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# Dorset Humanists

*Atheists and agnostics for a better world*

## ■ Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2.00pm

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TW

### Ancient Stoicism & Modern Humanism



Emeritus Professor  
Christopher Gill

Is Stoicism compatible with a modern humanistic outlook, and can it help us to live better, happier lives

today? In the popular imagination, a Stoic is someone who represses their emotions, but in reality Stoic philosophy is much richer than this misconception suggests. The Stoics believed the most important thing in life is 'virtue' or 'excellence of character', and that external material things could be part of a good life but are insufficient to guarantee happiness. They also recognised the importance of living in harmony with our communities and the natural world. Christopher Gill will outline the key themes of Stoic ethics, including ideas about virtue, happiness, and ethical and social development, and explain how adopting Stoic principles could make a positive contribution to our lives. Christopher is Emeritus Professor of Ancient Thought at the University of Exeter and has played a leading role in 'Stoicism Today', a project which aims to present Stoic ethical principles as a basis for guidance in modern life. His publications include several books on ancient philosophy and a translation of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* Books 1-6.

## ■ Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm

Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

### EU Referendum Debate: Humanist Views



Is there a humanist view on the advisability of remaining in or leaving the European Union?

Humanism includes many values espoused by the EU such as liberty, equality,

human rights, democracy, the rule of law, economic prosperity, and peace. But are these values best served inside or outside the EU, and do some values merit greater weight than others? Should humanists adopt a view based on national self-interest or a broader set of supra-national objectives?

To discuss these issues from a humanist perspective we bring together a diverse range of views from within our own membership and the wider humanist community. Our panel will include a published philosopher, a member of the British Psychological Society, a Polish lawyer who immigrated to the UK, a Conservative Party supporter, and a Labour economist. Some will argue to remain in the EU and others will argue to leave, but all of our panellists will strive to present a rational and humanistic analysis of one of the biggest decisions facing the British electorate in recent history.

Send bulletin updates to [chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk](mailto:chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk) or phone 07910 886629



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■ **Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 7.30pm** and every first Thursday evening of the month at Moon in the Square, Exeter Rd, BH2 5AQ



## Social Evening

Enjoy stimulating conversation over a drink or two at our pub social evening. There is no fixed agenda so if you have any interesting topics or ideas you want to share and chat about in a friendly atmosphere then this [meetup](#) is for you. ☎ Dean 07713 858773



## Walks

Our popular walks are on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of each month throughout the summer. Join us on Meetup for further details.

### Wareham to Corfe Castle

May 15<sup>th</sup> – 10:15 start from Wareham Stretche Road car park. 7 miles, linear walk, 1 large hill, bus return.

### Christchurch Bay

June 5<sup>th</sup> – 10:15 start from Tuckton bridge café. 9 miles circular walk, mostly flat, encircling Christchurch bay and waterfronts. Join us on [Meetup.com](#) for further details.

### ■ Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2.00pm

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TW

## The God Confusion



Dr Gary Cox. In this presentation philosopher Gary Cox will argue that the only credible philosophical position with regard to belief in God is agnosticism. He will explore conceptions of

God in an entertaining yet objective manner, and examine the strengths and weaknesses of the standard arguments for God's existence.

Gary Cox is a philosopher and the author of several books on Sartre, existentialism and general philosophy including '*The God Confusion: Why Nobody Knows the Answer to the Ultimate Question*'. He is an honorary

research fellow of the University of Birmingham.

### ■ Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 7.30pm

Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

## Ten Ways the Universe Tries to Kill You



Astronomer Steve Tonkin.

As we go about our daily lives, it is easy to forget we are passengers on a small planet travelling at nearly 70,000 miles per hour

around a solar system that orbits the Milky Way at equally breathtaking speeds. We often hear from apologists that our universe is 'fine-tuned for life', but the vast majority of it is extremely hostile, with terrifying phenomena that could wipe out humanity in the blink of an eye if they ever come close enough. From gamma-ray bursts to asteroid impacts, and from supernovae to galactic collisions, it seems certain that the universe is out to get us! Steve Tonkin's light-hearted but scientifically robust review of potentially cataclysmic events will help us understand many fundamental cosmological processes and their potential effects on us.

