

Saturday 8th October 2.00pm at Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW



**Chris at the Equator. Click image to
RSVP for this event.**

Humanist Schools in Uganda

Post-Pandemic Update

A talk by Chris Smith. Chris is a trustee of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust, a retired secondary maths teacher, and a member of Dorset Humanists.

After retirement in 2007, Chris was offered a VSO placement in Uganda. For two-and-a-half contented years she taught maths (and how to teach) at a Primary Teachers' College in Bushenyi, in the south west of the country. She also visited Isaac Newton Humanist High School in Masaka, central Uganda several times. She returned to the UK in September 2010.

Two further Ugandan adventures followed. The first, in 2012, was a 'friendship visit' with the now formalised Uganda Humanist Schools Trust. Trustees, supporters and others, checked on the progress of the schools and the scholarship students, with some visits to game parks. It's a long way to go without seeing an elephant! A solo visit followed in 2014 when Chris delivered equipment for deaf vocational training students, made contact with local colleagues and friends, and, naturally, taught maths at both Isaac Newton and the much more distant Mustard Seed in Kamuli, in the east. Planned and executed as her final visit, Chris returned to UK. Life went on, grandchildren and a move south, not just because she knew some Dorset Humanists and the group's reputation, but that helped.

Final was meant to be ultimate! But Chris is now a UHST trustee and she will talk about her recent "post-ultimate" visit in 2022, with five other trustees, and the major changes, some good but with many challenges, wrought by Covid. Intriguingly, Chris has promised that her talk will contain references to starfish, and debutantes! In addition to being informative and interesting, Chris also aims to raise funds and engage supporters.

Wednesday 19th October 7.30pm Orchid Hotel, 34 Gervis Road, Bournemouth BH1 3DH



Click image to RSVP for this event.

Stephen Evans is the Chief Executive of the National Secular Society. Stephen took on the role of CEO in 2018 after spending ten years at NSS in which time he became a regular media commentator on religion's role in public life.

Dorset Humanists is an affiliated group of the National Secular Society. The NSS champions the separation of religion and state and equal respect for everyone's human rights so no one is disadvantaged, nor privileged, because of their beliefs.



Time to separate church and state?

A talk by Stephen Evans, Chief Executive of the National Secular Society.

Please note that the venue for this talk is the Orchid Hotel in Gervis Road and it's the 3rd Wednesday in October instead of the 4th Wednesday.

As King Charles assumes the title of Defender of the Faith, Stephen Evans explores the role of religion in the monarchy and asks whether time has come to disestablish the Church of England.

Dates for your diary

Thursday 6 th October 7.30	Moon	Friendly pub social at Moon in the Square – find us on the ground floor on the right
Wednesday 19 th October 7.30pm	Orchid Hotel	Disestablishing the Church of England - Stephen Evans, Chief Executive Officer of the National Secular Society
Saturday 12 th November 2pm	Moordown	Proportional Representation – Paul Entwistle
Wednesday 23 rd November 7.30pm	Elstead Hotel	Details to follow

Plus social events and more walks which will be announced on Dorset Humanists Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any venue changes. We respectfully ask you to take all reasonable precautions to ensure that you do not spread infection to others at our events. If in doubt, please stay at home. Videos are usually available later on YouTube.



Inexplicable Phenomena

Forty-five people attended our September event at Moordown Community Centre to hear mathematician Barney Maunder-Taylor attempt to provide rational and mathematical explanations for unusual phenomena presented to him by Simon Whipple.



Simon provided the philosophical context for this event by quoting from David Hume's *Essay on Miracles*: "When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened." If the likelihood or unlikelihood of miracles comes down to a matter of probability then we need to put numbers on the probabilities.

Barney explained that in probability theory, the **null hypothesis (H0)** is the probability that the alleged miracle is just a coincidence (not a miracle) and the **alternative hypothesis (H1)** is the probability that the alleged miracle really is a miracle. He also explained that a **Type I error** is when the null hypothesis is mistakenly rejected – also known as a false positive – whereas a **Type II error** is a false negative. He also explained **Occam's Razor** which is that, other things being equal, simpler explanations are to be preferred to complex explanations. He also

explained the **evidence ladder** which progresses from 'anecdotal evidence' to 'significant evidence' to 'overwhelming evidence' to 'commonly accepted as fact'. Finally, he stipulated that we should not collect data and then look for patterns. We should propose a hypothesis and then collect the data.

