



Man's Best Friend

Dogs and their place in human affections and society

**Saturday 10th May ♦ 2.00pm Moordown
Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW**

An illustrated talk and discussion led by Simon Whipple. All welcome — free entry. A small donation of around £3.00 is appreciated but not obligatory. Browse our lending library and stay for coffee and further discussion after the main event.

Dogs are loyal companions to many, but attitudes toward them vary across and within cultures. What does our bond with dogs reveal about human needs, values, and identity? Should private passions, like dog ownership, ever be imposed on public spaces? Following last month's talk about John Stuart Mill – attended mostly by humans – we'll discuss the ethics of liberty, harm, and cultural difference. How should humanists navigate differences of opinion between personal freedom and public comfort? Join us for a lively exploration of dogs, morals, multiculturalism — and the limits of liberty. Simon is a member of our committee and has spoken at several of our meetings.

Our seating arrangements will allow for small group discussions and so please sign up on Meetup if you plan to attend so we know how many people will take part.

Only assistance dogs trained to support a disability are permitted at our speaker events. Dogs are welcome on our walks.

Join our new online chat room

Our new online chatroom is waiting for you! Go to <https://talk.dorsethumanists.org/> and follow the joining instructions including the REGISTER link. See you there!





What is beauty?

Wednesday 28th May ❖ 7.30pm West Cliff Hotel
7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS

A talk and discussion led by Barry Newman. All welcome — free entry. A small donation of around £3.00 is appreciated but not obligatory. Join us for a drink in the bar afterwards.

We all experience and seek out beauty — in nature, people, music, the colour of walls in your home, a plate of food — in fact in every aspect of life — however trivial. But what actually is this quality that we call beauty? Is it a universal that we can all agree on, or just personal taste? Why does it seem so important to us and why do we often disagree about it? In this discussion we'll explore beauty from many directions, looking at how it affects us and our choices.

This event isn't just for art lovers or academics (though they are welcome) — it's for anyone who's ever been struck by a sunset, a song, a fashion, a face, a picture, a building, or a shop window. Why does beauty catch our attention? What draws us in? Why do some things seem beautiful to one person but leave another cold? Come along and share your views — whether you simply enjoy beauty or find yourself asking deeper and more philosophical questions. Barry is a member of our committee and he's given us a number of informative and thought provoking talks in the past.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 10 th May 2.00pm	Moordown	Man's Best Friend – a talk and discussion led by Simon Whipple
Friday 16 th May 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Hotel bar social – just turn up
Sunday 18 th May 10.15am	Branksome Chine start	Pines and Chines Walk – see Meetup for full details
Wednesday 28 th May 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	What is Beauty? A short talk and open discussion led by Barry Newman
Thursday 5 th June 7.30pm	Wetherspoons	Friendly pub social – just turn up
Saturday 14 th June 2.00pm	Moordown	What is Paganism? A talk by Megan Manson.
Saturday 21 st June	Member hosting	World Humanist Day – BBQ in a member's garden – details for bona fide members/guests nearer the time
Wednesday 25 th June 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Origins of the Universe: A Humanist-Christian Dialogue
Plus more events as advertised on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes.		



John Stuart Mill and Limits to Liberty

Thirty people attended Dr Peter Connolly's talk on J.S. Mill's classic work 'On Liberty' which was published in 1859 – the same year as Darwin's 'Origin of Species'. This is an edited short report of Peter's talk.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) was a British philosopher, economist and political thinker, and MP for Westminster (Liberal Party) 1865 to 1868. He campaigned on progressive and liberal causes including votes for women, land reform, Irish affairs, individual liberty and civil rights.

The tyranny of prevailing opinion

Mill argued that safeguards are needed to protect minorities from 'the tyranny of the majority.' This applies not just to the exercise of blunt coercion but also to 'the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling' which can restrict the formation of any individuality not in keeping with its own values.

The harm principle

Where is the line to be drawn between what society can legitimately impose on an individual and what it cannot? For Mill, the fundamental principle that should guide the drawing of such a line is what has come to be known as the harm principle: 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.'

