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Humanists UK

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IHEU
International
Humanist and
Ethical Union



Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 10th March 1.15pm lunch**
Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue, BH9 1TW

Members' Annual Lunch and AGM



Dorset Humanists is a community group which has provided a friendly meeting place for non-religious people in Bournemouth and surrounding areas for over twenty years. We have established ourselves as a respected voice for reason and humanity, and Humanists UK has recognised that we are one of its most successful partner groups. None of this would be possible without the loyalty and support of our subscribing members and so, as a 'thank you', we are providing a complimentary buffet lunch prior to our AGM. Visitors are also very welcome to attend but we ask for a £3.00 donation for lunch – or you can join Dorset Humanists on the day! Our AGM is a sociable, enjoyable, and sometimes controversial event. Please join us to have your say on the future of Dorset Humanists. Lunch starts at 1.15pm. AGM starts at 2.15.

■ **Wednesday 28th March 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

How to Change Prisons



A talk by Rob Preece, who is Campaigns and Communications Manager at the Howard League for Penal Reform.

Overcrowded prisons are a menace to society. As we send more and more people to prison, more and more people are swept into deeper currents of violence, drugs, frustration and mental distress. Incidents of assault and self-injury in prisons have risen to record levels. In 2016, prisoners in England and Wales lost their lives through suicide at a rate of one every three days. If we want prisons to be places of genuine reform, where people leave less likely to commit crime, we must ask ourselves hard questions about how and why we use them – and take steps to improve them.

Since joining the Howard League in 2012, Rob has worked on some of the charity's most successful campaigns. They include the award-winning 'Books For Prisoners' campaign, which overturned government restrictions on prisoners receiving books from family and friends. A trained journalist, he lobbies decision-makers and gives media interviews and presentations on behalf of the charity.

The Howard League for Penal Reform is the oldest penal reform charity in the UK.

Send bulletin updates to chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

HMRC Charities Ref No EW10227



dorsethumanists.co.uk



[@dorsethumanists](https://twitter.com/dorsethumanists)



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



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

■ **Thursday 5th April 7.30pm** and every first Thursday evening of the month at Moon in the Square, Exeter Rd, BH2 5AQ



Pub socials

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

18th March – A pleasant local walk of about 6 miles (shortcuts possible) taking in parts of Meyrick Park, Talbot Heath, Coy Pond and Lower and Upper Gardens. Rearranged from January and hoping for better weather. Meet at War Memorial near Town Hall.

15th April – Bluebells in Roydon Woods. About 6 miles around the nature reserve, which is near to Brockenhurst in the New Forest. With luck this should be at the right time to see the bluebells.

All walks are between about 6 and 9 miles and usually have an optional short cut.

Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any last minute cancellations due to weather conditions. Phil ☎ 07817 260498



Short Talks

■ **Wednesday 21st March 7.30pm** Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX. £2.00-3.00 donation requested.

Ethics and Morality from a Humanist Perspective

This will be a report from the Dorset Humanists Ethics Working Group, which has been meeting over the last year to investigate and discuss the subject.

Each talk is around 20 minutes followed by questions and discussion. See [Meetup](#) for further details.

Future dates for your diary...

■ **Saturday 14th April 2.00pm** **Moordown** Learning to Live Well Together. A talk by Dr Allan Hayes.

■ **Weds 25th April 7.30pm** **Green House** Face to Faith: Christians and Humanists in Conversation. David Warden and John Macdiarmid.

Other events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 7th March 7.30pm** Sandford Heritage Hall, Sandford Rd, Nr Wareham, BH20 7AJ (Next to Pine Martin Grange Care Home) 'Out of the Box' Humanist/Christian dialogue group presents

Privilege and Inequality

A discussion led by Andrew Salmon.

■ **Wednesday 14th March 7.30pm** Skeptics in the Pub at Brunswick Pub, 199 Malmesbury Park Rd, BH8 8PX. £3

Sense, Nonsense, and Everything In Between: The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories

Speaker Dr Mike Wood is a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Winchester, where he teaches social psychology and conducts research on conspiracy theories.

■ **Thursday 22nd March 7.30pm** Elstead Hotel, Knyveton Road, £2.00. Bournemouth Labour Party presents an evening with:

Professor Steve Keen

If you are not a member of the Labour Party it is essential to register your interest in this talk by 15th March by emailing education@bournemouthlabour.org

Steve Keen, author of *Debunking Economics* and *Can We Avoid Another Financial Crisis?* is one of a handful of international economists who predicted the global crash of 2008. Tonight he will address the question 'Is the government economically illiterate and intellectually bankrupt?'



