



Summer Cream Tea

Weather permitting!

Saturday 10th August 3.00-5.30pm

This social event is NOT at Moordown Community Centre. It is in David Warden's garden. Address supplied when you RSVP via Meetup or email or phone to confirm that you are coming.

We're taking a break from our guest speaker programme in August. Instead, we hope to indulge in the quintessential English pastime of an al fresco Summer Cream Tea. Weather forecast looks promising at the time of writing.

Please note the start time is 3pm and finish time is 5.30pm. There is no parking in our drive or street – you will need to plan your parking and allow another few minutes to walk to the venue (please let David know if you need disabled parking and access). This event is complimentary for members and guests but please bring cash if you would like to make a donation to our charity Appeal for a local foodbank and Humanist Schools in Uganda.

chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk or text David on 07910 886629

Intergenerational Justice

Do Future Generations Have Rights?

Wednesday 28th August, 7.30pm at West Cliff Hotel 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. Please RSVP via Meetup.

A talk by Barry Newman

Do future generations possess rights or have any moral claim on those of us living today? Should we limit our own happiness and make sacrifices to ensure a sustainable and equitable world for future generations? Philosophers have responded in a variety of different ways to these difficult questions. Barry's talk will highlight some key philosophical themes, encouraging reflection on our ethical obligations towards those yet to be born. Barry is a retired intensive care consultant and he regularly speaks in local schools about humanism.



Sir Keir Starmer’s “wooden” performance at humanist event

We were delighted to welcome Sir Keir Starmer’s very convincing stand-in at our post-election Question Time event in July. But we did receive numerous complaints about his somewhat stiff and wooden performance and inability to answer questions. 10 Downing Street has failed so far to offer any explanation.

Get your very own Keir! Sir Keir will be sold off at our Summer Cream Tea event to the highest bidder to raise money for our charity Appeal. You will have to meet his reserve price to be in with a chance. He doesn’t come cheap.



Lyn Glass attempts to kiss Sir Keir

Dates for your diary

Saturday 10 th August 2pm	Private garden	Summer Cream Tea Phone David 07910 886629
Wednesday 28 th August 7.30pm	West Cliff Hotel	The Ethics of Intergenerational Justice – a talk by Barry Newman
Saturday 14 th September 2pm	Moordown	Sex and Gender in the Early Church - Dr George Askwith
Wednesday 25 th September 7.30pm	West Cliff Hotel	History of Free Thought – Dr Emma Park, former Editor of the <i>Freethinker</i> magazine
Plus other social events and walks which will be announced on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes.		



Photo by Aaron

Stoicism for Humanists

Thirty-five people attended David Warden's talk on Stoicism in July. David ran the event as a kind of 'interactive workshop' because he wanted participants to react to what the Stoic philosophers wrote – not just listen passively. Stoicism is meant to be practical wisdom – not abstract theory.

The popular notion of Stoicism is that it means bearing suffering in an uncomplaining manner. So if we say someone is being 'stoical' we're paying them a compliment. This is an aspect of Stoicism but it's only one aspect. There's a lot more to it than that.

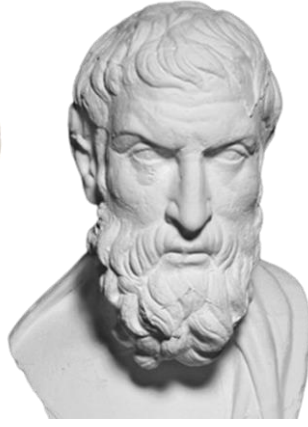
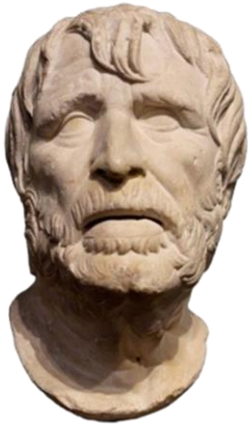
Stoicism is a practical philosophy for reducing human misery and suffering. And because we've mostly forgotten about Stoicism, we often repeat the mistakes they tried to address. So we have to relearn some of this ancient wisdom in order to live better and happier lives.

