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# Dorset Humanists

*Atheists and agnostics for a better world*

■ **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February 12.00 noon for lunch and 2.00pm for speaker**  
Bournemouth University, Kimmeridge House, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole, BH12 5BB

## Darwin Day 2020 with special guest Robin Ince



Robin Ince presents a new version of his tour show about finding joy in humanity, curiosity, and the universe. Robin mashes up the two cultures of art and science in this celebration of the

human mind, from Bohemians to Black Holes and Dali to DNA – another of his stand up sort of lectures. Robin is winner and co-star of the Rose D'Or and Sony Gold award-winning *The Infinite Monkey Cage* and winner of *Pointless Celebrities*.

**If you have booked a place please ensure you pay for it. If you haven't yet booked a place please phone Lyn Glass on 01202 767323 to check for late availability.**

Lunch & Talk Ticket (12.00pm start): £20 for members / £25 non-members / £10 students includes a welcoming glass of wine or soft drink, followed by a 2-course finger buffet lunch & coffee.

Talk only Ticket (2.00pm start): £5 includes coffee or tea on arrival.

■ **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm**  
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, Bournemouth BH1 3AX

## Revenge: A Sweetness No Humanist Should Ever Taste?

A talk by Dr Peter Connolly

Humanist author Philip Nathan (who spoke to Dorset Humanists last year) believes we should never pursue revenge. Peter Connolly will argue that revenge *does* have a place within a system of humanist values. After commenting on ways in which revenge can be a bad thing, he will attempt to persuade us that judicial retribution, often called 'justice,' is a good thing and that when such retribution cannot be delivered personal revenge is also a good thing.

Peter was a senior lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Chichester. His latest book, *Understanding Religious Experience* (2019) can be borrowed from Dorset Humanists library.

### Wanted: Clothing in Good Condition

If you are having a bit of a de-clutter and getting rid of serviceable clothes in good condition, please consider donating them to Michael House, supported accommodation for homeless people. 46-48 Grosvenor Gardens, Bournemouth BH1 4HH ☎ 01202 393178



■ **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm** and every first Thursday at Poole Hill Brewery, 41-43 Poole Hill, BH2 5PW. Please note changed venue.



## Monty Python's 'Life of Brian'

On 6<sup>th</sup> February, we will be arranging a showing of the Monty Python film 'Life of Brian' downstairs at our new venue. Enjoy stimulating conversation after the film over a drink or two. We warmly welcome regulars and newcomers.



## Sunday Walks

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> February  
10.15am**

A bracing walk over Hengistbury Head and around the edge of Christchurch Harbour. Seven and a half miles with impressive sea views. Meet at Tuckton Bridge by the gardens.

Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any changes, for example last minute cancellations owing to weather conditions.

☎ Phil 07817 260498

### **Future dates for your diary...**

■ **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March 1.15pm Moordown**

## Members' Annual Lunch and AGM

Dorset Humanists is not just a group of like-minded people – it's a humanist community, almost 'family' to some of our members. Our AGM is one of the opportunities we have to celebrate what that means to us and the wider world in which we live and work. The AGM is always preceded by a delicious lunch provided by, and free of charge to, our members. The AGM itself is always an interesting, lively, and sometimes controversial event which celebrates the achievements of Dorset Humanists and looks forward to what we hope to do in the future. A highlight of the event is our 'Humanist of the Year' presentation. We

hope you will join us for this important date in our calendar.

### **Other events of interest...**

■ **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> February 7.35pm**  
Sandford Heritage Hall, Sandford Road, Near Wareham, BH20 7AJ (Next to Pine Martin Grange Care Home)

## Understanding Antisemitism

An 'Out of the Box' dialogue event for people who subscribe to different worldviews. Rabbi Maurice Michaels from Bournemouth Reform synagogue will help us understand the roots of antisemitism as we grapple with its contemporary links to antizionism, the state of Israel, and the debate on the left of British politics. All welcome – free entry – small donation of £2 or £3 appreciated.

### **The 'Age of Responsibility'**

In April 'Out of the Box' will be discussing the 'Age of Responsibility'. We are looking for person aged around 16 to 18 to join our audience and express their thoughts and opinions on everything from smoking to voting, sex, and marriage. Look out for details on our Meetup page in March.