Steve is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society and has taught astronomy to adults and children for over 30 years. He has written books and articles on practical astronomy, and has a monthly column in the BBC's *Sky at Night* magazine. He is also a STEM (Science, technology, engineering and maths) ambassador with a special brief for astronomy.

### Other events of interest...

#### ■ 10-12th June, Birmingham

## BHA Annual Conference

Tickets: £129 for BHA members, £149 for non-members, £89 for students. Conference Extra tickets: £79 or £49 for students.

📄 [Conference](#) ☎ 020 7324 3060

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■ **Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm**  
Bournemouth Skeptics in the Pub,  
Brunswick Pub, Malmesbury Park Road  
BH8 8PX

## Hunting Monsters: The Reality Behind the Myths

Darren Naish. For as long as people have been exploring the sea, there have been tales of terrifying marine monsters. Debates about their actual existence or what they might really be have continued for decades, if not centuries. Known also as cryptids, they have spawned a body of research known as cryptozoology. This entertaining talk will look at the evidence of these mysterious monsters, explore what they might really be (if they exist at all) and why they have been represented as they have. Darren Naish is a science writer, technical editor and palaeozoologist affiliated with the University of Southampton.

■ **13<sup>th</sup> May 10.30-12.30pm**  
Strouden Park Community Centre,  
Vanguard Road, BH8 9NU. Also 10<sup>th</sup> May  
9.30-11.30am at Soulshine Café, 76 South  
Street, Bridport.

## Mourning Café

Drink Coffee, Eat Cake, Talk about Death!  
Dying Matters Awareness Week. Just drop  
in and start open and honest conversations  
about any aspect of ageing, death and  
dying.

<http://www.dyingmatters.org/>

■ **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 9.30-5.30pm**  
Central London (2 min walk from Russell  
Square). From £40.00 (early bird and  
student discounts apply).

## Secularism 2016: Living Better Together

A one-day conference. Speakers include  
Maajid Nawaz.

📖 Book online [here](#)

## Visit Down House – The Home of Charles Darwin



Would you like to visit Charles Darwin's home Down House with a group of happy humanists?! Journey time around 3 hours with a stop for a pub lunch on the way. Cost around £25. End of September – midweek date to be arranged if enough people show an interest. Look out for the sign-up sheet at our meetings or contact Cathy Silman direct.

✉ [catherinesilman311@btinternet.com](mailto:catherinesilman311@btinternet.com)

☎ 01202 740550

## Standing Orders

Do you pay your Dorset Humanist subscription by standing order? If so, we'd be grateful if you could check that your bank is paying us the revised amount of £15.00 (£22.50 for two at the same address). Thank you!



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Dorset Humanists on YouTube. See Phil James's talk on Thinking Fast and Slow [here](#)

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## Andrew Copson on 'backdoor blasphemy'



*A report of Andrew's talk to Dorset Humanists in April. Andrew is Chief Executive of the BHA and President of the IHEU.*

In 2008 the UK Parliament abolished the offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel but has blasphemy law been reintroduced by the back door? Andrew contrasted the US and the UK. The First Amendment to the US Constitution in 1791 stipulates that 'Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech' whereas in the UK freedom of speech is qualified for the purposes of preventing harm, the rule of law, and fairness and equality.