Some of the lessons of Stoicism have been integrated or absorbed into modern therapeutic techniques. For example, it's well known that CBT – cognitive behavioural therapy – is based on the idea that we tend to react not so much to events in the real world but to our beliefs and interpretations about those events. A CBT therapist tries to intervene at the level of cognition in order to help their clients think differently about a

situation, looking at something from a different perspective, or challenging harmful beliefs about something. A typical example is catastrophizing. If you catastrophize about some possible sequence of events what you're doing is allowing your mind to get into a negative feedback loop instead of responding rationally to the real situation. And one of the main principles of Stoicism is to respond rationally to reality.

The word Stoicism comes from the word Stoa. In ancient Athens, the word "stoa" referred to a covered walkway or portico, commonly used for public use. Stoas were often lined with columns and provided a sheltered area for various activities, including public gatherings, markets, and philosophical discussions. They contributed to the social and civic life of the city. Stoicism was the philosophy which took place in the Stoa, as opposed to philosophy which took place in a garden or philosophy which took place in an academy.

The founder of Stoicism was Zeno of Citium. Citium was an ancient city near Larnaca in Cyprus (now an archaeological site). Zeno taught in Athens from about 300 BCE. There were a number of Stoic philosophers after Zeno including Diogenes of Babylon, but our records of these ancient philosophers are fragmentary. So our best sources today ►



Our best sources for Stoicism are Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

are later Stoic philosophers including Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius.

Seneca the Younger

Seneca was born in 4 BCE in Córdoba in Spain. He became a Roman statesman, philosopher, and playwright. He wrote many essays and letters on ethics and practical philosophy including 124 epistles to Lucilius and essays on the shortness of life and the tranquillity of the mind. He was about 69 when he died. Seneca was very wealthy. Despite his Stoic teachings, which often emphasized the virtues of simplicity and self-control, he amassed significant wealth during his lifetime. His wealth primarily came from his career as a statesman and adviser to the Emperor Nero, as well as from various business ventures and investments. Unfortunately, because Seneca was implicated in a conspiracy to assassinate Nero, Nero commanded him to commit suicide. In order to do this, Seneca cut his veins and sat in a hot bath.

Epictetus

Epictetus was born in Hierapolis which is now an archaeological site in Turkey and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. His dates are 50-135CE. He was born into slavery and brought to Rome, where he served as an assistant of the Emperor Nero. Despite the harsh conditions of slavery, he was allowed some intellectual freedom and he developed an interest in philosophy. He eventually gained his freedom and began teaching philosophy in Rome but he relocated to Greece in the year 93.

He was about 85 when he died. He wrote nothing down but his teachings were recorded by his student called Arrian, including the *Enchiridion*, which is Greek for 'Handbook' or 'Manual'. His philosophy emphasised the idea that we should focus on what is within our control and accept what is not within our control. His teachings emphasised rationality, self-discipline, and inner freedom.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius was the 16th Roman Emperor and a philosopher. He is best known for his *Meditations* – a series of personal writings that reflect his Stoic beliefs and which are a guide to living a virtuous life. His dates are 121-180CE. He was 58 years old when he died. Historical accounts suggest that he was known for his sense of justice and compassion. He sought to govern in a way that was fair and in the best interests of the people.



Michel de Montaigne

Stoicism was influential in later writers and philosophers including Michel de Montaigne, the 16th century French humanist and philosopher. His dates are 1533-1592. He believed in the value of examining oneself and one's thoughts, famously saying, "I study myself more than any other subject".

Stoicism also influenced the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). He believed that recognizing the shared suffering of all beings leads to compassion and moral behaviour. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), a prominent English writer, lexicographer, and critic, was also influenced by Stoicism.