Simon posed some relatively easy challenges to start with. The first one was this: **"Tall people are more likely to catch Covid"**. Barney explained that this was true according to one study and false according to another. He concluded that there was not enough evidence to determine whether this statement was true. The second statement was this: **"Black people are more likely to catch Covid"**. A study with a sample size of 18 million concluded that this statement was true. A more intriguing question was whether Barney's father was more likely to sire male children, having had five in a row. Barney concluded that the only way to test this would be to get his father to have five more children and see what sex they are. ▷

Simon then challenged Barney to explain the Turin Shroud which is claimed to be the burial cloth of Jesus. Barney suggested that the most likely explanation of this phenomenon is **pareidolia** which is our well-known propensity for seeing faces in things like clouds. Simon invoked **Occam's Razor** at this point by suggesting that the simplest explanation for the Turin Shroud is that it is really is the burial cloth of Jesus. Barney conceded that he couldn't calculate the odds but he invoked the Skeptic's Checklist. This goes by the handy acronym **erm** where the e stands for evidence, r stands for replicability, and m stands for mechanism. Barney then proceeded to inform us that the Turin Shroud was denounced as a fake in 1390, that the Gospels only refer to 'strips' of cloth, rather than a complete burial sheet, and that radiocarbon dating in 1980 found that the Turin Shroud was dated to between 1260 and 1390. The Turin Shroud is not replicable and there is no known mechanism. Simon objected to all this scepticism with some nonsense about the True Cross and swiftly moved on to the penultimate challenge.

What are the odds that four of our top ten Olympians would share the same birthday? Mo Farah, Chris Hoy, Steven Redgrave, and Jason Kenny were all born on 23rd March. Barney initially calculated the odds at 18 billion to one, but then modified this to a still impressive 1/232,000. He then invoked **Littlewood's Law** which is that we should expect to witness a 'miracle' at least once a month given the very high number of things we experience every month. Finally, he suggested that given the almost infinite variety of possible quartets and attributes (four concert pianists with the middle name of Brenda?) it was unsurprising that we should encounter coincidences like this from time to time.

Simon's final challenge to Barney was to explain how it could be that on the very morning after he had spent a frustrating



Sceptical mathematician Barney

and fruitless day shopping for a new bicycle that he should come across an ideal bicycle outside his home, leaning against a lamppost, with the attached message: "Free to anyone who wants it". Simon suggested that the most rational explanation for this amazing occurrence is that his desire for a new bicycle was somehow transferred to the mind of the unknown donor.

Barney invoked the Skeptic's Checklist. He observed that the evidence was anecdotal – it happened only once. It was not replicable as it would be difficult to set up an experiment to test Simon's hypothesis. There was no known mechanism for thought transfer and it looks like a mere **illusion of causality** or a **spurious correlation**. Barney invoked a further principle – the **burden of proof** – and that the crux of the talk is that it would be dangerous to say that scientists are 'unable to rule out' such things as thought transfer. We don't want to live in this sort of world. He said 'Be a sceptic – but not a cynic'. Simon felt that the jury is still out on the 'burden of proof' but he agreed that we should be a sceptic, not a cynic.

A postscript on David Hume

I have long wanted Dorset Humanists to discuss David Hume's views on the impossibility of miracles occurring. I was therefore very pleased when David Warden agreed to this event where the noble Scottish philosopher's theory would be put to the test. A section of Hume's work called "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding" deals with miracles. In his 18th century prose he writes as follows:

'A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish... When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.'

Hume has, it appears, stated a mathematical argument against the occurrence of a miracle. The formula is as follows:

An unusual event ("A") is reported by a particular individual ("B") to have occurred;

The possibility of A having occurred is C

The possibility of B having lied about A is D

The possibility of B having been misled is E

Then D plus E is always in excess of C.



During our talk, I presented Barney with various examples of improbable situations, which people in a more credulous age might have regarded as miraculous. I challenged him to put actual numbers into the formulae quoted above. Could he prove that Hume was correct by calculating the odds? Barney conceded that he was unable to obtain sufficient data to be able to put actual numbers into the formulae relating to whether or not an account of a miracle was incorrect. As a result, he could not demonstrate the truth of Hume's assertion that **'no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.'**

Having failed to show that a statistician could disprove alleged miracles, Barney changed into a scientist and presented the familiar sceptic's response to an unexpected result looking at evidence, reproducibility, mechanism, and Occam's Razor.