■ **Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> March 1.15pm**

Quaker Meeting House, 16 Wharncliffe Road, Boscombe, BH5 1AH

## Rock and a Hard Place

A carefully researched, thought-provoking play, for those aged over 17 years, about domestic abuse from the Quaker Theatre Company, 'Journeyman Theatre'. The play illustrates the nature of violence, abuse and coercive control in the home, by focussing on the true story of Kayleigh, a talented teenager whose life should be full of promise. Instead she finds herself in a cycle of domestic abuse from which there seems to be no escape until her Auntie Jan helps her find her way out. The performance lasts for 65 minutes plus a 30 minutes Question and Answer session. Entrance is free but donations are welcome.



# The Ethics of Animal Conservation



*Dr Rebecca Nesbit took us through the ethical complexities of conservation at our Moordown meeting in January. She asked us: "What do you want tomorrow to look like?"*

*This is an edited version of Rebecca's talk. The video is available on our YouTube channel.*

**W**hen humans first arrived in Europe they found giant polar bears, cave lions, woolly rhinoceros, and of course these are long since extinct. Many more species have followed and we're now in a situation where an estimated million species are threatened with extinction. The level of extinction is up to a thousand times what we might expect based on the background rate in the fossil record which means that if this continues then we are living through an event which is equivalent to the one which wiped out the dinosaurs. And we're not going to stop this. The level of funding we're willing to commit to conservation is by no means going to reverse this trend. What we've seen in the past is a dip in the number of species followed by a radiation and some people are suggesting that the diversity of life we see on earth is courtesy of these extinction events and there's no reason to think that the same won't happen this time. But that doesn't really help us now. There are huge implications for humans.

This is a science talk. I started out on this journey wanting to know the science. Where are the biodiversity hotspots so that we can protect the most species in the smallest area? Which species are at greatest risk of extinction, and what interventions will protect them? What did ecosystems look like before humans changed them? But I was making unconscious value judgements. Science is essential, but it doesn't have all the answers. We are not striving for 'objectively right answers'.

So how do we decide which species we're going to prioritise? And is extinction what conservation should be thinking about?

Many of you will know that this year was incredible for Painted Lady butterflies – the best since 1996. And yet newspaper articles about insect declines were illustrated by pictures of Painted Lady butterflies! It's not very helpful because the reason we saw so many of them this year is because they are migrants from Africa. The rainfall patterns in Africa meant that the caterpillars' food plants did very well, a lot of caterpillars made it to adulthood and a lot of butterflies made it to the UK. If we were to use our conservation money in the UK to help Painted Ladies it would be a complete waste.

Conservation needs to be driven by science but science isn't enough. Science can't tell us about underlying values. Humans have always made changes that mean that some species become more common and some species less common. A classic example is when humans started to replace forest with agricultural land. What we now think of as farmland flowers did very well because meadows were an ideal habitat for them. Our ancestors were driven by the values of wanting to eat and feed their children. They didn't know that these flowers would become more common. But we're in a very different situation. We do know what's going on.

## The 'Last Man' Thought Experiment

Imagine you're the very last person on earth. There are no other sentient creatures left. Let's say you decide, just for fun, to cut down the last remaining baobab tree, making it extinct. Would you be morally wrong? Does the value of a species still exist if its absence does not affect any other species? In other words, does it have intrinsic value? Lots of people respond to this in a shocked way and say of course it is wrong but that's very hard to justify philosophically.

99.9% of all species that have ever existed have gone extinct. Maybe that's what species want – to go extinct. That's their ultimate fate anyway.



It's very difficult actually define what we mean by a species. And that's not surprising really when we think about evolution. There's no magic moment when the parent is one species and the offspring is another. It's continuous. And if a species is a rough category developed by humans why do we think it's morally relevant? Definitions get really hard when you get down to the level of bacteria. But if we are really saying that species have intrinsic value then the mould that I have been cultivating in my kitchen has exactly the same value as a rhinoceros. The fact that we value species is not a comment on intrinsic value but on how humans see the world. What is it about a species that gives it value? And why do we think that humans can't influence a species? When did we decide that humans and nature were separate? All species have an impact on other organisms around them. Why is it so unnatural if humans influence other species? Humans have even created their own domestic species. What about conserving ecosystems? People tend to think about what an ecosystem was like in the past but that means we are choosing a historical baseline. In the UK we have really good records of bird numbers and we often quote declines relative to the 1970s because that's when records began. I'm not sure that this is necessarily a good baseline. They are arbitrary and not morally relevant. Humans arrived in Europe at the end of the last ice age and there was an interaction between human impacts and changing climate. We don't know what ecosystems would have looked like without us. And again, why should we care? Why do we think that humans are somehow unnatural and shouldn't be affecting the natural world?