■ 3rd – 23rd April

Bournemouth Library (Triangle). Amnesty International presents:

Photography Exhibition

The main focus of the exhibition is the historic plight of refugees and will feature 30 photographs taken by photographers from the Magnum agency over the past 70 years.

■ Friday 11th May – Sunday 13th May

Weekend Retreat: 'NOT a Digital Detox: How to feel better without logging off'.

Last year, Dorset Humanists member Sue Thomas gave us a short talk about her book 'Nature and Wellbeing in the Digital Age'. She has been invited by the Othona Community, near Burton Bradstock, to run a retreat reflecting upon our online lives and our place in nature. More information [here](#)

Simon Whipple



As announced in last month's Bulletin, Simon Whipple has been co-opted onto Dorset Humanists Committee. Simon has agreed to allow his name to be put forward for election at our AGM.

Simon graduated from the University of St Andrews with an honours degree in philosophy. He was a junior officer in the Army and then a solicitor specialising in Social Welfare Law. He has served on committees throughout his working life, notably as chairman of the committee which established the Surrey Law Centre in 2001, and President of Hampshire Law Society 2013/14.

Simon is divorced, with two adult sons who are both (to his embarrassment!) evangelical Christians. He has lived in the New Forest near Christchurch since 2002.

An atheist since the age of nine, Simon was brought up in the Church of England and enjoys church rituals and especially church music. He attends church services infrequently without any feeling of hypocrisy

or anger. He has been attending Dorset Humanists meetings since about 2007 and became a member in about 2012.

Simon established our Ethics Working Group in 2017 which is a group of eight members of Dorset Humanists who have explored ethical issues in depth over the last year. It is scheduled to give a short talk about its initial conclusions in March.

Having enjoyed ten years of excellent talks and a social life from Dorset Humanists, Simon feels it is important to give his own time by serving on our committee to repay what Dorset Humanists has done for him. He wants to make sure that we continue to attract national class speakers who generate stimulating discussions on social and scientific issues. If there is sufficient interest, he would like to establish a Humanist choir, particularly enjoying secular carols around Christmas.

Humanism in schools

Cathy Silman presented the 'three main concepts' of Humanism to an audience of primary school teachers at the launch of a revised Dorset RE syllabus. Several contacts and leads were made for possible school visits.

David Warden visited Bishop Aldhelm's Church of England primary school in Poole and answered challenging questions from 60 eleven-year-olds on evolution and the Big Bang.

Still paying your sub with old money?

If you pay your annual subscription to Dorset Humanists by cheque or cash this is greatly appreciated but it creates a headache for us throughout the year when we need to send out reminders, sometimes several. Many members have switched to a simple and safe Direct Debit system. You could help Cathy our Membership Secretary enormously by following their example. Please contact her for details.

☎ Cathy Silman 01202 740550
💻 catherinesilman311@btinternet.com



What Next for Humans in an Age of Machines?



Ninety people packed into the Purbeck Lounge at the Bournemouth International Centre to celebrate Darwin Day and to hear Kate Devlin's fascinating glimpse into the future of humans and artificial intelligence.

Kate commenced her talk with some rhetorical questions: "Are we all going to die? Will we turn into machines? Or can we live in harmony with artificial intelligence?" She also shared the first verse of Richard Brautigan's poem "All Watched Over By Machines Of Loving Grace":

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

The applications of AI include robot vacuum cleaners, bomb disposal machines, autonomous weapons, machines which will be able to carry out surgery better than humans, and machines which can read your emotions.

Kate made a distinction between AI and robots: AI is analogous to the human brain and robots to the human body. She also made a distinction between 'narrow AI' (machines that can play chess) and the type of AI that can accomplish 'deep learning' and the ability to play abstract strategy games like Go. Artificial intelligence needs a lot of data which it can then use to make connections much more rapidly than humans. Deep learning is characterised by artificial neural networks which mimic the human brain.

Computers are not very good yet at recognising the difference between a cat and a dog although Google decided to teach its algorithms to recognise cats.

Digital assistants such as Alexa, Google Assistant, Siri, and Cortana are becoming increasingly popular. Some companies are also using 'chatbots' for customer service purposes but Kate informed us of one chatbot that became increasingly fascist by absorbing and reinforcing the biases of the humans it was chatting with.

Companion care robots can help people to live independently in their own homes. Japan is a world leader in this sector. A robot called Robear can help with moving and handling but users need to ensure that it is fully charged to avoid accidents! Companion robots can have applications to help patients with dementia and children with autism. Robot pets can be therapeutic and they leave no mess! We can establish empathy quite easily with such machines.

Robot ethicists are concerned however that this amounts to a form of deception. Should we put such robots in a shell that looks human? Could such machines have non-human sentience? It's very hard to identify what consciousness is in any case. Would care robots deprive people of real human contact or can we benefit from both? If we keep old people in their homes will this exacerbate the housing crisis?

One of Kate's research topics is 'intimate relationships with technology'. Can we have love, companionship, attachment, and sex with machines? There is a new wave of sex technology which is of particular interest to disabled communities and for long-distance relationships. Life-sized silicon hypersexualised female robots are not yet commercially available but they are being developed in prototype. This raises another set of ethical questions. There is a worrying emphasis on the female form and can a robot be raped? Would this perpetuate sexual violence? Kate claimed that violent computer games haven't spilled over into real life. But should we ban something because we find it distasteful? Some people claim to be happier with non-human companions but Kate also asked whether human-like robots freak us out because they look like dead bodies.

Kate also warned us of the dangers of hacking. Sex robots could reveal your



deepest perversions to complete strangers. Some researchers are concerned that 'sex robots may literally fuck us to death' because unlike human partners they don't get tired.

Kate reminded us that machines already building a detailed profile of your life. All such data is biased however because the people who can't afford the technology are not being represented.

In the distant future transhumanists are asking whether we will merge with machines to become cyborgs. We are already using pacemakers, contact lenses, and other bits of technology to enhance our bodies' capabilities. In the future will an elite have brain implants? Those who can afford it will upgrade but will this create a two-tier system? The future may be exciting but we need to keep an eye on it.

Despite concerns and some scary scenarios, Kate is an optimist because there is always a counter to optimism. She reminded us that Socrates thought that writing would be the death of memory. We asked the audience if they were optimistic and excited, pessimistic and terrified, or sitting on the fence. A few were pessimistic and terrified and the rest were split between optimism and sitting on the fence.

Kate concluded her talk with the last verse of the Richard Brautigan's poem:

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

■ Kate Devlin is a Senior Lecturer in Human Computer Interaction and Artificial Intelligence at Goldsmiths, University of London. She was recently named as one of London's most influential people.

■ See *Letters & Emails* for a link to a Sam Harris TED talk on AI.

Humanist Pledge at Holocaust Memorial Day



Maggie Pepin

The theme for this year's HMD at the Bournemouth International Centre was 'The Power of Words' and these are the words I said at the event:

"We have to be so careful how we use words don't we?. How we think of and how we refer to other people is paramount. Stereotyping leads to prejudice, prejudice to mockery and persecution, persecution to genocide.

And what do we call ourselves? This year the British Humanist Association became Humanists UK, so that's what I'm known as now. But I'm still the same person. What are you? What are you proud to be? You could say, 'I support human rights because I'm a ...' and name your nationality or your religion or a group you belong to ... But, you know, in your heart you support human rights because you're a human. We all are and our similarities far outweigh the sum of our differences.

I beg you again, as I always do, to acknowledge our common heritage, our common humanity, and to stand, if you are able, while I read the pledge:

We pledge ourselves
To give equal value to each and every person
However different they may be from us
To establish justice and peace
To feed the hungry and heal; the broken
To welcome the refugee and the stranger
To console the bereaved
To bring hope to those in want
So that all may rejoice in liberty
That is the right of every human being."

Christian Humanism: A Contradiction in Terms?

At our February 'Out of the Box' dialogue meeting in Sandford, retired vicar and author Hugh Maddox outlined a set of beliefs he refers to as 'Christian Humanism'.

Hugh began his talk by sharing his understanding of Humanism. He said it means being open minded and that life and its origins can be explained in scientific terms. He spoke about the 'false gods' of individualism and materialism and that we belong to each other and the earth. He accepted that 'religious experience' can more or less be explained in psychological terms but not 'explained away'.

Hugh said that he does not believe in a God who is a separate, male, human-type being, who intervenes and who judges, and who required the sacrifice of his son in order to appease his anger. He said he would be prepared to machine-gun a God like this. Instead, he defined God as 'that which was at the very beginning and will be at the end, the source of everything that is, the basic principle in everything that is animal, vegetable or mineral, which is outside time. He described this as a 'colossal thought' which is an indefinable mystery.

Hugh has given up the idea that God intervenes. Instead, God works 'through nature'. God can influence us to the extent that we are willing to be open.

A constant theme throughout Hugh's talk was that although he does not believe in a separate male human type of God he nevertheless relates to him or it 'as if' to a mother or father. He 'lives with paradox'. He believes that God has total love for us and that he handed the world to us and refuses to interfere – like a human parent who refuses to interfere. Hugh also said that 'God himself suffers' and that Calvary [the crucifixion] shows us the suffering of God. Jesus is 'the human face of God'. [This was a reference to a book by John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich who caused a storm in the 1960s with his book *Honest to God*.] Hugh quoted a poem by G. A.

Studdert Kennedy *High and Lifted Up* in which the poet writes that 'I hate the God of Power on His hellish heavenly throne, Looking down on rape and murder, hearing little children moan... The very God of Heaven is not Power, but Power of Love.'

For Hugh, the resurrection means that 'failure and death are not the end – new life is always available and death is not the end'.

Hugh noted that the Bible is an anthology and that the book of Leviticus is full of socialist legislation. He described the Bible as 'a love letter from God' and that he hears God speaking to him through it.

Hugh described prayer as an activity which 'takes you out of yourself' and helps you 'to look at the world through the eyes of God who must weep at all the refugees, poverty etc'. Through prayer Hugh asks 'Dear God, what do you want to do with me today?'

On miracles, Hugh is open minded. He explains some in rational terms, for example he thinks that Jesus inspired 5,000 people to share their picnics with each other rather than performing a miracle with a few loaves and fishes. On the other hand, he heard about or witnessed the disappearance of an untreatable mole on a woman's arm and thinks this was a possible miracle.

He thinks that the humanist movement used to be tolerant but that it has become more missionary, aggressive, and wanting to ban prayers. He mentioned the National Secular Society in this regard. He said that cathedrals are used for 'common grief'.

Religion is not about believing a whole load of daft things but about having an attitude to life which includes compassion, honesty, wonder, gratitude, and acceptance.

In the Q&A session, Hugh said that he 'believes in love' and has to live by it. He wasn't sure that he would if he didn't believe in the source of this love.

■ Hugh's book *Tales of a Huggable Vicar* (2012) is a readable and entertaining autobiography.

Christian Humanism? A response

I recognise Hugh's set of beliefs as a brief phase I went through on my journey from evangelicalism to atheism. It is variously described as 'liberal' or 'radical' Christianity and sometimes as 'Christian humanism'.

Hugh appears to accept science and yet he wants to go beyond it to some kind of 'ultimate source'. In the Q&A session when I asked him if he was making factual claims about this he said that 'factual' was a bit too strong. When I suggested 'hunch' he seemed more comfortable with that.

What I like most about Hugh's take on Christianity is his repudiation of the God of power although I was taken aback when he said he could take a machine gun to such a God and surprised that none of the Christians present challenged him on this violent imagery. For Hugh, God is love and the source of love. Jesus is 'the human face of God' and his death by crucifixion 'shows us that God himself suffers'.

For a talk billed as 'Christian Humanism' I felt that Hugh's account of Humanism was far too brief and unsatisfying. He said it entailed accepting science, believing that we belong to each other and the earth, and repudiating the 'false gods' of individualism and materialism. There was nothing here about living a full human life, perhaps because Hugh denies that death is the cessation of life. I appreciate Hugh's focus on love but there is also a rather gloomy preoccupation with suffering in his outlook. Hugh's human icon is the crucified Christ. In the humanist tradition I want to point to icons of human health, vigour, proportion, and beauty like Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* or Michelangelo's *David*.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of Hugh's talk was his insistence that God is not a separate, male, human-type entity but at the same time Hugh relates to him/it as if he/it is a father: in other words, a separate, male, human-type entity in a parental role. Hugh played the classic get-out-jail-free card by saying that we have to 'live with paradox'. It was this kind of double-speak

that made me glad to get away from the suffocating fog of theology.

Hugh said that the humanist movement has become less tolerant and more aggressive. He thinks that the church can cater for believers and unbelievers alike when needed for a response to disasters. I am reluctant to criticise Hugh who is one of the nicest vicars you could hope to meet but I think he has an old-fashioned and rather arrogant belief that the Church of England can cater for everyone's pastoral and spiritual needs. It's simply not true, as the increasing popularity of humanist funerals and humanist pastoral care shows.

On miracles, Hugh seems unaware that the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people is simply a rewrite of a story from the book of Kings.¹ The gospels are creative fiction, not historical reports. On the spontaneous disappearance of a mole this is surely a common occurrence. I've had a mole disappear from my own back.

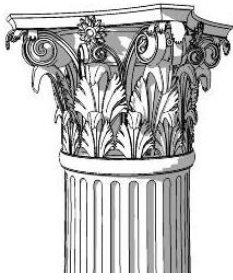
So does Hugh believe a whole load of daft things? I think I would characterise Hugh's version of Christianity as wanting to have your cake and eat it. It is a belief system based on emotion and sentiment which presupposes, but does not try to prove, some theological beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality. Hugh doubts that his commitment to love would be as secure if he did not think that 'God' was the source of love. The difference between Hugh and me is that I do not share these presuppositions and nor do I think they are necessary in order to be fully committed to the human values of compassion, honesty, wonder, gratitude, and acceptance. Hugh's belief system is more Christian than Humanist although I acknowledge and welcome the fact that we have a lot in common in terms of values.

David Warden

■ This response replaces *Chairman's View* this month. David graduated with a degree in theology from the University of Kent in 1982.

¹ Elisha multiplied twenty barley loaves to feed 100 men in 2 Kings 4:42-44





Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Carol Wilcox, Secretary of Labour Land Campaign

I don't get along to meetings and am not active, but I want to say how much I appreciate the bulletin. I was very interested in Sarah Goode's good work and your article with regard to dialogue with religious groups. On the question of money creation I recommend *Reclaiming the State* (2017) by William Mitchell and Thomas Fazi which I believe to be more grounded than Positive Money, but the Positive Money campaign has done a wonderful job in raising the issue. Our Labour Land Campaign chair was saying recently that we could do with learning from Positive Money on how to connect.

From George R, Morocco

I have just finished reading *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins which is not available in Morocco, so I asked a friend to bring a copy from the States. Strangely enough, much of the content is what I had thought when I was around 13 years of age. I then told my parents I no longer wanted to follow the Catholic faith. They were open-minded enough to accept my decision.

From Graham Marshall

I feel that Artificial Intelligence will be MUCH more important than cute robots to please lonely and sex-starved people. One day we will be amazed to know that we once trusted doctors with limited and outdated human knowledge. We will be diagnosed by 'AI doctors' with all human medical knowledge at their disposal and experience of all people who showed similar symptoms – not just the one the doctor treated twenty years ago. Perhaps the AI of a million years

hence will be able create universes or even God!!!

Watch Sam Harris TED talk here: [Can we build AI without losing control over it?](#)

From Martin Brennan

I am still enjoying life in Japan, the land of the robots! I enjoyed your Facebook post about Kate Devlin's talk. Do you know if anyone is using the term 'roman' for robot-human hybrids? I don't know whether I invented it or not, but I have been using it for several years and have never seen it in print.

From Roger West

I want to help in my own way to make our society better. When I was a Councillor I worked as an independent and did what my residents wanted and championed their causes. I didn't then know the expression 'representative democracy' but I was in fact working to that principle. We hear daily on the radio that Local Government is now no longer fit for purpose. None of the political parties want to challenge it as it is a way to bolster up the national parties. A possible answer is an Elected Mayor because at least he/she can be kicked out of office.

From Aaron Darkwood



I was quite saddened to see renowned Humanist and writer Stephen Fry on the BBC news site talking about his prostate cancer experience, but pleased he is now recovering. As a person who has had testicular cancer I like to spread awareness of these things. So if you are a man under 40, please check your genital regions at least weekly for any abnormalities, lumps or swelling. Testicular cancer typically has no pain so catch it early rather than ignore anything. For those of us over 40 it's very wise to get prostate screening which can be just a blood test. Finger probing is only done in suspected cases – I know this can be a deterrent to getting checked. As this one is a killer, don't put it off.