



A partner of
Humanists UK

national
secular
society

IHEU
International
Humanist and
Ethical Union



Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 11th May 2.00pm**

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TW

Erasmus Darwin and the Lunar Men



A talk by David Croman. This fully illustrated talk will start with the life of the extraordinary physician, innovative inventor, botanist, scientist, engineer, poet, evolutionist, and

grandfather of Charles Darwin. Erasmus Darwin was a leading member of a group of key pioneers including Josiah Wedgwood and James Watt. They shared their ideas and informed and challenged each other at regular meetings of the Lunar Society. David Croman is a former Secretary of Dorset Humanists.

■ **Saturday 11th May 3.50-4.30** Moordown Community Centre.

Talkback

Why not come along to our popular 'talkback' session after the refreshment break to continue the discussion or get something off your chest.

■ **Wednesday 22nd May 7.30pm** Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

Transforming the FutuRE



A talk by Dave Francis who is Deputy Chair of

the Religious Education Council of England and Wales and an RE Adviser. This presentation will focus on three projects of interest to humanists: the Commission on Religious Education, 'Big Ideas' for Religious Education, and 'Solarity' - a resource for out-of-school-hours religion and philosophy clubs. Dave will show why humanists should be interested in, and excited by, these projects and how things might be developed – with humanist involvement – in the future.

Dorset Humanists Choir

We are pleased to announce that the Dorset Humanists Choir will be resuming in June, and we are recruiting new members. All are welcome, and no prior singing experience is required. Our next performance will be at the August meeting, when our guest will be Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK. Rehearsals will be held weekly at Moordown, and are expected to cost £5 per session.

For further information, please contact Mike Goodman mdgoodman@hotmail.co.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 6th June 7.30pm** and every first Thursday 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

Sunday 12th May – Bluebells in Roydon Woods near Brockenhurst. A lovely spring walk.

All walks are between about 6 and 9 miles and usually have an optional short cut. Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any changes, for example last minute cancellations owing to weather conditions.

☎ Phil 07817 260498



Short Talks

■ **Tuesday 18th June 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX. £2.00-3.00 donation requested. (There is no ST meeting in May.)

‘Why I am Not a Christian’ & ‘Why I am Not a Humanist’

Two short talks by David Warden and Dave Pegg.

David Warden and Dave Pegg have formed a successful working partnership whereby they go into local schools to inform students about Christianity and Humanism and to ‘model’ how to respectfully disagree on fundamental matters. Dave tells students about the fundamentals of evangelical Christianity and David describes how he left evangelical Christianity and became an

atheist and then a humanist. Neither of them espouse a fuzzy relativism. They are clear that if one is right about the existence or non-existence of God then the other, logically, must be wrong.

David and Dave are friends but their differences run deep. In his talk, David will set out why he is not a Christian, partly on the grounds that it is based on ‘magical thinking’, and in his talk Dave will set out why he is not a humanist, partly on the grounds that he thinks it is ultimately a self-centred creed. Please join us for a fascinating head-to-head between two people who have come to a deep knowledge of each other’s views.

Calling budding speakers! Do you have a short talk up your sleeve? Contact Phil Butcher if you would like to discuss your idea for a short talk.

✉ ph.butcher@gmail.com

Future dates for your diary...

■ **Saturday 8th June 2.00pm** Moordown

‘**Science as King**’ – a talk by Emeritus Professor and Patron of Humanists UK Peter Atkins.

Other events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 5th June 7.30pm**
Sandford Heritage Hall, Sandford Rd, Nr Wareham, BH20 7AJ (Next to Pine Martin Grange Care Home). ‘Out of the Box’ presents:

Christianophobia

There has been a dramatic rise in violence and discrimination against Christians worldwide. Out of the Box investigates this worrying phenomenon and places it alongside similar persecution of atheists and humanists. Out of the Box is a dialogue group for people who subscribe to different worldviews. The group aims to attract a balanced mix of Christians, Humanists, Agnostics, and people of all faiths and none. All welcome – free entry – donations gratefully received.



The Good Delusion

What's the closest we can get to objective ethics?



Our April speaker Alex O'Connor set out an ingenious three-part argument to provide a way to talk about right and wrong in such a way that does not cross the is-ought divide. Report by David Warden.

The eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume famously declared that you can't derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. In other words, no statement about facts can, logically, lead you to what you ought to do in any given situation. The example given by Alex concerned the weather. If, for example, it's raining outside and you intend to go out we cannot say, as a matter of logic, that you *should* take an umbrella because there is a hidden assumption in this 'should' which is that it is undesirable to get wet. Logically, this assumption is entirely separate from the mere fact that it is raining. The is-ought problem featured prominently in Alex's talk.

Alex's three part argument can be summarised briefly as follows:

1. There is no such thing as free will
2. We desire what is pleasurable and we are programmed to do what gives us maximum pleasure
3. If an action does not maximise your pleasure then, objectively, you should not do it

Alex claimed that this procedure is practically indistinguishable from conventional ethics and allows us to justify objectively statements such as 'murder is wrong'. Let's unpack his argument in more detail.

There is no such thing as free will

Traditional morality doesn't make any sense when we remove freewill because, if we are



David Hume: the 'is-ought' problem

not in control of our actions, then we cannot choose the good instead of the bad. So do we have freewill? Alex claimed we do not. He said that everything you will ever do as a matter of conscious

action you will do because you desire to. However, there appear to be instances when we do not desire to do something and yet we do it anyway, such as going to the gym. But in this instance, the only reason we do what we do not want to do is because there is another desire, such as the desire to be healthy, which overrides our desire not to go to the gym because we are feeling lazy. And we simply don't have any control over this stronger desire. We will act on it.

Take two men who commit a murder. One grew up in a good family and the other in a bad family. We might be inclined to condemn more forcefully the man who grew up in a good family because he is unable to appeal to negative factors outside of his control. But what if he is put in prison and subsequently starts to complain of headaches? He is taken to the prison hospital and it's found that he has a tumour which is pressing on the part of the brain which deals with rational thought. Our moral evaluation of this person changes and he is no longer held morally culpable because he had less control. But Alex claimed this is the case with all conscious action. It's *all* the result of some activity in the brain over which we have no control. So how can we hold anyone morally culpable for their actions? It makes a mockery of the criminal justice system.

There is perhaps a tiny get-out clause and it's called compatibilism. This has a strong tradition in philosophy and it goes back to Thomas Hobbes. Compatibilism is the view that you can't choose your desires but as

long as you're able to act in accordance with your desires you're still free. There are a number of problems with this. The first is that it makes an arbitrary distinction between causes that happen inside the brain and causes that happen outside the brain and this is what Daniel Dennett does – a famous compatibilist philosopher. If your actions are causally determined, who cares where the cause comes from? The cause of your actions could have come from your liver or your toe or your brain but they are still determined. Causation is a chain and it doesn't have a start or stopping point. If you go back far enough, the cause of your actions will take you outside of the human mind. If determinism is true, then the cause of your psychological state right now goes all the way back to the beginning of the universe. So the only reason the things in your brain and your psychology are the way they are is because of this deterministic process that stretches back millions and billions of years. The only way compatibilists can salvage freewill is by redefining it, for example by saying we are free if we have not been forced into or prevented from doing something.

The one thing you desire in itself is pleasure

Everything you do is based on desire so what do we desire? The one thing that is desired in itself is pleasure. I desire to have a meal but this is not strictly true. I desire the pleasure I'm going to derive from eating or the pleasure I will derive from being well nourished. I do not desire the nutrients themselves. Similarly, I do not desire to go for a run for the run itself. I may desire the pleasure of the activity of running or the pleasure of living a healthy lifestyle, but I do not desire the run itself. Even virtue itself is based in pleasure. People live virtuous lives because this kind of life gives them pleasure. But what about the case of a soldier who jumps on a grenade in order to save the lives of others? Surely he is not doing this to have pleasure? Well yes he is. He is momentarily choosing intense pleasure to do what soldiers are trained to do which is to save lives. He is also avoiding a lifetime of psychological pain

associated with the guilt of having failed to do what a soldier has been trained to do in that instant. He could be totally wrong and his action could be irrational from a psychological point of view, but nevertheless he acted out of a desire for pleasure and to avoid pain.