The appropriate region of human liberty

Mill identified three areas that constitute 'the appropriate region of human liberty':

1. Liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral or theological, including publishing such views, opinions, etc.

2. Framing the plan of our lives to suit our own characters
3. Meeting with others for any purpose that does not involve harm to others

Why diversity of opinion is ultimately beneficial for civilized societies

Mill sought to defend four reasons for thinking that allowing diversity of opinion is ultimately beneficial for civilized societies. As summarised by British philosopher Nigel Warburton they are:

1. *The infallibility argument.* For Mill, to silence opposing views is to assume infallibility for one's own, an assumption that no human being can justify. If the assumption cannot be justified, then neither can the silencing. Even the Roman Catholic church, which held that the sun travelled around the earth as one of its 'infallible dogmas' had, in the end, to concede that it was wrong. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to think that the certainty of infallibility is the only reason why people might want to suppress contrary views. Often they do so as a means of retaining power. Of course, in civilized societies they cannot admit that this is the case. ►

2. *The partly true argument.* This is that prevailing opinion is often not the complete truth. Contrary opinion may be mostly false, but there is benefit to society if it is tolerated as even a minuscule amount of truth is an aid to human progress.
3. *The dead dogma argument.* Mill contrasted living truth with dead dogma. Even if a belief is true, he argued, unless the person who holds it has some idea why it is true and how it is superior to other views then that person does not know that truth as a rational being. Rather, he or she holds it as superstition. Becoming acquainted with the arguments presented by holders of different views is, for Mill, the best way to ensure that a truth stays alive. In the course of developing this argument, Mill commented on how, when beliefs are minority views and struggling against persecution, they are often at their most vigorous – they must confront criticism on a daily basis.
4. *The link with action argument.* Mill drew attention to the hypocrisy of Christians, who profess beliefs that they rarely, if ever, act upon. He wrote: 'They do believe them, as people have always believed what they have heard lauded and never discussed. But in the sense of that living belief which regulates conduct, they believe those doctrines just up to the point to which it is usual to act upon them.' [For example, Christianity preaches forgiveness — "forgive as God forgives you" — but in practice, people often hold deep grudges, seek revenge, or cut people off without any serious effort at reconciliation.]

Should the expression of opinion always be temperate?

Mill addressed 'those who say that the free expression of all opinions should be permitted on condition that the manner be temperate, and do not pass the bounds of fair

discussion. He seemed to regard this claim as somewhat duplicitous, as people whose views are attacked and find adequate answers hard to come by are likely to call their critics intemperate. Moreover, in the debates of his day Mill noticed that the use of devices such as invective, sarcasm and the like tended to be described as 'honest zeal' and 'righteous indignation' when employed in support of prevailing opinion and as 'morally culpable' when employed by its critics. For Mill, the government has no business in restraining the use of such devices.

Individuality and 'experiments of living'

Mill addressed the challenge posed by prevailing opinion, which, by and large, assumes that people should be trained and educated in the principles that society has evolved over time. He claimed there comes a point when an individual reaches maturity at which point the person has to decide for him or her self exactly how much of what has been received is appropriate as a guide to the construction of his or her own life. He offered three reasons in support of this:

1. The experience of others may have been too narrow to serve as guide for everyone
2. Some people are unsuited to 'customary' modes of life
3. Even the best of customary ways are deficient if they do not involve the individual in choosing them. Moreover, many ways are not the best, e.g. the Calvinistic ideal of obedience patronises a 'pinched and hidebound type of human character.'

Mill's vision of human fulfilment was expressed through the metaphor of a tree, 'which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.' By cultivating that individuality 'within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others', a human being becomes a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.' ►

Such individuals are, claimed Mill, a benefit to society:

1. They offer originality and, often, genius
2. They and their eccentricities act as a foil against the tyranny of prevailing opinion
3. The lifestyles they might adopt open up new patterns of life to be explored
4. They help to keep society flexible and innovative – he compared European nations with China, which [in his day] stagnated. Stagnation, claims Mill, occurs when societies repress individuality.