We like to think that species belong somewhere. We have brought many species to the UK or spread them round the world. Some of them are welcomed whereas some we don't like because they become pests. But we can't say they do not belong here without creating arbitrary baselines. There are no right answers and we need to question some assumptions. There's no intrinsic reason why humans

shouldn't alter the world around them, just as every other species does.

None of us wants the world to look like a mining scene. We much prefer a beautiful mountain scene. However, we do want the products of mining and if the whole world looked like the mountain scene what would we eat and where would we farm? So how do we make these incredibly difficult trade-offs?

We need to go back to our point about what has intrinsic value: people and sentient animals that can suffer and have experiences. Humanists make their ethical decisions based on a concern for human beings and other sentient animals so I'm going to propose a utilitarian answer to this question: A world which maximises the wellbeing of all people and sentient beings, now and in the future. And in some ways this supports current and traditional conservation practices. In pure economic terms we can often justify conservation. For example, it's cheaper to protect a marshland than put up a concrete sea wall. We should of course be wary of relying solely on economic arguments given how poor capitalism has been at supporting human welfare. But we can use human wellbeing to guide what conservation decisions we make. I'm not talking simply about economic benefits but also, for example, the mental health benefits of green spaces. We benefit just from knowing that nature exists. I've never been to the Galapagos Islands but I like knowing that marine iguanas exist. But when I say I want marine iguanas to exist I am describing my worldview. Whereas intrinsic value means a value which is completely separate from humans. And this is a very important distinction. For example, I could say "I would like rainforests to stay in their pristine state" but this would be imposing my worldview on the people who live in and around the rainforest who might be wanting to change it in a certain way.

### **Which animals are sentient?**

This is a complex question – it's not even clear what it means. Sometimes people are talking about the ability to feel physical pain. Or is there anything it is like to *be* that



animal? Any kind of awareness? Can they have positive and negative mental states? In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer suggests that somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster is “as good a place as any to draw the line.” I’m actually not that interested in whether octopuses or crabs can feel pain because I think we are so far from being able to know the answer to that question.

There are two worldviews in play: the animal rights movement will say that it is wrong to kill animals whereas the animal welfare movement wants the wellbeing of animals to be maximized. Compassionate conservation is saying ‘we should never kill a wild animal’. Welfare consequentialism is kicking back against that by saying we could be causing suffering by *not* killing animals.

### **The ethics of killing wild animals**

We harm wild animals in many different ways including direct killing (for sport, food, for protecting ourselves), keeping wild animals in zoos, destroying habitats by building roads, changing ecological systems by introducing new species such as the grey squirrel, spread of disease, climate change (fires killing animals), air pollution affects wild animals too, and traffic accidents (‘road kill’). As a consequence, there are far fewer wild animals now than there were a generation ago.

Roughly 250 lions are killed every year as trophies but the existence of wild game parks for sport can provide an incentive to maintain the lion population. What about hunting for food – is it better to eat a cow raised in captivity or a deer shot in the wild? Maybe a wild animal shot for food had a much better life than a cow raised in captivity. If we are going to eat meat, maybe we should be promoting the killing of wild animals for food. Conservation itself is responsible for lots of killing, such as rats and possums which have been introduced to a new area at the expense of native species. Is it OK to kill rats to serve the greater good? What about parakeets? Why do we accept the killing some species and not others? Sometimes the language we use (‘invasive species’, ‘pests’) can

legitimize the killing of animals in inhumane ways.

### **How can we maximise wild animal welfare?**

Could we actually be more ambitious about designing a world which is for the good of animals? All sorts of things have been suggested. We could let nature take its course and not try to have domination over animals. We could manage wild populations by feeding and culling to prevent starvation. We could abolish zoos but some zoos have conservation roles for the most endangered species. Or we could bring *all* wild animals into captivity in order to protect them. Is an animal life a good one? There’s a lot of suffering in nature. Maybe you should just pave over your garden so that fewer animals ever live. Or should we try to prevent the loss of natural habitat and restore what’s lost? But if we want more room for wildlife we need to take less for ourselves. But if we want a world of maximum welfare for humans and animals how do we compare the needs of humans and animals? Do we want fewer humans so that we can keep on consuming, or as many humans as possible with less consumption? At what point does reducing our consumption compromise our wellbeing? We could focus on primate conservation. We could even use gene editing to ‘re-programme’ predators to become herbivores.