I felt the most helpful contribution to the afternoon was from a gentleman in the Q&A (Mike from New Milton) who stated that in the future, as human knowledge advances, so will human understanding of remarkable phenomena. So that it is possible that in a few hundred years' time, if someone reports that he has encountered a free bicycle on the very day that he is trying to purchase a bicycle, the reasons for that conjunction of events will be obvious to all, and it will neither be regarded as an amazing coincidence nor as miraculous.

Simon Whipple



Forty people attended our September event at the Elstead Hotel for Henri Ruff's presentation on inflation. There was a great deal of stimulating interaction and discussion. This is a brief, edited version of Henri's talk based on his slides and notes. You can watch the video on our YouTube channel.

Thanks to all of you who join me this evening to discuss an aspect (ethics) we don't hear too much about in the fight against inflation which we do keep hearing and reading about. I want to go *beyond*, not simply *behind* the headlines because I want to focus on ethical considerations rather than the purely economic ones we all hear about. Some very broad-brush economics is inevitable but the focus will be on the *ethics* of combatting inflation.

Around the world, 'inflation' is in the headlines. Turkey is currently suffering 80% inflation (July 2022), Russia almost 20%. The usual suspects like Brazil are at 12% and even Switzerland is at 2% being the highest since 2008 (the financial crash).

But let's look beyond the attention-grabbing headlines to an aspect of the fight against inflation which is rarely in the headlines, namely: Inflation may be a bad thing, so fighting something bad sounds like a good, virtuous, ethically sound thing to do. But does that necessarily mean that the current combat strategy is ethically sound?

Jargon busting

Money is a measure and stock of wealth which inflation can erode; and a lubricant of the economy. **Inflation** was defined by US economist Milton Friedman as "a steady and

The ethics of fighting inflation

sustained rise in prices". He added that "inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon". It's not just any price rise. 'True' or 'spiralling' inflation is a sustained rise in the average level of prices resulting from a structural mismatch between the tectonic plates in any economy of demand and supply. The two main tools of **Monetary Policy** are interest rates and money supply. There are various devices in the second category, such as Quantitative Easing since the financial crisis of 2008, but first introduced by Japan in the 1990s to reverse their recession and decades of no-growth. **Fiscal policy** refers to taxation, government spending, and government borrowing to influence the level of activity in the national economy. **Useful inflation** avoids a deflationary spiral and encourages consumption (cheaper today than tomorrow) and investment (lower rates now than in future). **Harmful inflation** is when it causes financial hardship through a loss of purchasing power and decreasing value of savings. It encourages asset bubbles which are self-fulfilling if not credibly managed. **Price indices** include the familiar Consumer Price Index, Retail Price Index, and a host of others. The **cost of living crisis** means acute and unforeseen and tending to be short term. What is currently being faced in the UK and elsewhere) is arguably a cost of living crisis and not necessarily 'True or spiralling' inflation. The appropriate weapons to combat this are not necessarily the same as those to be used in the fight against 'True inflation'. Using the weapons of monetary policy can exacerbate the cost of living crisis and so are ethically questionable.

If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail

The ostensible aim of anti-inflationary policies is to reduce the level of rising prices. Friedman had a point when he argued: “inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon” but this highlights the fundamental flaw in monetarism, and monetary policy, i.e. if all you have is a hammer everything looks like a nail.

Which prices are anti-inflationary policies trying to reduce? It depends on whether inflation is seen as coming from the demand side (demand pull) or the supply side (cost-push – in various forms, e.g. wage inflation imported inflation etc.)

There are three weapons in the armoury to fight inflation: Monetary policy – mainly interest rate and money supply policy; Fiscal policy – taxation and budgets and government borrowing if necessary; Regulation and interventions – price capping (back in fashion), credit restrictions, and ‘Forward Guidance’. Yet price is not an entirely accurate indicator of structural imbalances because there are non-price factors that also signal mismatched demand and supply, e.g. hospital waiting lists, chronic traffic jams.

Fundamentally, it is structural imbalances between demand and supply that underlie inflation. Because of this, the underlying aim of restoring equilibrium can take time.

So ‘True/Spiralling’ inflation relates to a sustained and systemic rise in the level of average prices. Not simply the rise in the price of one or two product groups or services.

Who should manage money? Experts or elected politicians?

Aristotle viewed money as a conventional fiction. This is borne out by the evolution of money over its history. For such a conventional fiction to persist money must retain its credibility and credibility relies on

its persistent functionality. This requires management in order to maintain and sustain money as something ‘real’. **John Rawls** argued that sound monetary management needs to be governed by welfare and social justice considerations. **Plato, Locke** and **Friedman** lean towards a sort of **technocracy** in which the state is run by those with specialist knowledge. By contrast, **Johann Fichte** saw political supervision as the whole point of monetary policy and one of the primary tools and responsibility of sovereign national government. **Keynes** sought to reconcile the conflict between technocratic vs. democratic control by the modern-day arrangement of technocratic central banks subject to oversight by an elected government.

Ethical questions

Is raising interest rates, which adds to costs, fit for the purpose of dampening already rising prices or does it fan the flames? It seeks to protect the value of money and is motivated by good intention. It aims to restore demand/supply equilibrium in order to reduce uncertainty. And psychologically, it instils market confidence that inflation is under control. But on the other hand it targets price alone, tackling symptoms not causes. Some forms of inflation are not expressed in monetary terms, e.g. waiting times in hospitals. It aggravates imbalances at least in the short to medium term. Raising interest rates may dampen demand but it also raises costs on the supply side. If suppliers raise their prices to cover these higher costs it contributes to inflation. It’s a knee-jerk and ideological response which hits the most vulnerable hardest and it can exacerbate uncertainty that the policy will work.

Do policymakers confuse a cost-of-living crisis with an inflationary spiral and so mistakenly use weapons that disadvantage the most vulnerable? We have an unprecedented combination of ▷

inflationary pressures: ‘Recovery pricing’ due to the pandemic plus the war in Ukraine and follow-on effects of Brexit. It’s twin spiked: energy and food prices and two very important, high-profile items in the basket, and energy costs ripple through the entire basket. The dramatic rise in prices, forecast to continue for the foreseeable has many of the hallmarks of a cost of living crisis and once the underlying factors get resolved prices can be expected to revert to more normal levels and not continue to spiral.

On the other hand, we may be at the beginning of spiralling inflation. The world’s energy sector is structurally changing due to environmental concerns and decoupling with Russia; there is decoupling with China more widely; it could be a replay of the 1973 oil crisis; and there are techno-sociological factors such as artificial intelligence and human labour responses. Psychologically, there is something of a pathological public belief that inflation can be tamed, or at least that the price of doing so (recession) is worth it; and that politicians (aka democratically-elected generals in the war against inflation) and technocrats are capable of winning that war.

Should the fight against inflation default to amoral technocrats? There are occasions when prices rise suddenly and unexpectedly and a fire-fighting approach is necessary. There are calls to ‘bring back the experts’ i.e., central bankers and an army of advisers. There is one central banker in particular, **Paul Volker** (Chairman of the Federal Reserve 1979-1987) who is almost single-handedly responsible for making interest rate policy the preferred weapon in the fight against inflation. He got inflation (peaking at <15% in early 1980s) under control through the economic equivalent of *monetary chemotherapy*. By raising interest rates (peaking at almost 20%) he engineered two massive, but brief, recessions, to slash spending and force inflation down to a more manageable 5%.

On the other hand, it is argued that “experts



Paul Volker fought inflation with ‘monetary chemotherapy’

advise, democratically elected politicians decide”. All the credit for lowering inflation by the end of the 1980s has been attributed to the Volker effect, but is this misleading? At the same time, President Carter created his own plan for credit controls and budget cuts to beat inflation.

Further reading

The Currency of Politics: The Political Theory of Money from Aristotle to Keynes (2022) by Stefan Eich.



Please donate to our Annual Appeal in support of local food bank *Hope for Food*. Last year, we donated £2,594 worth of food and toiletries to them.

Hope for Food works on a referral system from schools, social workers and healthcare workers for food hampers. Please contact David Warden for details about how to make a donation. Phone: 07910 886629

Email: chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk



Letters & Emails

It's your column...

Endorsement of Cathy Silman as Humanist Prime Minister

A long silence from our end, but we are still here. I am emailing you having just read the latest Dorset Humanists newsletter. First, thank you for keeping us on your mailing list. We have retreated somewhat over the last few years into a Bridport shell and got involved with different events going on here. A pity - for us - that Dorset Humanists is based in Bournemouth, otherwise you would have seen us. We still come to Bournemouth but these visits are irregular.