Andrew cited the way in which the Sikh play 'Behzti' was closed down in 2004 following protests by the Sikh community. He said the way in which criticism of religion can be silenced by violence or the threat of violence is worse than the old blasphemy law which at least had the virtue of being limited in scope and subject to the rule of law. In 2011, Benetton launched a poster campaign inviting world leaders to combat the 'culture of hatred'. Its arresting images included a poster of Pope Benedict apparently kissing the imam of the Al Azhar mosque in Egypt. The Vatican threatened legal action and Benetton withdrew the poster. Students at University College London used a 'Jesus and Mo' cartoon, in which the two characters are depicted drinking pints of beer, to advertise a Freshers' drinks event. Someone complained and the student Islamic society claimed that the advert constituted 'harassment' which is unlawful. The students union ordered the image to be removed. In another episode, South Bank Atheist Society displayed a Michelangelo-

style poster depicting God as the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The poster was banned on the grounds that it was 'offensive to Christians'. These examples indicate that equality law in practice is actually worse than the old blasphemy law because it criminalises expressions which are harmless and has a chilling effect on freedom of speech on university campuses. Its application is also arbitrary because it's in the hands of student unions. Equality law is, however, ultimately subject to the rule of law and the BHA has never lost any appeals.

Andrew said that an environment of censorship in the UK has been created. The Advertising Standards Authority, for example, requires that adverts 'must not contain anything that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care must be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability or age'. This stance led to the banning of Federici ice cream adverts which used suggestive images of nuns and priests and Samsung adverts claiming 'miraculous deals' with a cartoon of Jesus. Andrew said that the threshold of offence is set far too low but, on the positive side, these decisions are usually held up to public scrutiny and no one has to go to court.

The BHA was banned by the Committee of Advertising Practice from claiming, in its 'Atheist Bus Campaign' that 'there isn't a God'. Hence the insertion of the word 'probably' – an allusion to Carlsberg beer adverts. During the 2011 Census



Campaign the BHA ran into trouble with the owners of advertising space for using the phrase 'If you're not religious, for God's sake say so'. Perceptions of possible offence have now become totally dependent on corporate decisions and there's no right of appeal. An American Christian company now owns most advertising space on buses and it may no longer be possible to run an 'Atheist Bus Campaign'. We'll never know what we might have seen because silence on religion has been normalised.

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## Sheena Nayton goes to Bahrain



*Dorset Humanist Sheena Nayton sent us this report of her recent trip to Bahrain.*

I recently enjoyed a brief trip to visit my son in Bahrain, who is there on a 3-year posting at the British Embassy. Bahrain is a small island country in the Persian Gulf, about the size of the Isle of Man, and it's connected to Saudi Arabia by a 16 mile causeway. The population is only around 1,340,000. The country's capital, Manama, is home to many large financial structures, but it's not as glossy and opulent as its oil rich neighbours. Many poorer neighbourhoods surround the city.

Bahrain was once a British Protectorate but in 1971 it declared independence. Nearly all government positions are occupied by the Al Khalifa royal family. The king's uncle has been Prime Minister for over 45 years, the longest serving PM in the world! Since 2011 the country has experienced protests and unrest inspired by the Arab Spring, particularly by the majority Shia population. These protests were crushed by the Sunni government with help from Saudi Arabia although some protests by Shia youths continue.

The state religion is Islam and 75% of the population are Muslim. About 65% of these are Shia and the rest Sunni. Christians represent 15% of the population, mainly expatriate workers but also some native Bahrainis, and Hindus make up 10%. Bahrain also has a native Jewish community numbering about 50 citizens. Bahrainis are known for their tolerance towards the practice of other faiths and there are several churches and a synagogue in Manama.

The traditional attire for women is the hijab or the abaya gown, and for men the thobe, but western clothing is also common.

Women are allowed to go out alone and to drive, unlike in Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is, in fact, the most liberal of all the Gulf States and has strong ties to Britain.

Women were granted the right to vote and stand in the 2002 elections. In 2008 a Jewish woman was appointed as ambassador to the United States, making her the first Jewish Ambassador of an Arab country! In 2011, a Christian woman was appointed ambassador to the UK. It is illegal for a couple to live together unmarried, although generally a blind eye is turned to westerners who live together. Although Bahrain legalized homosexuality in 1976 many homosexuals have since been arrested.