### **What you can do**

You could change your lifestyle by changing your diet to become more plant-based given how much more land is required to produce meat and dairy products, waste less food, buy fewer clothes. You could challenge people when they say things like ‘let’s save the planet’. Does the planet need saving? What do they really mean? You can’t know the science on everything, but you can know the values you want to uphold. You can ask conservation charities what they are trying to achieve - the chances are they won’t give you a very good answer. You could spend time in nature which I know you do through your walks. Stick up for the unloved and think about what you would like



tomorrow to look like. There are winners and losers, humans and animals – we're actually arguing about something much more complex than saving nature. A just world supporting the wellbeing of all people is probably going to be full of nature.

■ Dr Rebecca Nesbit is a trustee of the Galapagos Conservation Trust and has worked for the Royal Society for Biology in science communication.

## Jane Bannister Winter Appeal surpasses £1,000

Our 2019/20 Winter Appeal has just passed the thousand pound mark thanks to the generosity of our members and supporters. The appeal is open until the end of February so please keep giving to our very worthwhile charities.



## Letters & Emails

*It's your column...*

*From Jeremy May on Extinction Rebellion*

Very many thanks for inviting Chris Rigby to speak on mass extinctions and Extinction Rebellion's role. The first part of his talk certainly acquainted me with quite a few facts I wasn't familiar with and reminded me of others I'd forgotten. Perhaps it was asking too much to have expected him to keep this up in the second part of his presentation where he tended to lose the plot. For example, should we focus on direct action by individuals like you and me to make progress in this respect or should we rely instead on governments and international agencies to do the job on our behalf? If direct action is the preferred option, what sort of action, in particular who and what are its principal objects and how violent, confrontational and disruptive should it be? If direct action is rejected, might we have no choice but to supplant

democratic with autocratic forms of government (as in WW2 under Churchill) in order to enforce compliance with the radical lifestyle reforms needed to effectively combat the environmental crisis?

*From Greg Atkins on the coronavirus*

In 2003, at the time of the SARS epidemic, I remember giving an interview to Irish broadcaster RTE on that subject. The interviewer was Fergal Keane, who now works for the BBC. I expected technical questions, but the first question was "Should we panic?". A similar reaction is now taking place here for the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak.

This virus has so far only produced mild symptoms in most of those infected, but has killed some people, who were all elderly or suffering from other diseases. So could this virus pose a greater danger? After all, 20-50 million people were killed by the 1918 flu virus, and HIV has infected and debilitated or killed millions. Both of these viruses, and many others that have caused problems in recent years, arose at least partly from other animals.

Like SARS, the present coronavirus probably originated from animals, and at present infects humans inefficiently. So could this change? Theoretically it could. Those of you who attended the Dorset Humanists Science Course last autumn will remember that flu virus can rapidly change by swapping segments of its genome with animal flu viruses, or by mutating because the enzyme that copies its RNA genome is error prone. The same is true of the enzyme that copies the coronavirus RNA, but its genome is not segmented, so it cannot swap segments. However, its genome is one of the largest for RNA viruses, and this makes it more likely that it can carry out a similar process by breaking and rejoining its RNA (termed recombination). So it is theoretically possible for it to mutate to a more deadly and/or more easily transmissible form, or to recombine with other human viruses to do this. After all, there are plenty of other animal coronaviruses about, and around 15% of self-diagnosed cases of colds or "flu" are caused by very infectious human



coronaviruses which cause relatively mild disease. So it is theoretically possible for it to change to a more dangerous form. However, the probability of this happening is low. Most newly arising virus infections peter out quickly after infecting a relatively small number of hosts, but occasionally a bigger problem does arise.

Just to give some idea of the scale involved here, there have been about 130 deaths from the Wuhan virus at the time of publication (there were 800 from SARS); by comparison seasonal flu kills an average of 600 in most years in the UK (about 300-650,000 per year worldwide) but in 2013/14 this rose to 11,000, and we hardly heard about it.

*From Dave Haith*

Before I was ousted from Dorset Humanists' Facebook group for posting too much about UFOs, I was constantly criticised by members who refused even to consider any evidence on the subject unless it was peer reviewed. Now, a year or two down the line, the US Navy accepts the existence of unidentified craft in its skies, has provided video and pilot testimony and I can bring you a peer reviewed scientific paper. One of the authors of this paper is Dr Kevin Knuth who is a former NASA scientist and current Associate Physics Professor at the University of Albany. I am in regular touch with Dr Knuth and would be happy to put any Dorset Humanists members in touch with him for further information. The web link for the paper is [here](#).

One section deals with the 2004 Nimitz incident in which fighter planes encountered and during a naval exercise off the California coast, chased a TicTac shaped object which attained speeds with "required power peaks at a shocking 1100GW, which exceeds the total nuclear power production of the United States by more than a factor of ten." Since the paper was published professor of theoretical physics Michio Kaku has joined the discussion. Questioned about the US Navy announcing videos showing aerial phenomena which cannot be explained, he said "We are now witnessing a tipping point. The burden of proof has

shifted to the military, the government, to prove they are *not* real. The evidence is overwhelming. We have all this information from navy pilots... We can measure the velocity of these objects - they travel between Mach 2 and Mach 20; they can go from 80,000 feet to 20,000 feet in the blink of an eye; they can manoeuvre so the forces would crush any human being - all of it on video tape."

*From Graham Marshall*

Dave Haith is an ardent UFO advocate and I am a retired scientist with years of skeptical rejection of the UFO phenomenon. Recently, Dave kindly lent me two books on UFOs by Leslie Kean and Richard M Dolan. It does seem that thinking people have done some careful sifting of the data and I now admit that some of the reports are worth studying, particularly those reported by police and defence professionals and where the objects were detected by sight, radar and infra-red. We should always have an open mind to evidence and now mine is open a crack for UFOs! The Nimitz incident is well worth a look - just go to Youtube and search [Nimitz](#). Cmdr. David Fravor seems to be an honest looking professional. Ignore the believer who chips in now and then.

Dave reports that Michio Kaku now seems to be saying there is something happening. A scientist has to be brave to get that far; careers have been lost. That is why so many endorsements are by retired officials who were once in charge of their countries UFO study programmes etc.

In the 13.7 billion years history of the universe we are late arrivals. Life started here "only" 3.5 billion years ago. There was time for intelligent creatures to evolve many times and some could have technologies billions of years ahead of us - and our technology is only 200 years old. They have had time to get here and we could well be under surveillance by "them" and "they" have had plenty of time to arrange for that.

Don't just search for 'UFO' as you will be engulfed by trash. Only bother reading if there is radar and visible evidence from professionals. Ignore Roswell, the town is like Loch Ness. Try Nimitz.





## Dorset Humanists **Chairman's View**

February 2020

Last autumn, I completed a counselling training course to help people suffering from the after-effects of abuse-related trauma. One of the models used by trauma specialists suggests that the human self can be experienced as a domain of conflict between different sub-personalities. In the middle of this training I came to the somewhat shocking realisation that as a teenager I had, in a sense, been abused by God. As a result of childhood indoctrination, God had been installed as an overbearing personality in my constellation of selfhood. In the Christian tradition I belonged to, Christians are encouraged to 'die to self' to allow God to take centre stage. I believed that God was 'in charge of my life'. As a pious Bible-believing teenager, I took this pretty seriously and tried to put myself in the back seat of my life as much as possible in order to make way for God. He was supposed to be in the driving seat and my proper place was to be the passenger. Unfortunately, the more ardently I tried to make this scheme work the more my life fell apart. I failed my A levels and became quite seriously depressed. I discovered the hard way that God really doesn't operate like that at all. It was, perhaps, the first indication I had that God doesn't exist at all and I had, effectively, been sitting in a driverless car. My uncle came to the rescue with a slim volume of self-help advice which introduced me to the novel idea of 'believing in myself'. It was the turning point and the start of recovery. I cannot, of course, be angry with God about what happened because he is just a figment of the human imagination. I cannot even be angry with Christians because they are simply caught up in this bizarre mental model and I guess it works for some people. But I'm grateful for the classic humanist ideas of 'believing in yourself' and 'being in charge of your own life'. God may be a therapeutic idea for some people, but for many others, God is an unhealthy and potentially abusive idea in the human mind.

Last month we had two very different talks on extinction. Dr Rebecca Nesbit's approach was scientific and tentative, claiming that there are no objectively right answers. Councillor Chris Rigby's presentation was, in my view, more propagandist. It could, of course, be argued that Rebecca's talk was too concerned about the details of conservation and not alarmed enough about the big picture. Both talks converged, however, on how we should live our lives. We should avoid wasting food, eat a more plant-based diet, walk and cycle more, buy less stuff, reduce plastic, recycle waste, give unwanted clothes to charity, and value the natural world of which we are a part.