If an action does not maximise your pleasure it is objectively wrong

Alex questioned why we are prepared to base empirical science on the evidence of our subjective senses if we are not prepared to do the same with ethics. According to John Stuart Mill, the only evidence we have that something is desirable is that we desire it. We all agree that pleasure is good and we all think that our senses work. So Alex wants to offer an alternative to objective ethics which is based on the evidence of our subjective senses.

So let us ask whether action x is right or wrong. We know that you have done x because you believe it will maximise your pleasure and this is a matter of fact. Pleasure is a state of consciousness. It's measurable. So you are either right or wrong about whether action x has maximised your pleasure. Sam Harris claims that we *should* desire pleasure but that's a jump across the is-ought divide which Alex is trying to avoid. So we need to stick with the objectively ascertainable fact that action x either does or does not maximise your pleasure. If you are wrong and you find that action x does not maximise your pleasure then you will act differently. And Alex claims this is practicably indistinguishable from traditional ethics.

Let's take the example of rape. If a man commits this crime then necessarily he believes that this act will maximise his pleasure. Alex claims however that he is objectively wrong because, as a member of social species, the perpetrator's pleasure will actually be maximised if he does not commit rape. And Alex believes this to be an objective fact. He could be wrong about this but in principle there is a right answer to this question. Can we still use the word



'should'? If Alex said to this rapist 'You shouldn't do this', what he means is if the rapist could see things as he sees them the rapist wouldn't commit the crime because, as a matter of fact, this action will not maximise his pleasure and by seeing this he would not do it.

But what if there are people who genuinely derive more pleasure from committing a crime than by not committing crime, despite having been invited to look at the world from the point of view of being a member of a social species? If this is genuinely the case then they have no choice but to commit the crime and there is nothing we can do to rectify the situation.

Or what if our desires are inaccurate? What if pleasure is in fact bad? If we all desire pleasure then this has to be the basis for our action. There's no way round this. If pleasure is bad there's nothing we could do about that.

So morality does not need to collapse. We can use the same moral language as we have used before but we justify our conclusions differently. We can still say that murder is wrong and we can justify that opinion as an objective fact without having to cross the is-ought divide and without having to invoke some delusory concept of freewill.

Critique of the argument

I find myself in agreement with the first two parts of Alex's argument. I agree that I have no freewill in a strict sense but I think this is because there is no such thing as 'me' apart from the bundle of sensations and desires in my brain. But if I have the illusion of freewill, and if I feel that I can choose between two flavours of ice-cream, even though in reality I am simply weighing up which of my desires is the stronger, then I am happy and content. (It's usually double-chip chocolate or honeycombe.)

I'm also happy to accept that all of my actions are ultimately based on maximising pleasure, even if that entails doing things which I do not apparently want to do. I may, for example, decide to do something which is inconvenient and tedious but if it helps to

further some project or goal which is important to me then I will do it.

But what about the third part of Alex's argument? Can we really convince someone not to commit rape by convincing them that in doing so they are not maximising their pleasure? Perhaps, if we could hook up their brain to a complex algorithm which could scientifically determine the amount of pleasure which will ensue from each course of action. This seems farfetched. But maybe this is what, in effect, has happened to the majority of law-abiding citizens through the processes of socialisation and education. The majority of people have been convinced not to commit rape, either because they believe it is objectively wrong on the basis of some divine command, or because they derive pleasure from living a virtuous life and know that they would derive a great deal of pain, in terms of punishment, shame, guilt, and remorse, from committing such a crime. And so we can conclude that rape is objectively wrong simply on the basis of Alex's pleasure calculus. And perhaps this works as effectively as traditional ethics.

Does the theory work when applied to other crimes such as the Holocaust or female genital mutilation? The Nazi regime believed that by eliminating Jews, Roma, gay men and so on they were acting to bring about a good state of affairs. On what basis can we claim that they were objectively wrong? Using Alex's theory, we have to persuade the Nazis that what they were doing would not maximise their pleasure but they may have derived a great deal of pleasure from scientifically improving, as they saw it, the Aryan race. Perhaps we might have succeeded in getting them to see the world as we see it if we had been able to show them the future destruction of their regime. But what if their bold experiment had succeeded? Would they then have been able to argue that the Holocaust was objectively right because it did indeed improve the purity of the Aryan race, thus maximising their pleasure? What seems to be missing in this discussion is any consideration of the pain inflicted on the victims. Human beings are capable of disregarding 'social species' feelings when



certain categories of humans have been deemed unfit for survival. Alex's theory seems to fail when confronted with a moral problem of this magnitude.