Some core ideas of Stoicism

1. React to reality, not your opinions and thoughts about reality. As we go through life, we think that we are reacting to events but more often than not we're reacting to our thoughts and beliefs about events, rather than the events themselves. We may not be able to change external events but we may be able to change our thoughts and beliefs.
2. Attachment to things beyond our control is a form of 'slavery' – the remedy is to focus on what we can control. We should stake our wellbeing on what we can control and we should let go of attachment to what we cannot control. For example, a Stoic prefers prosperity to poverty but wealth is considered to be an 'external' and we should be 'indifferent' to it rather than 'enslaved' to it. If we get attached to things which are beyond our control this will make us miserable. There is an echo of Buddhism in this principle of non-attachment.
3. Non-attachment leads to a state of equanimity or tranquillity – a mind less troubled by mental disturbances. This is a key theme of Stoicism – reducing mental disturbances. Upsets, tantrums, hissy fits and so on.
4. Conquering the fear of death is a major theme in Stoicism. For example, 'Death is nothing terrible. Rather, the *opinion* that death is terrible – that is the terrible thing'. Epictetus
5. The Stoics can help us to get a more accurate view of reality by trying out different perspectives. In modern terms, we might call this 'reframing'. A modern example is 'Seeing the glass as half full rather than half empty'.
6. Use adversity to build character. In Stoicism, adversity is a kind of resource for building strength and resilience.
7. The Stoics recommended moderation in all things rather than excess.
8. They taught that it is *rational* to live a virtuous life and happiness is a pleasant by-product of this. The purpose of life, according to the Stoics, is *virtue* and devotion to the greater good. Happiness or eudaimonia (flourishing) is an incidental by-product of living virtuously. Their four cardinal virtues were wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. We might choose a different list of virtues today.
9. Virtue is not just a private matter. It also involves engagement in public affairs whether as a citizen, leader, or family member. It would be a mistake to think that Stoicism is about withdrawing from the world. It's not about going into some kind of Stoic monastery. Virtue also means being engaged in public affairs in the broadest sense. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius were both leading figures in Rome. So we have a duty to contribute to the community and the greater good.
10. Stoicism is a practical philosophy but it's not always easy to put into practice. Perfection is not expected. It seems doubtful that any human being can become a perfect Stoic, living a life of perfect equanimity – but Stoicism may help us to achieve this state of mind.

Selected Stoic quotations

"If any external thing causes you distress, it is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgment about it. And this you have the power to eliminate now." Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.47

"Reports that make the underworld terrible to us are mere tales. No darkness threatens the dead, no prison, no blazing streams of fire, no seats of judgment. All those things are the sport of the poets who have stirred us up with terrors that are empty." Seneca, *Consolations to Marcia* 19.4

"I know a gentleman who, having entertained a large group at his house, a few days later boasted as a joke that he had fed them a pie made out of a cat. One of the young ladies was so stricken with horror that she developed a violent stomach disorder." Montaigne, *On the Power of the Imagination* (1580)

"What we believe ourselves to want, torments us not in proportion to its real value, but according to the estimation by which we have rated it in our own minds." Samuel Johnson, *The Adventurer* (1753)

"A somewhat similar case is the idea that deceives the mass of mankind – that if they could live in big houses and get together enough slaves and money, they would have a happy life. But a happy and cheerful life does not come from without. On the contrary, a man adds the pleasure and gratification to the things that surround him, his temperament being, as it were, the source of his feelings." Plutarch, *On Virtue and Vice I* (100b-100c)

"The ordinary man places his life's happiness in things external to him, in property, rank, wife and children, friends, society, and the like, so that when he loses them or finds them disappointing, the foundation of his happiness is destroyed. In other words, his centre of gravity is not in himself; it is constantly changing its place, with every wish and whim." Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life* (1851)