The covering email about the newsletter captured my attention with "We stole a march on Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak...". Politics is what preoccupies my thoughts these days and I have to confess to feeling quite depressed about this country, which seems to be on a right-wing fascist trajectory of which I want no part. I find myself becoming more left-wing by the day. I believe what this country needs more than anything is a good dose of socialism. Your encapsulation of socialism as "the idea that wealth is like a vault of gold to be divvied up fairly" (*Chairman's View*) seems unfair. There is more, much more to socialism than that. And I say that as a Liberal Democrat! But that is not the argument I want to get into. We just need a lot less privatisation and a good deal more public ownership.

Enter Cathy Silman. Rarely have I read such a short manifesto document that encapsulates in just 11 points a programme for the future with which I can identify so wholeheartedly. The main emphasis is on houses and home ownership. We need a complete change of

direction and some radical policies to get there. Cathy has obviously studied this at some length and her recommended reading list perhaps points the way. I seem to recall that some years ago now you recommended a book *Killing the Host* by Michael Hudson, which has a lot to do with the same idea. House ownership and house prices lie at its core too.

Finally, I notice you are now Sir David Warden. Congratulations and well done. Recognition from somewhere of your leadership within the humanist fraternity.

Best wishes, Roger and Gill Smith, Bridport

■ Roger Smith was on the steering committee of West Dorset Humanists some years ago. I explained that my knighthood was purely fictional! DW

The wisdom of Chairman Warden

Having just read the September bulletin, I found myself wishing for more from our illustrious chairman. In no way do I want to burden him with extra workload, but I could be speaking for many when I say one of my favourite parts of the bulletin is the little insights of thought-provoking wisdom as inspired by the back page. I wonder how many others wish this were three or four pages in length, a *Guardian*-style editorial?

One of the people I follow on Instagram is a keynote speaker called Vin (AskVinh) and he says that we are shaped by the five people who are most in our lives, and that we should seek out those educators with precision in order to help us grow. I know from experience that my life has grown with 'young' Mr Warden being a teacher, and one of my five influencers. Hopefully, that spreads throughout Dorset Humanists, making us all better versions of who we are.

Aaron Darkwood, design editor of Humanistically Speaking and a former Dorset Humanists 'Humanist of the Year'

View from the Chair

David Warden
Chairman of Dorset Humanists



On 29th September, I attended a lecture at Bournemouth University by Danny Dorling, Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford. His lecture was about the problem of inequality and the fact that the UK is one of the most unequal countries in the world. His lecture was interesting and sobering. But I came away from it thinking about Henri Ruff's phrase from his presentation on inflation the night before: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Dorling, along with Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, authors of *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* (2010), argue that most of our social problems can be traced to one underlying variable – the gross inequality between the top 1% and everyone else. In the Q&A, I asked Professor Dorling whether this theory is now at the heart of Labour policy. His answer was long and rambling so I'm not sure whether it is or not. If this theory has so far failed to gain much political traction on the left, despite the data marshalled in its favour, maybe there is something wrong with it. I didn't hear Keir Starmer say he is going to limit chief executive pay to a small multiple of average wages or introduce a new top rate of tax at, say, 80%.

Kwasi Kwarteng tried to restore New Labour's 40% rate of income tax but this caused apoplexy in the commentariat. Lyn Glass recently explained to me how this change could increase the tax take through highly-paid employees deciding to be taxed in the UK rather than in some other jurisdiction. That aside, what I care about is whether young people can afford to buy homes, start a family, and whether everyone can benefit from cheap, abundant, and secure energy. These are the basics, and I'm not certain that targeting chief executive pay is the main route to their realisation. The fact that these basics are still beyond reach for so many indicates a gigantic failure of the elites over recent decades. We need a deep analysis of banking, investment, energy, environmentalism, and globalisation to see where things have gone so badly wrong for ordinary people. I don't buy into the mythology that it is all the fault of evil Tories or the stupidity of Brexit. There are intellectual and ethical problems and dilemmas at the heart of politics and governance affecting all political parties and international institutions. Our new Prime Minister is saying that she wants to break the old consensus and get the UK back onto a trajectory of growth. I wish her well, but it has not been an auspicious start.

I am flattered by Aaron's letter on the previous page and I will try not to let it go to my head. I am always pleased whenever I hear that members and supporters have read the bulletin and gained something from it, including my opinion page, even if it merely confirms how wrong I am about something.

I am shocked to discover that Simon Whipple thinks that some natural mechanism may yet be found in the future to explain the mysterious appearance of his free bicycle. We are sending him to a humanist re-education camp. Sleep deprivation and mild electric shocks might do the trick.