The authority of society and the individual

Mill addressed the boundary between an individual's control over his or her life and society's control over that same life. In his view, with any actions that are purely self-regarding (i.e. have no effect on others), the individual is sovereign. If an individual chooses to live a wasteful, seemingly worthless life that is rooted in base pleasures then we may disapprove and bad consequences may follow, but we are not justified in coercing that individual to behave otherwise. He was aware that some people may not be inclined to recognise a sphere of entirely self-regarding actions. They might claim that 'No person is an entirely isolated being; it is impossible for a person to do anything seriously or permanently hurtful to himself without mischief reaching at least to his near connections, and often far beyond them.' In opposition to this, Mill argued that society's right to coerce individuals whose behaviour it disapproves of only becomes active when their conduct violates a 'distinct and assignable obligation' to others. In support of his view, Mill comments on the fact that society has extensive control over the education of its children; hence, 'If society lets any considerable number of its members grow up mere children, incapable of being acted on by rational consideration of distant motives, society has itself to blame for the consequences.'



Mill met Harriet Taylor (above), a married woman, when they were both in their early twenties. She was his 'intellectual collaborator'. After the death of her husband, by which time she and Mill were in their mid-forties, they married. Sadly, she died seven years later.

Society treating its own preferences as moral laws

Mill addressed what he considered the strongest argument against public interference in purely personal conduct: the danger that society will invest its own preferences with the character of moral laws — a version of the 'tyranny of the majority' argument. Mill contested the view that if someone is offended by the behaviour of another person then that behaviour should be prohibited. The consequence of this view would be the prohibition of almost everything.

Offences against decency

In Mill's view, if a pattern of behaviour that causes widespread public offence can be pursued in private then the general good will probably be best served by prohibitions on its public manifestations. ►

Should sexual intercourse on a crowded bus be permitted?

Mill did not argue that there should be no restrictions on 'experiments of living'. The liberty principle would curtail all 'experiments' that involve demonstrable harm to others. In addition, he says that certain acts of public indecency may be curtailed. American philosopher Joel Feinberg asked how many unconventional acts a person travelling on a crowded bus should be required to tolerate in close proximity to him or her self. What about horrible smells? Migraine-inducing colour combinations? Intolerable noises? The consumption of live insects? Eating other people's vomit? Sexual intercourse? Is offence not a sufficient warrant for the prohibition of such things? Mill doesn't comment on cases like these but the British philosopher Jonathan Wolff thinks that he would be sympathetic to Feinberg's proposal for their regulation. In Mill's view, if a pattern of behaviour that causes widespread public offence can be pursued in private then the general good ('the greatest happiness') will probably be better served by prohibitions on its public manifestations.

Conclusion

It seems that Mill's liberty principle and his indecency policy offer us the most balanced, albeit incomplete, guide to setting the boundaries of freedom with regard to 'experiments of living.' Guides based on other criteria will need to present a clear demonstration of their superiority to Mill's before they can even be considered as candidates for social regulation.

Further reading

Free Speech: a global history from Socrates to social media (2022) by Jacob Mchangama

Arguments for Freedom (1999) Nigel Warburton

Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (1873) by James Fitzjames Stephens – a 19th century rejoinder to Mill's book *On Liberty*

Technofeudalism

Practical steps to take back control



At our Westcliff Hotel event in April, Winston Smith spoke about the rise of "techno-feudalism". He explored the complex relationship between automation, surveillance, digital addiction and the erosion of privacy, while offering practical steps for regaining autonomy in an increasingly monitored world.

This summary of Winston's talk was mostly created by artificial intelligence.

The idea of technofeudalism is that, eventually, big tech companies will own almost everything in society. Maybe they already do today. Their parent companies will control our infrastructure. They will own all of our data. If you ever want to talk to anybody online, big tech companies will be able to see it. They'll know everything about you and predict your behaviour perfectly — at first to advertise to you, and maybe later for other purposes. Automation also raises troubling questions. When a job is automated, nobody has to do that job anymore, which may be nice — but it also means people lose their livelihoods. So automation cuts both ways. Throughout this talk, you'll notice a pattern: almost everything I mention could be seen as good from one perspective, and bad from another.