Looking on the internet, there did not seem to be any open group of atheists, agnostics or humanists in Bahrain, although there were a number of atheist bloggers who chose to be anonymous. One person likened being atheist in Bahrain to being the only sober person at a party! It seemed that there were plenty of Bahrainis who had had a western education and now doubted Islam, or who had no time for it, but felt they had to toe the line outwardly. They could only admit their atheism to other western educated people who were generally sympathetic.

There are many countries around the world who keep their subjects repressed under the yoke of religion, however in today's world, connected through the internet and social media, it has been shown this often results in civil disobedience, insurrection and revolution. With education and freedom of thought comes tolerance, acceptance and a more peaceful society. Hopefully, Bahrain, in taking some small steps in the right direction, will lead the way for other Muslim countries to become more tolerant towards those of other faiths or none.

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## South Hampshire Humanists

Our neighbouring group South Hampshire Humanists have a packed programme of events. Details can be found in their newsletter [here](#).

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# The Heart of Humanism



*Some edited highlights from Estelle Goldie's talk to Dorset Humanists. Estelle Goldie teaches philosophy at the U3A.*

In his book 'Ideas That Matter: A Personal Guide for the 21st Century' (2010) philosopher A.C. Grayling explains that the word 'humanism', has had a variety of different senses and uses since its first coining in the Renaissance. But although the word has a relatively short and complex history, the main current meaning applies to the great tradition stemming from classical Greek antiquity, older by half a millennium than Christianity, and older by a thousand years than Islam, and much richer and deeper than either of them.

In 399BCE Socrates was charged with 'impiety', not to be confused with 'heresy'. In ancient Greece there was no sacred text, no elaborate body of doctrine, no priestly hierarchy, no confessional books in which a writer furthered orthodox or heterodox beliefs. Religious practice was ritualistic, an obligation you assumed automatically as a member of a community. The very fabric of the state depended on the goodwill of the gods, and this in turn depended on everyone playing a part. Patriotism and piety were thus inseparable. Hence the seriousness of the charge against Socrates. By refuting common beliefs and by encouraging young aristocratic men to think for themselves he was thought to be undermining the state and sentenced to death.

As early as the 6<sup>th</sup>c BCE philosophers were trying to understand the world by the use of reason without appealing to revelation, authority or tradition. Xenophanes may have been the first to express the scientific principle of scepticism when he wrote: "As for the whole truth no man has known it... For all is but a web of guesses." Evolutionary theory and modern cosmology can also be traced back to ancient Greece.

Charles Darwin recognised that Empedocles in the 5<sup>th</sup>c BCE was the first to suggest a theory of evolution by survival of the fittest. Anaxagoras is sometimes regarded as the intellectual ancestor of Big Bang theory. He also speculated about the possibility of a multiverse. Sadly, he too was prosecuted for treason and impiety. The sceptic Protagoras declared that he was unsure whether the gods existed but recommended that they should be worshipped nonetheless!

According to A. C. Grayling, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* remains one of the most important works in the history of ethics. Aristotle asks one of the fundamental questions for all human beings, 'How should we live?'. He thought that having a certain amount of money, reasonable looks, good ancestry and children were prerequisites for a genuinely flourishing life. He also thought that those who want nothing more than the pleasures of sex, eating and drinking lower themselves to the level of cattle. The good life for human beings is a life of 'rational virtuous activity' and the reward is a life of true happiness. Much of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is taken up with spelling out what such lives might be like, what sort of character you need in order to live the good life. This includes his idea of the golden mean. For example, the virtue of courage lies between two vices: a deficiency of courage is cowardice whereas an excess is rashness. The virtue of self-control lies between two vices: a deficiency of self-control is impulsiveness and an excess leads to apathy.

Estelle rounded off her talk by introducing us to the ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant whose moral system was grounded neither in supernatural nor dogmatic authority but in the 'rationality of the autonomous individual'. His famous 'categorical imperative' stipulates that we should test moral actions by the principle of 'universalizability': 'What if everyone did that?'. We should also treat others never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'. Kant also issued a famous definition of enlightenment which is a basic principle of Humanism: *Sapere aude!* [Use your own intelligence!]

