is that moral values come from religions, transmitted through sacred texts and priests, and that even the values of non-religious people have been absorbed from the religions around them. Even some non-religious people believe this, and it can be a source of insecurity for them, an area where they are made to feel indebted to a religious culture that they do not share, and where they are patronised or criticised by religious believers. Many people, including some non-believers, worry that a general move away from religious faith will bring about some kind of moral breakdown in society. We have all heard politicians, for example, claiming that more religion in schools will reduce juvenile crime, and we have all read stories about wrongdoers giving up lives of crime because they discovered religion.

But humanists believe that that moral values are not dependent on religion and that it is untrue, unfair to non-religious people, and a damaging idea in an increasingly secular society, to assert otherwise. Humanists believe that moral values evolved, and continue to evolve, along with human nature and society, and are indeed based on human nature, experience and society. If human civilisation were to develop all over again, it is highly unlikely that exactly the same religions would develop. But it is very likely that our basic moral principles would be the same, because human beings, who have evolved to live in groups, need the kinds of rule which enable us to live together co-operatively and harmoniously. Although anthropologists in the past emphasised the

---

differences between human societies, and xenophobes, racists and religious fundamentalists have always stressed and exploited cultural differences, human beings have in fact much more in common than the superficial differences might suggest. Recent anthropological studies and the work of evolutionary biologists and psychologists have brought home to us how much of our behaviour is universal, including our basic needs and values.

### Shared values

Communities can survive and work efficiently, and increase the welfare and happiness of their members, only if the people who live in them cooperate and accept certain principles, based on shared human values. These include: looking after the young and other vulnerable people; valuing the truth and respecting promises; fair allocation of power and property according to some recognised system which includes merit; mutual assistance in defence and disasters; disapproval and punishment of wrongdoers, restraints on violence and killing.

Some of these can be seen in other social animals too, for example mutual help is common in intelligent social animals such as chimpanzees. The human capacity for language has made it possible for us to formulate and transmit complex systems of rules, sanctions and rewards. Shared human nature explains the considerable agreement between religions, societies, and ethical and legal systems, about what is good or bad, tolerable or intolerable, moral or immoral, even when they disagree about where their values came from. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has gained wide international acceptance, and which celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1998, is underpinned by a belief in shared human needs and values. In England and Wales, a National Forum for Values in Education and the Community formulated a statement of values, which was then given to MORI who polled 3200 schools, 700 national organisations and 1500 individuals. About 90% of people agreed with the statement, showing that even within a multicultural and pluralistic society, there is still considerable agreement about moral values. This [Statement of Values](#) is now in the revised National Curriculum, and includes statements like: "We value the environment, both natural and shaped by humanity, as the basis of life and a source of wonder and inspiration", and "accept our duty to maintain a sustainable environment for future generations", and "We value relationships as fundamental to the development and fulfilment of ourselves and others, and to the good of the community."

### The Golden Rule

Although many of the less important rules vary, all traditions seem to have come up with a version of the "Golden Rule": "Do as you would be done by" or "Treat other people in a way you would like to be treated"

---

yourself". It can be expressed both positively (as above) and negatively ("Do not treat others as you would not like to be treated yourself"). Some people think that the negative versions are more realistic, because it is easier to agree on the things we would not like done to us, and anyone can work out what would cause suffering to another person and then avoid doing it. Humanists have been impressed with the apparently universal nature of this rule and with its egalitarianism and usefulness as a basic principle. It is based on human nature and experience, using our need to be treated well by others and our aspiration to live harmoniously with others as its foundation. It can be worked out by anyone, anywhere, by reference to experience. It does not need to be given to us by a deity.

It is compatible with other well respected and useful moral principles such as Kant's "categorical imperative": "Always treat other people as ends in themselves, never as means to an end" and "Act only on that maxim which you could will to be universal law." And John Stuart Mill, in his book *Utilitarianism*, wrote of the Golden Rule: "To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality."

Like other very general moral principles, it has been criticised for being empty - it does not give us specific rules of conduct - and for being incomplete - it requires considerable empathy and understanding of others to put it into practice. The playwright George Bernard Shaw joked: "Don't do to others what you want others to do to you - their tastes may be different." He had a point, but developing an awareness of the variety of other people's characters and interests is part of growing up and most people are capable of it with a little thought. Humanists do not see the fact that the Golden Rule often needs further reflection before it can be applied as a disadvantage; and its flexibility about actual moral rules and laws would be seen as a positive advantage. It has been called "a searchlight, not a map", a metaphor which summarises its undogmatic appeal to humanists. The Golden Rule can be the foundation for other principles.

The golden rule is also self-correcting. It might seem, if understood superficially, to encourage immoral acts, for example someone who enjoys danger could try to justify putting other people's lives at risk by saying that he would welcome his life being endangered by others. But none of us wants anyone to act towards us without considering our personal wishes and interests, and this aspect of treating others as we would wish to be treated would not permit a danger-lover to take risks with our lives, unless we wanted them to.

Implicitly, the golden rule requires kindness and care for the less fortunate, because this is what we would want in their situation, and it discourages lying, bullying and theft, for example, because no one wants to be lied to or bullied or to have their property stolen. It has the virtues

---

of simplicity and clarity and works well in many situations.

### **Unshared values**

Universal social and moral values still leave considerable leeway in their interpretation, and this accounts for disagreements about particular moral questions. Everyone agrees that murder is wrong, but we might disagree about what counts as murder. Abortion? Voluntary euthanasia? Human sacrifice? Killing in war? Killing animals? Everyone agrees that children should be protected and nurtured - but there is considerable disagreement about how exactly this should be done and the best family arrangements in which to achieve it. Religions are the source of much variation. Even within major faiths there are moral disagreements, for example on the merits of pacifism or the use of contraception - deities do not seem to offer moral consistency, despite their reputation for knowing everything.

And there are, of course, some specifically religious values: for example rules about diet, family and marriage, or religious observance. A few religious people define as "good" anything that a religion or deity or sacred text commands. But most pick and choose from the many conflicting rules in their texts and traditions, and they decide which are the worthwhile rules by using their ability to reason and to learn from experience. Like most other people, including most moral philosophers, they use humanist reasoning and criteria (such as consequences for well-being) when judging right and wrong. Besides, many religious rules are not about morality at all (Look at the Ten Commandments - how many of them are actually moral rules?) Many religious rules are based on tradition, or on practices that were useful in the past, but within the religion they have achieved the status of moral values, so that, for example, some groups think it wrong to eat pork or to use contraception. Some religious values are generally, and unthinkingly, accepted as morally worthwhile, for example the Christian edict to "turn the other cheek", but may, on reflection, be less unambiguously good than appears. Would it be right to turn the other cheek when bullied or exploited? Wouldn't this just encourage bad people to go on behaving badly, to the disadvantage of everyone else?

### **Morality without religion**

Humanist ethics makes human beings solely responsible for working out and implementing moral values and codes. Of course, we do not choose these completely arbitrarily - they must be based on principles that respect the autonomy (or personal freedom) of others and the general welfare. Morality is much more necessary than religion, and in an era of declining religious belief it is a dangerous mistake to confuse the two. Religious faith does motivate and support some people in living better lives, and that is surely a good thing for the community - the more good people there are, the better for all of us. But religion and dogmatic

---

authorities are not essential for morality. Many non-religious people think that it is actually more moral to think for oneself, and to make responsible and independent choices without divine authority or the hope of divine reward in an afterlife. Freely choosing to help someone else could be considered more virtuous than helping someone out of obedience or because you expect a reward.

### The words we use

Morality, ethics, values, rights, duties are all words used when people talk about issues of right and wrong, of what we ought and ought not to do. We also talk about fairness and justice (or unfairness and injustice) and use words like good and bad (or sometimes virtuous and sinful or evil), and legal and illegal. Apart from the last two, which are simply factual statements about what is and is not permitted by law, they are all words which express views about morality or ethics - which mean much the same thing, though we usually use ethics and ethical when being a bit more theoretical.

These words are sometimes interchangeable, sometimes not. A few examples will illustrate the sometimes subtle differences, and you can think of your own:

- We might say we have a duty to look after our aged parents, or that it is right or good to do so, immoral not to. But it is not illegal to refuse to do so - is it unfair or unjust?
- You might think it is unjust, or unfair, or a bad thing, or immoral that some people have much more money than you, but you do not have a right to their money and it is legal for them to own more than you. Ought it to be?
- Generally, you ought to keep promises, and perhaps you have a right to expect others to keep their promises to you, but it is not normally illegal to break informal promises. Is it immoral or unethical to do so?
- You have the right to life and are entitled to own property and it is illegal to kill you or steal your property. Is this a good thing?
- Are a person 's or a society 's or a religion 's values necessarily good or moral?

### Further questions

- Can you think of actions which are: immoral but legal? unjust but legal? illegal and morally neutral? illegal but good? unfair but good? morally worthwhile but not a human right?
  - What makes a good life?
  - Is it possible to sincerely share values, without living by them? Is agreeing with them enough?
-

- Should religious people impose their moral views on non-religious people? Yes? Sometimes? Never?
- Should non-religious people impose their moral views on religious people? Yes? Sometimes? Never?
- Can it ever be right to break the law?
- Can something be right in one place and wrong in another? Or right in one period of history and wrong in another? For instance, was it right to burn "witches" several hundred years ago? Was slavery ever right?
- How are you deciding the answers to these questions?
- If you were the only person on Earth, would you need moral rules?
- Re-read the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20, 7-17 or Deuteronomy 5, 7-21). Are they an adequate guide to living a moral life?
- Have you ever observed "goodness" or altruism in other animals?
- Do humanist principles inevitably lead to liberal ideas on moral and social issues?
- How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

### **Further reading:**

- Julian Baggini *Atheism A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003)
  - Simon Blackburn , (2001), *Being Good* (Oxford)
  - The Centre for Defined Ethics is developing a [secular moral compass](#)
  - Dylan Evans and Oscar Zarate, (1999), *Introducing Evolutionary Psychology* (Icon Books)
  - Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Penguin)
  - Hayward, Jones and Mason, (2000), *Exploring Ethics* (John Murray)
  - Richard Holloway, (1999), *Godless Morality* (Canongate)
  - Humanist Philosophers ' Group, (2002), 'What is Humanism?'
  - Wallace Matson, *The Expiration of Morality* (in E F Paul, F D Miller and J Paul (eds) *Cultural Pluralism and Moral Knowledge*)
  - J S Mill, *On Liberty, and Utilitarianism*
  - Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*
-

- Richard Robinson *An Atheist's Values* - long out of print, this excellent defence of humanist morality and critique of "Christian values" can be read at <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/athval0.htm>
  - Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge)
  - Barbara Smoker, (1998), 'Humanism' (British Humanist Association)
  - Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy: the Basics, chapter on "Right and Wrong"* (Routledge)
  - Mary Warnock, *An Intelligent Person 's Guide to Ethics* (Duckworth)
  - Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (Abacus)
  - [\*\*Statement of Shared Values\*\*](#) (1996), now an Appendix to the revised National Curriculum
  - *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (available from Amnesty International or United Nations Association)
-