What about FGM? This is a cultural practice we find abhorrent because of the unnecessary suffering it inflicts on girls and women. And yet generations of women continue to practice it on their own daughters and grand-daughters for reasons of 'purity'. Presumably, the pain of the procedure and its after-effects is outweighed by the pleasure derived from this state of 'purity'. It is difficult to see how Alex's theory could convince its practitioners that FGM is objectively wrong with such a strong investment in 'purity', however irrational such a desire might seem to us. But then it's difficult to see how any ethical theory could convince its practitioners that FGM is objectively wrong. All we have been able to do is express our abhorrence of it and make it illegal.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, there is no need to chase after the chimera of 'objective ethics' at all. Right and wrong are matters of evolutionary psychology, social consensus, tradition, and contestation. Things which are considered abhorrent and wrong in one generation can be accepted and even celebrated in the next. Ethics, like language, is a human creation. It's useful, publicly accessible, and relatively stable but it's subject to evolution, controversy, and change. It's grounded in our shared human world.

Further reading

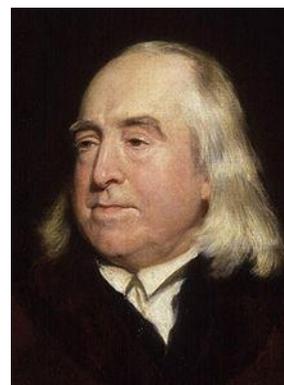
- Sam Harris *Free Will* (2012)
- Julian Baggini *Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Freewill* (2016)



■ Alex's talk has already been watched and commented on by nearly 30,000 people. Watch it here: [The Good Delusion](#)

'Not persuaded'

Simon Whipple reacts to Alex O'Connor's talk and traces a line back to the ethical theories of Jeremy Bentham (pictured right)



Alex O'Connor is a very clever and successful young man. At the age of twenty he has achieved a place at Oxford University; he has 250,000 followers on YouTube, and he gives regular public lectures. I imagine that most YouTube prodigies are pop singers and dancers. It is truly astonishing that Alex's followers watch him for his philosophy talks.

Most people, when faced with the option of listening to a philosophy lecture, will regard it as impenetrable and dull. Alex has named his website "Cosmic Sceptic" which may account for its popularity. And perhaps many people, young and old, want to explore the eternal questions of philosophy.

One of the eternal questions of philosophy is whether there are universal, objective, standards of right and wrong. Dorset Humanists ran an ethics study group in 2017-2018 which considered this question. The group came to the conclusion that there are no absolute ethical standards, and that each society forms its own ideas as to what behaviour is right or wrong. This is called Ethical Relativism.

The publicity for Alex's talk stated he would provide his listeners with "...a means to ground ethics in a way that allows us to determine what people should and shouldn't do as a matter of fact..." and so I was really looking forward to learning from him.

Alex's delivery on stage, without the support of any visual aids, is very accomplished for one so young. He was so confident that even the most challenging questions could not unhinge him. He often spoke very softly, so that his audience had to listen very carefully to catch his words, and this gave an impression of profundity. He was able to answer each question fluently and to his



own complete satisfaction that his theories had not been refuted.

I spoke to several members of the audience who were most impressed by his confidence, and they were sure that his theories must be correct. The lady I sat next to said that he seemed to have repeated himself a lot, but that he had given a good impression.