Surveillance capitalism

After I started thinking about automation for this talk, I realized I also needed to talk about surveillance capitalism. There's a very good book on this topic called *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) by ►

These individuals seem to have low self-control, are highly introverted, honest, emotionally stable, not adventurous and have little self-control hence we can target them with niche and general self-improvement and relaxation products, such as ASMR videos for stress relief, subscription boxes for introverts, ethical brands of clothing, meditation apps, high-adrenaline adventure tours, habit-tracking apps, Calm, Lumosity, Patagonia, and Netflix.

An example of how Google infers personality traits from a photograph for the purpose of advertising

Shoshana Zuboff. I'm donating a copy to the Dorset Humanists library. Essentially, surveillance capitalism means that companies such as Google and Facebook offer free services — but their real business is spying on us to sell targeted advertising. They infer a lot of information about us based on an enormous amount of data collection. This may seem sinister but their official line is that it's "to improve your experience". Both of these statements can be true.

Companies such as Alphabet (Google's parent company) not only own search engines but also YouTube, advertising systems, and smart devices. Billionaires such as Bill Gates promote charitable work, but their foundations often serve as soft power tools — providing influence rather than purely altruistic benefit. Charitable foundations only need to give away around 5% of their assets annually. The rest can be invested, sometimes in companies tied to oil extraction, private prisons, and arms manufacturing.

Digital addiction

In order to harvest as much of your data as possible, companies need you to be glued to your devices. Phones are brilliant tools but also sources of entertainment and addiction. Many people can't stand to wait in a queue without pulling out their phones and checking apps like Reddit or YouTube. Mobile games are designed to be addictive, luring a small percentage of users to spend thousands — enough to fund the entire game. Social media apps hire addiction experts to make their platforms as sticky as possible. The average person spends four and a half hours a day on their phone. Infinite scrolling mechanisms (such as YouTube Shorts and Facebook feeds) are carefully engineered to keep you engaged without stopping to reflect. Surveillance capitalism isn't just about advertising — it's about manipulating your attention and gathering every possible data point.

How tracking works

Google, Facebook, and others can track you even when you're not using their apps. Web pages with embedded trackers (such as Facebook Pixels or Google Analytics) report your activity back to the parent companies. Even Windows operating systems, unless carefully configured, send massive amounts of "diagnostic data" to Microsoft — including browsing history and typed inputs.

Ad blockers such as uBlock Origin can prevent some of this. Firefox remains the best mainstream browser for privacy, though even Firefox recently softened its promises about data privacy.

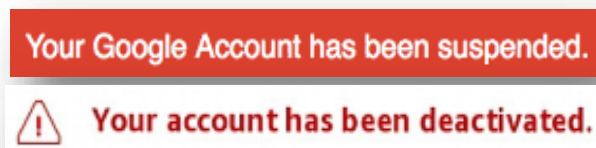
Google's analysis of your photos

Using tools like Google Vision API, tech companies can automatically analyse every photo you upload. They infer not just surface details, but demographic information, emotions, income levels, political leanings, religious beliefs, and more — often with eerie accuracy. Google's systems can guess whether a child might be "tempted to skip school" ►

and tell lies”, based only on a photograph. They routinely analyse uploaded images even when users don’t realize it. This isn’t just a theoretical capability — it’s happening, silently, on a massive scale.

Ownership and control

Ownership of digital goods can be fragile. Amazon has remotely deleted books from users’ Kindles in the past. Google or Amazon can suspend your account with little warning and almost no recourse. Appeals are usually handled by AI, not humans. Once you are locked out, you lose access to your books, videos, cloud storage, email — everything. The infrastructure of your digital life is not really yours.



AI and the end of work

Many white-collar jobs are now under threat from AI. Companies are hesitant to hire junior engineers because AI can often perform their tasks faster and cheaper. There’s little incentive to train new workers when AI is improving faster than humans can. Even in industries such as farming, big tech is moving in. Automated tractors and machinery are affordable only for large corporations, pushing small farmers out. The same story is unfolding in warehouses: humans are the slowest, most expensive part of the system, and companies such as Amazon are designing environments where burnout is normal. Gig economy work, such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo, offers little security and no benefits. Workers are paid only when actively working, and turnover is extremely high.