"When you have lost one of those dearest to you, to suffer endless grief is foolish indulgence; to suffer none, inhuman hardness. The best middle course is to feel a sense of loss and to subdue it." "Believe me, a great part of those we have loved remains with us, even if some accident has taken them away." Seneca, *Consolation to Helvia*, 16.1; *Epistles*, 99.4-5

"Imagine the vast abyss of time, and think of the entire universe; then compare what we call a human lifetime to that immensity. You will see how tiny a thing it is that we wish for and seek to prolong". "The difference between dying at a great age and dying tomorrow you should consider no great thing." Seneca, *Epistles* 99.10; 4.47

"Do not overlook how short are the lives of all mortal things, and how insignificant – yesterday little blob of mucus, tomorrow a mummy or ashes". Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.48

"The whole human race is condemned to die. As for cities that ever held sway over the world, some day people will ask where they were. So why should I be angry or feel sorrow if I precede the fate common to all things by a tiny interval of time?" Seneca, *Epistles* 71.15

"We should treat each other well and with good humour, for the things that distract us from those simple aims aren't worth worrying about." Seneca, *Natural Questions III*, I Pref. 15

"Make life as a whole agreeable to yourself by banishing all worry about it. I have for a long time tested death... before I was born." Seneca

"There are no terrors in ceasing to live.. Death makes the mortality of life enjoyable." Epicurus

"Spend each day as if it were the last." Marcus Aurelius



You can watch the whole talk on YouTube. Click the image or go to YouTube and search for Dorset Humanists.

Book Review

Handle Gently: An exploration of a journey through grief is a wonderfully moving book by Wendy Goddard who is a retired therapist and a member of Dorset Humanists.

From the book:

"This is a book about grief, a book about loss. But it is more than that. It is one person's journey from anguish to acceptance, helplessness to independence, suffering to relief, and melancholy to hope. It is my story after the death of my beloved husband. At least that is what I began with, until it grew into a journal of self-exploration – including childhood memories that affected the way I am now and how I dealt with his death; the people in my life that have influence my progress and relationships that have altered the way I think about the world. However, most of all, it is a story of love."

From David Warden to Wendy:

"You will be pleased to know I have finally read your book! It is a really beautiful record of three years of your life. The writing is flawless and I was moved to tears many times. Today I listened to Mahler's 5th (the Death in Venice bit anyway!) when you mentioned it was included in Peter's funeral. I really cannot praise your book highly enough - it is a real treasure."

Handle Gently is available in paperback for £12.99 or £3.99 on Kindle. Click the book image to go to Amazon.





Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Graham Marshall

Last month, David Warden wrote “As a humanist group, we welcome contrarians and those who have the courage to go against the grain. Our first instinct may be to denounce them as ‘deniers’ or ‘conspiracy theorists’ but these are lazy reactions to heterodox perspectives. Let’s make room for the heretics in our midst. They might be on to something.”

Just to say - THERE IS A LIMIT! During lockdown, I researched the depths of human gullibility and was quite shocked by internet “rabbit holes” populated by “paranormal believers” with zero science knowledge. I sometimes added a small comment from a science perspective to some of the sites and without fail my posts were deleted! I was eventually banned from the Facebook page ‘Anomalies Are Us’ after they tried very hard to get me to accept their beliefs – particularly about flying saucers. They are prepared to believe that dozens of crashed UFOs are being studied by very secret US Department of Defense groups. The Facebook page is devoted to any and every paranormal topic and they seem to believe in all of them.

I do keep 1% of an eye open for the UFO phenomenon. Humans are at an ‘explosion in technology’ point. Other civilisations could be a million years ahead of us and would want to watch out for potential threats from the new kids on the block – us. Some testimonies are very believable and people like James Fox seem to have avoided the “I must believe everything else as well” rabbit hole. But there’s no hard evidence - so only 1%. See also Mick West (see note) who disproves most of the rubbish.

But some of the James Fox documentaries, such as *The Phenomenon* make you think and keep half an eye open... a bit. But if there is any truth, it is smothered by a huge number of mad belief stories so that mainstream science will not look at it.

Note: Mick West is a British-American science writer and sceptical investigator. He created the website Metabunk.org, dedicated to the analysis and debunking of various conspiracy theories, including those related to UFOs, chemtrails, and other unusual phenomena. He applies scientific reasoning, critical thinking, and evidence-based analysis to challenge and refute unverified claims. He wrote *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* (2018), which provides strategies for addressing and debunking conspiracy theories.

From Eric Hayman

In last month’s bulletin, Aaron wrote: ‘This email is no defence of the Conservatives, but a reminder that people are people, and that today’s elected officials are just people as well. Not saviours, miracle workers or perfect humans – just untrained elected nobodies whom we entrust to govern us with as much knowledge and wisdom as they take with them into the job’. As for, ‘today’s elected officials are just people’ – they are people who put themselves up for election, 650 people wanting to tell some 70 million other people how to be educated, work, live and EVEN die. Self-selected because they think they know better. Just as the Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed thought they knew better. Just as the Kaiser, Marx, Engels, Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot – and Edward Heath – and many others, thought they knew better. Fear not, the 650 were ‘democratically elected’. Now that does make them ‘perfect humans’. In just under five years’ time, the whole charade will be repeated; unless Starmer has made himself Prime Minister For Life; and the UK a one-party state.



View from the Chair

David Warden

Chairman of Dorset Humanists

I highly recommend *The Practicing Stoic: A Philosophical User's Manual* (2018), by Ward Farnsworth who is a professor at the University of Texas. It was the main source for my talk on Stoicism and it really brought this tradition of ancient wisdom to life.

Humanism does not have any foundational 'scriptures'. This is good in one sense – we do not want to be hidebound or have to revere ancient texts. But it's also a weakness. I remember one young man visiting Dorset Humanists about twenty years ago saying that he was 'looking for wisdom'. He never returned, so I guess he did not find what he was looking for. Eight years ago, we did have a professor speak to us about Stoicism. But when I looked at his PowerPoint slides again in preparation for my own talk, I thought they were rather dry and unappealing. I also remember attempting to read *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius some years ago and giving up halfway through for some reason. But now that I have actually delivered a talk on Stoicism, I feel that this tradition of wisdom is the perfect complement to humanism in terms of practical wisdom which can help us to live a good life. In addition to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, Seneca wrote 124 epistles covering a wide range of topics, from dealing with adversity to the importance of self-improvement, and Epictetus is (indirectly) the author of *The Enchiridion* – a handbook of Stoic teachings on how to live virtuously, deal with adversity, and maintain inner peace. Such texts could almost be considered 'humanist scriptures'.

Although the Stoics did have some metaphysical beliefs which humanists would not share today, these can easily be set aside. What remains is a substantial storehouse of wisdom which has resonated through the centuries, popping up in later writers including Michel de Montaigne, Samuel Johnson, Arthur Schopenhauer and others. The Stoics can help us overcome our natural fear of death and our propensity to get het up about all sorts of things. In recent weeks, I have been getting het up about the maddening bureaucratic slowness of financial organisations involved in a pension transfer. With every delay and blockage, I feel a rising sense of rage and impotence. Stoic wisdom might counsel me to be "indifferent" to such "externals" beyond my control. Maintaining Stoic calm is easier said than done, but I'm trying to put it into practice.

In-group preference is a selective adaptation we're saddled with. Short of re-engineering the human brain, this is something we'll have to manage until the end of time. England's record of tolerance and integration is better than many countries, but politicians who ignore evolutionary psychology and who fail to manage borders and the asylum system have helped to create tinder-box conditions for sectarian conflict and violence. This appalling situation now has to be contained and I fear for the police and local communities caught up in riots. Humanism could take a lead in fostering a deeper understanding of human nature and the application of such knowledge to inform political choices.