And what did he tell us? After listening very carefully to his presentation for ninety minutes, I regret that I can only summarise that part which was already familiar from established philosophical texts:

1. 'It is impossible to derive an "ought" from an "is"'. This was best expressed by David Hume, the Scottish 18th century philosopher, and no one has ever successfully challenged it.
2. 'Every event, even random events, has a cause'. Most people would accept such a statement.
3. 'Because all human actions are caused by prior conditions, no human being has free will.' There is a popular response to this claim, called compatibilism, which states that it nevertheless makes perfect sense to use the concept of free will in normal conversation and to blame people if they do bad things. Alex rejected compatibilism on the grounds that compatibilists simply redefine the meaning of freewill.
4. 'Because there is no free will, no one can be held morally accountable for their actions, however terrible'. Alex did agree however that the criminal justice system is necessary to deter wrongdoing.
5. 'Humans may believe they have made a free choice to do something, but actually they always do whatever maximises their own pleasure.' If they believe they are making a selfless choice, that is because they gain greater pleasure from being charitable than from being selfish. This is a theory, originally formulated by Jeremy Bentham, called 'psychological egoism'. It postulates that all human motives can be reduced to one: the desire to maximise one's own pleasure.

A moment's consideration should lead one to conclude that all Alex is doing is redefining the word "pleasure" to equal "desire". And so Alex was simply stating that "all that people desire is to satisfy their own desires."

6. Once he had proved to his own satisfaction that we all want pleasure, Alex went on to establish his unique moral theory. Unfortunately, the more he spoke, the less I could understand of his theory. I think he claimed that 'Because all that people desire is pleasure, then the actions they should do are those which maximise pleasure.' Is that their own pleasure they should maximise or other people's? Is he using the word "pleasure" in the same sense as before? And why should we care about other people's pleasure?

When I was at university, I learnt that good university lecturers possess the skill of making complex theories comprehensible; and have the humility to abandon their theories in response to criticism they cannot counter. I learnt that bad university lecturers will bamboozle with words that confuse and intimidate their listeners who may feel that, even if they do not understand what they are told, the lecturer must be correct.

After writing this article I watched Alex's talk on YouTube. On a second viewing it made much better sense. But I still did not agree with what he had tried to say.

It was a great novelty for Dorset Humanists to be addressed by someone so young. Alex is a talented man and an accomplished speaker. He has the ability to win people to his side. It is remarkable that he has achieved such considerable popularity. He raises questions that are of great interest to many people, who have a thirst for knowledge in a world where religion no longer provides an answer.

Alex might in due course train to become a barrister and he would make an excellent advocate in court, persuading a jury to acquit a dubious defender. But, so far, he has not persuaded me that he brings anything novel to philosophical discourse.





Dorset Humanists **Chairman's View**

May 2019

The most dangerous superstition of modern times is the belief that money 'exists'. Money has sometimes been represented by real things such as gold and fancy bits of paper but metal and paper are not money itself. Money itself is purely conceptual and based on intangible ideas like debt and trust. The amount of money needed by an economy to function is analogous to the amount of blood needed by a human body (6-10 pints depending on your bodyweight). The optimal amount of money needed by an economy is proportional to its productive capacity measured in terms of plant, labour, infrastructure and innovation. A central bank should be able to feed just enough money into the economy to keep it running at optimal capacity, avoiding both unemployment and inflation. The bank does not 'have' the money in its vaults. It can create money from nothing. But something has gone terribly wrong with this beautifully simple idea. We have been indoctrinated into believing that money really exists and that governments and central banks can simply run out of it. The Labour Party on leaving office left an infamous note: 'Sorry there's no money' and our current prime minister believes 'there is no such thing as a magic money tree'. These views are dangerously misguided because they are what stands in the way of the Green New Deal promoted by the United Nations Environment Programme among others. The original New Deal was set in motion by Franklin D Roosevelt in 1933 to kickstart the US out of the Great Depression. It included the construction of 480 airports, 78,000 bridges, 780 hospitals, 572,000 miles of highways, 15,000 schools and other public buildings. It was the opposite of the self-defeating austerity policies followed by his predecessors and it gave the US three decades of relative social and economic stability.¹ The Green New Deal needs to be on a similar scale to achieve things like upgrading all existing buildings to achieve maximum energy efficiency and meeting all of our energy needs through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources.

Who benefits from the superstition that money exists? You guessed it. The finance industry which is only too happy to limit the supply of money and to charge extortionate rents on it to both the government and ordinary people. We are living through a real world dystopia in which a basic utility has been captured by a financial dictatorship which would sooner see the world burn than lose its exorbitant privilege. We have to bust this superstition if we are to save the planet.

¹ *The Battle for Europe* (2014) Thomas Fazi, p119-120.