How pricing really works

Prices are not necessarily set based on cost plus a reasonable mark-up. Instead, companies charge whatever they can

get away with. In markets where costs are obscure — such as cloud storage — prices are set based on brand power and perceived value. In many cases, apparent competition is an illusion. Products such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi are dominant, and when one raises prices, the other often follows. YouTubers promote products such as VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) which often don’t actually protect you in the ways they claim. VPNs can hide your browsing from your Internet Service Provider but do little to shield you from sophisticated browser fingerprinting and surveillance by Google, Facebook, and others.

Practical steps you can take

1. Set your default search engine to DuckDuckGo
2. Use Firefox instead of Chrome, Edge, or Safari
3. Install ad blockers like uBlock Origin
4. Use Linux Mint if you want a private, easy-to-use alternative to Windows
5. Consider using ProtonMail instead of Gmail
6. Switch to Signal for messaging instead of WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger
7. When websites ask for cookie consent, say no. Sign out of YouTube and turn off your history to make the site less addictive. Whenever possible, refuse cloud services that harvest your data.

It takes effort. And yes, it’s hard when your friends are still using Facebook and Google. But it’s worth it if you care about your privacy and autonomy.

Conclusion

The systems we depend on today are incredibly powerful. They harvest enormous amounts of data. They manipulate behaviour. They control access to critical parts of our digital lives. But change is possible. Awareness is the first step and small individual actions can build momentum for broader societal shifts.



A point of view

David Warden

I don't want to downplay the risks to humanity of technofeudalism and surveillance capitalism but I believe myself to be mostly impervious to online advertising and social media addiction. The algorithms can be remarkably stupid. Often they do not even know whether I am male or female and occasionally I get adverts in German or Japanese (I speak neither of these languages). YouTube adverts are interminable rubbish (some new product is 'taking the world by storm') and invariably I press the 'skip' button as quickly as possible – so why does YouTube persist with me? I have a lifetime's practice of ignoring adverts – don't they know this basic fact about me? I only buy stuff I need or want and almost never in response to advertising. I am somewhat susceptible to 'infinite scrolling mechanisms' on Instagram and Facebook but it's not that difficult to 'close all apps' when I want to do something else. I do spend a lot of time on my smartphone but this is mostly how, these days, I read newspapers and books. Total surveillance by tech companies and their ability to deactivate your apps for some unknown thought crime, with no recourse to a sympathetic human agent, is of course the stuff of nightmares. If tech is tightening its grip on us and reducing Gen Z to serfdom then we will need to revisit this topic in the near future.

I have puzzled for some time about the apparent contradictions of 'free speech'. Humanists promote free speech but we do not permit abusive speech in our meetings or online platforms and therefore we restrict freedom of speech. Occasionally, we have had people in our meetings complaining, on free speech grounds, about no longer being able to use highly offensive terms. It was a relief, then, to discover that John Stuart Mill's formula cuts through the confusion. Mill stipulated that we should have 'absolute freedom of opinion'. This sounds right to me. A good test is to ask whether Holocaust denial should be permitted. A local rabbi said 'Yes – because then I can engage in dialogue with the person holding that view'. A similar distinction can be made with regard to, say, transphobia. It is not transphobic to hold the opinion that sex is binary and determined by chromosomes and gametes. But it would be transphobic to treat a transperson with anything less than dignity and respect.

As popes go, Pope Francis seemed pretty good to me. Of course, he did not – perhaps could not – stray far from Catholic orthodoxy. But I liked his humility, his lack of ostentation, and his willingness to upset a few apple carts. He spoke out strongly against unbridled capitalism, consumer culture, and the 'globalisation of indifference'. He consistently emphasised caring for the poor and the vulnerable and he urged humanity to respect and protect the planet. He had a greater willingness than many of his predecessors to engage in dialogue with people of different faiths and with non-believers. The pope, by definition, is a Catholic but the life and ethics of Pope Francis inclined towards humanism.

Why not continue these discussions in our new chatroom <https://talk.dorsethumanists.org/>

► Do you have a humanist point of view? Email chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk