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Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 14th March - Lunch at 1.15pm followed by AGM at 2.15pm**
Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TB



Members' Annual Lunch followed by AGM

- ❖ Humanist of the Year 2020
- ❖ Delicious complimentary lunch
- ❖ The Hawkridge Singers

Dorset Humanists' Annual Lunch and AGM is a special event in our annual calendar. An occasion to say 'thank you' to our loyal members and volunteers, celebrate what we have achieved in the year just gone, and look forward to the year ahead. Dorset Humanists is more than just a group. It's a community of like-minded people where friends are made and new things are learned. Please join us for lunch – free for members/£5 non-members. If you're not yet a member, you are very welcome to come along but why not join for just £15.00 a year? Lunch at 1.15pm. AGM at 2.15pm.

■ **Wednesday 25th March 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, Bournemouth BH1 3AX

The Danger Posed by Emerging Virus Infections

A talk by Greg Atkins

Viruses are small intracellular parasites which are distinct from other disease-causing entities. They contain either DNA or RNA as their primary genetic material. Virus particles are too small to be seen with a light microscope but may be visualised using an electron microscope. They multiply by utilising the metabolic process of the infected cell and directing it with their nucleic acid to form more virus particles. Over the twentieth century there was a substantial drop in mortality from infectious disease, including virus infections. However, threats still remain, including those from vaccine hesitancy and novel virus infections. Threats still posed by human immunodeficiency virus, Ebola and influenza viruses, as well as re-emerging measles virus will be considered. A summary will be presented of the present situation with emerging coronavirus infection and the prospects for control.

Greg Atkins taught virology at Trinity College Dublin and is well-placed to comment on the unfolding crisis.

Send bulletin updates to chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

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Dorset Humanists



[meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists](https://www.meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists)

■ **Thursday 2nd April 7.30pm** and every first Thursday at Poole Hill Brewery, 41-43 Poole Hill, BH2 5PW. Please note changed venue.



Enjoy stimulating conversation over a drink or two at our pub social evening. Look out for the Dorset Humanists signs on the table. We warmly welcome regulars and newcomers.

☎ Dean 07713 858773



Sunday Walks

Sunday 15th March 10.15am

Corfe Castle to Kingston and Houns Tout. 8 miles (with several possible short cuts). Stunning views of Corfe Castle and also of the sea from Houns Tout. Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any changes, for example last minute cancellations owing to weather conditions.

☎ Phil 07817 260498

Future dates for your diary...

■ **Saturday 11th April 2.00pm Moordown**

Do Animals have a Theory of Mind? A talk by Juliane Kaminski.

■ **Weds 22nd April 7.30pm Green House**

The Goldilocks Enigma: Is the Universe Trying to Kill Us? A talk by Geoff Kirby

Other events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 1st April 7.30pm**

Sandford Heritage Hall, BH20 7AJ. 'Out of the Box' dialogue group presents:

The 'Age of Responsibility'

At what age does a young person become an adult? The legal right to kill (as a soldier) can start from 16 to 18. The age at which young people can buy cigarettes and alcohol is different in different countries. You can have sex at 16 but can't watch pornography until 18. Voting ages also differ. If we could determine a single 'age of responsibility' for the entire world that covers everything, could we agree on one? All ages welcome, but we especially welcome younger people to this event.

Understanding Antisemitism

Rabbi Maurice Michaels of Bournemouth Reform Synagogue gave us a fascinating insight into the history of antisemitism at our 'Out of the Box' dialogue event in February. This is an edited version of Maurice's talk.

Antisemitism is a euphemism for Jew-hatred. It's not new. A lot of people think it began as a response of Christianity to its mother religion. But it predates the time of Jesus. Antisemitism is all about Jews being different. It combines racism, xenophobia, and hatred towards a different religion. Early Christianity saw the Jews as a different religion but it wasn't antisemitism because for the most part they were from the same race. It was only when Christianity was exported throughout the Roman Empire that it became antisemitism in its claims of Jews having killed Christ. And in medieval times the way in which this was demonstrated was by a variety of discriminations. Jews were not allowed to marry Christians, they could not appear in court as a witness against a Christian, and Jews were prohibited from holding any official position. There were ways in which to separate yourself from them, the 'Other'. So for example, Jews look totally different, 'they have horns and tails', and as everyone knows 'Jews practise ritual murder'. The Crusades were ostensibly to drive the Muslims out of the Holy Land but on the way in most of Central Europe the crusaders got their practice in by killing Jews. Over the centuries, Jews were subjected to political, economic, and social discrimination resulting in the deprivation of legal and civil rights. In many places Jews were restricted to living in ghettos. They were required to wear a distinctive symbol, a badge or a pointed hat. They were prohibited from many occupations as a result of which many were forced into usury. Christianity forbade the charging of interest but people still needed to borrow money and so they turned to the Jews for that money. Many Jews were expelled from their countries because kings and nobles didn't



want to repay them. The 'blood libel' became a common factor. The Bible prohibits Jews from eating blood and yet there were claims that the Jews were killing children to put their blood in the matzah. The plague was blamed on the Jews. The Spanish Inquisition said that a Jew could avoid antisemitism by converting to Christianity. But it wasn't just because of your religion but because of who you were. Being Jewish is not just a religion. Martin Luther's pamphlet of 1545 entitled *The Jews and their Lies* claimed that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and it urged the slaying of all Jews.

'Antisemitism' coined in 1873

The term 'antisemitism' was coined in 1873 by Wilhelm Marr in *Victory of Judaism over Germanism*. His thesis was that the Jews were conspiring to run the state and therefore should be excluded from citizenship. At roughly the same time in Russia the tsarist secret police published a forged collection of documents that became known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Its thesis was that there was secret plot by Jews to take over the world. Racism in general and antisemitism in particular was also facilitated by social Darwinism – pseudoscientific notions based on racial superiority. The Dreyfus affair brought all of these things into focus. Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French soldier, was falsely accused of being a traitor and he was sent to Devil's Island and left to rot. Emile Zola's book *J'accuse* accused France of being institutionally antisemitic.

'Zionism' coined in 1890

There were pogroms in Tsarist Russia and this continued under the Communists. Somehow the Jews were the enemies of both the Tsarist right-wing and the Communist left-wing. The response to that was Zionism. The term 'Zionism' was coined by Nathan Birnbaum in his book *Self Emancipation* (1890). The Hebrew word *Tzi-yon* either means Jerusalem, the land of Israel in its entirety, or the people who live there. Theodore Hertzl, a reporter, established the Zionist movement in 1897 which promoted the idea of a national home

and later a state for the Jewish people in Palestine. The concept is ancient. If you go back to Psalm 137 the Israelites, exiled to Babylon 2,600 years ago, sang 'We remember Zion'. For 1,950 years the daily liturgy has included prayers three times a day for the restoration of Zion. All of our festivals refer to a return to the land. So why did nothing happen over that period of time? Religious Jews said 'Wait until the Messiah comes'. The Jews as a whole had no way of achieving the necessary power because they were subjugated. With European nationalism and the unification of Italy and Germany the Jews thought 'Why not? We can also look towards a national home'. That, together with continuing pogroms, led the non-religious leadership of the Jews to say 'We're going there, we're not going to wait for the Messiah'. And that started at the end of the 19th century. They cleared swamps and made the desert bloom again.

The Balfour Declaration

What seemed like the answer to 2,000 years of prayer came in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration which said the UK government favours the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1922 the League of Nations also declared support for the concept. Then the Nazis started their 12-year war against the Jews. The Holocaust actually started in 1933. Hitler reintroduced Lutheran teachings and social Darwinian ideas of Aryanism. He used the economic damage of the First World War, Communism, and scapegoating against the Jews. He passed a series of laws by which Jews became second-class citizens. Jews had their beards pulled in the streets and they were made to scrub floors. They were humiliated, beaten, and imprisoned. All of which led to dehumanisation. They were considered vermin. Slave labour, concentration camps, death camps. Each followed on from the other and the result was the death of six million Jews of which just under a million and a half were children. Two thirds of all European Jewry. Following the war, the outcry for a place that could be called home became greater and greater because with almost no exception the countries of the world were closed to Jewish refugees. We talk about the wonderful



Kindertransport to the UK of 10,000 children and yes it was wonderful but it was nothing in relation to the need.

Contemporary antisemitism

So let's look at contemporary antisemitism. Having the State of Israel hasn't changed the nature of antisemitism which is at its height again. Left-wing antisemitism has its roots in Jews being capitalists, bankers, running the media, and the idea of 'Jews running the world'. And right-wing antisemitism is because Jews are socialists and communists. Both are correct! In the US at the moment, amongst the Democratic candidates for President are two Jews: Bernie Sanders (a socialist) and Michael Bloomberg who is allegedly seven times wealthier than Donald Trump. There's no reason why Jews can't be capitalists and other Jews can't be socialists. We're people. So what are the roots of antisemitism in the contemporary world? From a religious perspective we're still 'Jesus killers'. In 1965 the amazing Vatican document *Nostra aetate* ('In Our Age') declared that Christ's death cannot be charged against the Jews who are our brothers and sisters. It's taken the Anglican Church 50 more years to do something similar. What are the other reasons? We eat differently. Some of us look different. We have funny ideas of having our Sabbath on a Saturday instead of Sunday. Haman's words still resonate "There's a certain people in your empire, their laws are different' [Esther 3:8]. Actually our laws are not different. The Talmud is crystal clear that the laws of the land are law. Another area is that Jews are high achievers. Whatever field you look at whether its economics, medicine, technology, physics and chemistry, Jews have won Nobel prizes way beyond their numbers. And sometimes that can cause envy. Jews are cosmopolitan. So it's said we 'can't be patriotic' because we have 'dual loyalties'. The third area is Arab-Muslim antisemitism which comes because of Israel. [Maurice gave an example of completely false allegations about a Palestinian child's death being tweeted and retweeted just last week.] There have been any number of peace plans. When it gets to the point of

sitting down with pen in hand Palestinians always walk away. Why? Because Hamas and Fatah cannot agree on anything. Hamas has not changed its constitution which calls for the complete destruction of Israel. How do you make peace in those circumstances? There is also fear of assassination – as happened to Anwar Sadat when he made peace with Israel in 1979. And third, the Palestinians have not put into place all the institutions that are necessary to run a state. They've had the opportunity since 1967. Fourth, they lack motivation. Their leaders do not want a state because they will lose money. Nobody has ever said to them "If you don't come along and have a negotiation then we'll stop supporting you". So why should they? I believe they are taking the long view. They can wait it out because what they are looking for is the whole of it, not a two-state solution. They are looking for a one-state solution but it's not a secular solution.



Revenge!

A Sweetness No Humanist Should Ever Taste?

This is an edited version of Dr Peter Connolly's talk for us at the Green House Hotel in February. Peter contextualized his talk by referring to one of 52 humanist principles stated in Philip Nathan's book 'Living Humanism' (2018): 'Never pursue revenge'.

My response to Philip's Nathan's principle 'Never pursue revenge' was something like 'Never?' 'Really?' 'Is revenge always bad?' 'I don't think so.' 'Is it impossible for a person who seeks revenge to be a humanist?' These questions nestled in my mind as a kind of irritant that challenged my self-identification as a humanist. It was an itch I had to scratch. Could I justify my skepticism about Nathan's claim in a robust manner?

Among philosophers who have addressed the issue of revenge there is nothing even approaching a consensus. Most



philosophers' reflections on the morality of revenge take place within their deliberations on the nature and justification of state-administered punishment. States claim 'a monopoly on the use of force.' In the modern world, all forms of personal revenge that involve violence tend to be illegal, which is why philosophical discussions about revenge tend to occur within discussions about justice and punishment.

Biologists and psychologists seem more willing than philosophers to tackle revenge head-on. In his book *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (2015) psychologist Roy Baumeister observes that the magnitude of a crime tends to be much greater in the minds of victims than it is in the minds of perpetrators. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that a victim's judgment about what counts as an appropriate response to the crime can tend to be inflated and thus, in the minds of many commentators, disproportionate.

The pursuit of revenge can generate undesirable outcomes. But that does not mean that the pursuit of revenge is always bad and that we humanists who seek to create a better world should declare it to be intrinsically immoral and make its rejection a core criterion for identification as a humanist. I will attempt to show that a reasonable outline case can be made for regarding revenge as not merely acceptable but, in certain circumstances, a good thing.

***Death Wish* (2018 film)**

The three main foci employed by philosophers when they engage in making judgements about the morality of actions are the *character* of the actor and his or her intentions, the *nature* of the act itself, and the *consequences* of the action. Let's apply all three aspects to the 2018 remake of *Death Wish*. The central character is an accident and emergency surgeon, played by Bruce Willis, who spends most of his working life helping others. In the story, his wife is murdered and his daughter put into a coma by burglars who broke into his house. The police are unable to identify the perpetrators and Willis, unable to sleep or rest properly, has to take time off work and go for therapy. On his return to work

something happens that we might call luck. During a search through the belongings of a gunshot victim Willis discovers photographs of his personal details taken just prior to the burglary by a car valet. He puts two and two together and goes in search of the valet's contacts. This is where the moral ambiguities kick in. Should he have passed that information over to the police or, judging the police to be ineffective, do what he decided to do and pursue the killers himself? Is there a humanist consensus on the right answer to this question? I doubt it.

Let us now return to the three primary components of moral actions. Was the doctor played by Willis someone of bad character? I'm guessing that most people would say 'no.' Was his intention to seek revenge a bad intention? Some would say 'yes' and others 'no.' Would all humanists be in the 'yes' camp? I'm not sure they would. Were his acts of killing his wife's murderers immoral? Again, some would say 'yes' and others 'no.' Would all humanists be in the 'yes' camp? Again, there is likely to be disagreement. Were the consequences of his actions, the deaths of his wife's murderers, good or bad, moral or immoral? Again, there is unlikely to be a consensus, even amongst humanists. If Nathan's principles are adopted then all those humanists who judged *either* his intentions *or* his actions *or* the consequences of those actions to be moral suddenly find themselves to be non-humanists, cast out of the fold.

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Where do we humanists stand? Do we align with the belief that we are in the vanguard of advanced morality, or are some of us still connecting with more deeply rooted moral intuitions? I'd now like to take the next step in my justification of revenge in certain circumstances. In his book *The Better Angels of our Nature* and, to a lesser extent, *Enlightenment Now* linguist and psychologist Steven Pinker addresses the issue of revenge quite extensively. Two lines of approach are prominent in his treatment: the 'civilizing process' (which includes the historical forces of 'Leviathan' and 'Commerce') and the 'prisoner's



dilemma' [prisoner's dilemma omitted for reasons of space]. By 'Leviathan', a term taken from Thomas Hobbes's book of that title, Pinker means 'a state and judiciary with a monopoly on the use of force.' 'Commerce' in the sense of exchange or trade is self explanatory. Both have contributed, in conjunction with advances in technology, quite significantly to the reduction of violence. The state creates the security and stability that allows commerce to flourish and commerce opens avenues of wealth creation that compete with violence and which cultivate cooperative values. Nevertheless, as Pinker notes, 'A Leviathan can civilize a society only when the citizens feel that its laws, law enforcement and other social arrangements are legitimate, so they don't fall back on their worst impulses as soon as Leviathan's back is turned,' and, we can surely add, when Leviathan is ineffective. One of these 'worst impulses' is revenge, the second of Pinker's 'five inner demons.' One of the main ways in which Leviathan is able to become effective and to subdue this impulse is to deliver revenge under the heading of justice.

When one person has been harmed by another a common and perhaps morally intuitive response is to seek a roughly equivalent harming of the perpetrator plus an additional harm for the crime. Without this additional suffering the original balance between perpetrator and victim would not have been restored. Disagreement between victim and perpetrator is almost inevitable on this issue. Leviathan's role in is to take responsibility for justice and get the balance right.

Mexico's drug cartels

When a state can deliver such justice on a regular basis then people seem to be willing to forgo their own pursuit of it. But when, as in the case of the *Death Wish* films, that ability to deliver is compromised then personalized justice/revenge comes back on to the agenda and, it seems to me, attracts the same moral status as state administered justice. In *Goliath: Why the West Doesn't Win Wars* (2019) author Sean McFate comments on Mexico's ongoing conflict with drug cartels. He cites the

example of farmers in the state of Michoacan. The cartels had dominated the area through violence and extortion. A tipping point was reached, and the farmers fought back. They set up cordons around towns and hunted down cartel members and killed them. Such a state of affairs, according to philosophers such as Brian Orend, does not constitute war and should be counted as mass murder. For McFate it is a good example of what he calls 'a war without states.' On McFate's definition the farmers were not murderers, and even though the cartel members were civilians and not 'combatants' in a conflict that Orend would classify as a war, killing them was a good thing, not merely permissible but desirable. My personal response was one of approval for the farmers. I judged their intentions to be good, their actions to be good and the consequences of those actions to be good. I'd be interested to learn your reactions to this scenario. Do any other humanists think as I do?

Pinker shows how we have managed to reduce violence, personal revenge and interminable vendettas, but his message is not one of complete abandonment of revenge-based justice. Indeed, the abandonment of Tit-for-Tat revenge-based strategies would put the gains in violence reduction documented by Pinker at risk of reversal. Leviathan needs to ensure that perpetrators of crimes are caught and punished in an appropriate manner. It needs to deliver revenge/justice that, as far as both perpetrators and victims are concerned, is both certain and proportionate.

So, should humanists abandon the pursuit of revenge? I would suggest that there are good reasons for being cautious and even rejecting this as a principle that is constitutive of humanist identity. We humanists want to create a better world and, if the case I have presented has any force, then we will need to incorporate some version of revenge-based justice into our social arrangements. Its abandonment could be catastrophic.

■ The full transcript of Peter's talk is available on request.





Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Aaron Darkwood

I was left unconvinced by Peter Connolly's arguments. I do not see revenge as a civilised trait that belongs in any humanist tool box. I feel it is animalistic, and belongs buried deep in the reptilian brain from which it emerged. Yes, there would be impulses, urges, deep desires to hurt someone who has harmed you, but the civilised response is to uphold a higher moral standard. In what way can a twenty first century human being argue for behaviours a caveman would have practiced? That we enjoy *Death Wish* as revenge films, and I do, or the *Equaliser* TV series of the eighties where injustices were balanced, I can't see these behaviours being valid by any modern day standard.

From John Coss, Greater Manchester Humanists, who attended the Peter Connolly talk on 'Revenge'

In arguing against Philip Nathan's belief that Humanists should never pursue revenge, Peter Connolly seemed to me to end with a false dichotomy. I understood him to argue that there were circumstances in which the options for responding to harms done were retribution or allowing people to get away with them, so facilitating 'free riders'. I would go for a third option, where the primary aim is to prevent future harms as far as practicable and otherwise to reduce their incidence or mitigate their consequences. Of course, that may involve restrictions on the liberty of the perpetrator. And punishment may itself deter the perpetrator and others from future offending, although this depends on the likelihood of being caught. There may also be a case for seeking compensation as restitution for harms done to others.

Revenge may be defined as the action of hurting or harming someone in return for an injury or wrong suffered at their hands, and retribution as punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong or criminal act. In personal interactions, this may generate an ongoing feud and escalating harms to all concerned: for example, there are cases of road rage resulting in deaths. Especially in an ongoing relationship, a better approach is to seek acknowledgement of the harm done and a promise to do better in future, together with an apology and an offer of appropriate reparations. In some circumstances, it may be best to avoid in future the situations in which the harm arises, though this may be easier said than done, for example in cases of domestic violence.

As Peter suggested, the present criminal justice system is mostly a matter of judicial retribution, in which the extent to which criminal actions are due to upbringing, ignorance, chance, genetic predisposition, or other external circumstance out of the control of the perpetrator is mostly disregarded. There seems to me good evidence that many if not most criminals are sick or damaged, or act out of ignorance of the consequences of their actions. Rather than a punitive response we should aim for rehabilitation of offenders and address the underlying causes of crime, which accords with the views of most Humanists. Moreover, feelings of revenge can give rise to psychological harm – something which Restorative Justice can address.

Peter suggested that revenge was an acceptable motive for punishment in some circumstances. I am sure there are instances in which revenge was the primary motive, but I would argue that punishment was only warranted if justified on grounds of deterrence, or in the case of capital punishment, prevention, for example the treatment of collaborators in wartime.

There are three reasons for punishment – retribution, rehabilitation and deterrence. From a Humanist perspective, in an ideal world retribution would play no part. Of course, we do not live in an ideal world, so Philip's claim that we should never seek revenge may go too far.





Dorset Humanists **Chairman's View**

March 2020

At our well-attended 'Out of the Box' event on antisemitism, I put the case for a one-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. This is usually viewed as an existential threat to Israel as a Jewish state because, it is argued, the return of millions of Palestinian refugees would overwhelm the Jewish nature of Israel and lead to its conversion to a Muslim state. I made it clear, however, that what I was calling for was a secular state which constitutionally guaranteed the rights of all citizens, regardless of race or religion. It would be neither a Jewish state nor a Muslim state. It would be a modern secular state, guaranteed by a UN mandate. This proposal is not anti-Zionist but post-Zionist. I am not suggesting that this solution is likely to come about in the years or decades ahead but Zionism itself was unthinkable until the late nineteenth century. The fall of the Berlin Wall was unthinkable until it happened. Brexit was unthinkable until David Cameron decided on a Yes/No referendum. It seems to me that accusations of antisemitism are justified if sympathy with the Palestinian cause implies the destruction of Israel as a secure home for Jewish people. This is why the secular solution deserves consideration. It would guarantee the safety, security, and human rights of *everyone* in one secular state called Israel-Palestine, ending a conflict which has lasted for far too long.

Iwould like to reassure Peter Connolly that you don't have to sign any humanist equivalent of the Church of England's 39 articles in order to be accepted as a humanist. Philip Nathan's 52 humanist principles are not canonical! I found myself in some sympathy with Peter's thesis but I want to make a distinction between revenge on the one hand and concepts of justice and punishment on the other. Revenge, it seems to me, is motivated by spite and nastiness whereas justice and punishment are dispassionate and less likely to be violent. We need the 'automatic stabilizers' of reciprocal harm. If someone harms others then they should expect to suffer harm in return, although not necessarily in the same manner. People who cheat suffer harm by loss of reputation. People who commit crimes should suffer harm by appropriate but humane punishment. Countries that commit aggression against other states should expect harm in return. And so on. Without an operating principle of reciprocal harm the world would soon descend into a state of utter lawlessness. I accept, however, that there are different humanist views on this matter and I thank our thoughtful contributors to this month's *Letters & Emails* column.