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# Letters & Emails

*From Aaron Darkwood*

How immensely proud I was of the large turn out on the Dorset Humanists walk on 17th April as twenty-one intrepid explorers trekked effortlessly across some of Dorset's most beautiful coastal countryside.

Breathtaking scenery, awesome blue skies, and some of the finest company money can't buy, all combined to make a really pleasant day. We reached Dancing Ledge, a national treasure west of Swanage and Durlleston, and found a wonderful place for the kids among us to play rock climbing and explore rock pools. Such fun. Thank you to all.

*From Lorraine Dallmeier*

My 5-year-old (Year 1) came home telling me that 'god made the whole world'. I asked him where he'd heard that. He told me his teacher (at his community school) had told him. I questioned it a bit further and discovered that she had told him that some people THINK that god made the whole world, whereas some don't. We talked about it in fairly neutral terms (which for me, is pretty good) and I left it at that, feeling fine about it all. He then went to school, put his hand up and said 'my mummy says YOU'RE WRONG' which was not at all what

I'd said, but amused me greatly nonetheless.

The teacher and I had a good chat and she showed me what their RE curriculum contains in terms of information on humanism. She has a fairly extensive book of work sheets and right at the back there was one page on humanism. She admitted that she doesn't know much about it but would love more information so she can cover the topic properly.

Moreover, when I mentioned that the one aspect which disturbs me most about this school is that the vicar is given free access to my child, she said that they would love to invite someone into their assembly to speak about humanism.

#### ■ Response from David Warden:

As a result of Lorraine's discussions with Milborne St Andrew's First School, Dorset Humanists have been warmly invited to do a presentation on Humanism for the staff and to run workshops and assemblies for all of the children (ages 5-9). Cathy Silman and I will be running these in May and June.

*How you can help:*

- Consider joining our schools project
- If you have children or grandchildren in school ask the head what they are doing to ensure that RE includes non-religious worldviews such as Humanism and suggest they contact us for help. Please contact me if you would like a draft letter.

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Dorset Humanists  
**Chairman's View**

May 2016



It's often said that death is a taboo subject in the modern West. I was interested to learn from a Mexican friend that in her country the 'Day of the Dead' is a joyous festival when the dead are remembered and celebrated. You can buy confectionery skulls and superstitious folk put out food treats for the departed. In my mother's case it would have to be a gin and tonic and a packet of Walkers crisps. 'Dying Matters Awareness Week' (9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> May) is an attempt to break down some of the taboos around this subject. Christians believe that death is a punishment for sin. According to the biblical myth, Adam and Eve were immortal until they ate the forbidden fruit. Their disobedience brought death into the world. The Christian gospel teaches that Jesus died for you so that you can live forever after all. Humanism repudiates all of this mythology. Humanism starts with an acceptance of death and finitude. For us, transience and death is what gives life its urgency. In the words of philosopher Don Cupitt, we have work to do and we must do it in a hurry. At most we have about 1,000 months to live and each one flits by alarmingly quickly. Our individual lives may not make it into the history books but we can make our corner of the world a little bit brighter, richer, and kinder. I never tire of reading the end of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* about the central character, Dorothea: "... the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

A dear friend of ours, Bill, died from a brain tumour at the age of eighty in 2006. When I first met him he was a Catholic. After many hours of theological discussion with me he gave up believing in God. On his death bed in Poole Hospital he remained somewhat imbued with religious thoughts and told me, in some anguish, that he was 'facing the abyss'. I didn't know how to assuage his fear and have often since pondered his words. How can humanists face the end of life with equanimity? I could have reminded him of all the ways in which he had lived a full life with many adventures, achievements, and kindnesses to friends and neighbours. I could have expressed my own gratitude. A life well-lived is what matters. Death, as Epicurus said, is nothing to us. Like its counterpart, birth, it's nothing more than a boundary or a bookend.

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