



An introduction to Paganism

An illustrated talk by Megan Manson
from Gravesham Pagans

**Saturday 14th June ❖ 2.00pm Moordown
Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW**

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.

Megan Manson is an excellent speaker, and this will be her second visit to Dorset Humanists. As part of our aim to promote 'religious literacy', we are looking forward to what promises to be an enjoyable and informative talk on modern Pagan traditions. Megan will offer an engaging overview of the key beliefs and practices within this diverse spiritual path, exploring why it resonates with so many British people in the 21st century. While acknowledging the subjective nature of religious belief, she will not be seeking to persuade anyone of its 'truth'. Instead, drawing on her personal experiences, Megan will share what this path means to her.

Continue the discussion online

Why not join our new chatroom to continue the discussion? Go to <https://talk.dorsethumanists.org/> and follow the joining instructions including the REGISTER link. See you there!



World Humanist Day Barbecue

Saturday 21st June 6pm – 9pm at a member’s house in Poole

One of our members has very generously invited us to their home to celebrate World Humanist Day. Our host will provide meat and buns plus cutlery and crockery. Please bring your own drinks plus a contribution of food to share such as salads or puddings. RSVP on Meetup or phone/text David 07910 886629. Venue details will be provided to bona fide members and guests who RSVP.

Members’ ideas

Dorset Humanists committee invites members to suggest items for consideration by the committee. If you would like a specific issue to be considered email secretary@dorset.humanist.org.uk

This includes topics for Saturday or Wednesday events, other activities or anything else. Suggested items will be considered by the Secretary and Chairman who have absolute discretion as to whether the item will appear on the agenda.



Origin of the Universe

A Humanist-Christian Dialogue

Wednesday 25th June 7.30pm West Cliff Hotel

A friendly and thought-provoking panel discussion on the origins of the universe, featuring perspectives from both humanists and Christians. Dave Pegg will represent the Christian viewpoint, while Ron March and Geoff Kirby from the West Dorset humanist group will share their humanist perspectives.

The discussion will explore key themes such as the fine-tuning argument and the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God, and arguments in favour of Deism.

This event offers a respectful space for dialogue, examining whether the universe’s origins point to a divine creator or can be explained through natural processes. Bring your questions and join the conversation!

Dates for your diary

Saturday 14 th June 2.00pm	Moordown	An introduction to Paganism
Saturday 21 st June 6pm	Member’s house	World Humanist Day barbecue
Wednesday 25 th June 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Origin of the Universe dialogue
Thursday 7 th August	Moon in the Square	Pub social
Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes. More walks will be scheduled as soon as possible and posted on Meetup.		



All we need now is some people to show up...

Dorset Humanists at Poole Pride

David, Daniel, Roger, Steve and Aaron set up an information table and display at Lighthouse in Poole as part of Poole Pride day on 7th June. We were unsure how many people were going to venture out on a rainy day, but waves of people passed by our table and we thrust leaflets into their hands at every opportunity! Lots of people expressed an interest in humanism and our open and inclusive ethos.



“Wings of Pride” – an interactive art installation by Matt Wilding. Aaron took full advantage to show off his shy and introverted personality.



Man's Best Friend

Simon Whipple gave an informative talk on this topic at our Moordown event in May, which was followed by hosted table discussions on ethical questions arising from dog ownership. This is an AI-assisted summary of Simon's talk.

"It was extremely interesting." Emily, a new member of Dorset Humanists

Simon began his talk with a reflection on the emotional intensity of human-dog relationships. That very morning, a neighbour's dog had been put down, and the grief expressed reminded everyone how easily people become deeply attached to their dogs. But can dogs truly be called "friends" when humans control every aspect of their lives? From breeding to euthanasia, the power is entirely one-sided.

Dogs are selectively bred for traits that appeal to humans—whether for behaviour, appearance, or utility. They are neutered or castrated at will, put down when inconvenient, and shaped to fit lifestyles. The phrase "a dog is for life, not just for Christmas" was cited as a reminder that this is a moral relationship, not just a sentimental one.

Origins

The origins of dog domestication were traced back around 40,000 years. The most likely theory is that wolves began scavenging near early human settlements. Those that appeared submissive or friendly were more likely to be fed and protected. Over time, this mutual relationship evolved: humans gained hunting companions, and dogs gained safety and food. It was a case of natural selection—survival of the most agreeable.

Rabies

But with the relationship came problems. Rabies has likely existed since dogs first began living alongside humans. Though the disease is now mostly controlled in the West,

it still kills around 59,000 people annually, especially in places like India. The virus spreads through saliva and has historically made people fearful of dogs in many cultures. Even now, a dog bite in some countries is still regarded as a potential death sentence.

Religious views

Different religious traditions have approached dogs in varied ways. Traditional Christianity viewed animals as created for human use, without souls or genuine feeling. The notion persisted for centuries that animals only appeared to feel pain. Figures such as St Francis of Assisi shifted that perspective somewhat—treating all of creation as sacred. Today, most Christian thought acknowledges that cruelty to animals is wrong, not because they are equal to humans, but because they are part of God's creation.

Islamic teachings often consider dogs to be unclean. For example, [Iran has banned dog walking on grounds of public health](#). In many Muslim-majority countries, they are not kept as pets, but nor are they usually harmed. Instead, stray dogs are left to roam, as seen in places like Turkey. In Orthodox Judaism, dogs have also been viewed with suspicion, although attitudes are changing. In Israel, dog ownership is becoming more common, particularly under the influence of European cultural norms. In Buddhism, there is no explicit teaching about dogs, but the general principle of compassion for all sentient beings applies. The belief in reincarnation adds a striking dimension—a dog might once have been a human relative, and may be again. ►

Psychology

Psychologically, our attitudes to dogs are often shaped by childhood experiences. A single frightening encounter can leave a lifelong impression. And while some fear of dogs may be irrational, there are rational grounds for concern—dog bites, aggression, and zoonotic diseases.

Economics

Attention turned to the economics of pet ownership. The dog trade is vast and largely unregulated. Anyone can breed and sell dogs, and profit margins can be high. In 2023, some 21,000 dogs were abandoned in the UK, compared to 15,000 in 2015. The surge is often attributed to the pandemic, when many people bought dogs during lockdown and later discarded them. Around 20,000 dogs are euthanised annually—some due to age or illness, but around 9% simply because they are too aggressive. It was suggested this raises deep moral questions: should dogs be killed because they are inconvenient?

Law

Under UK law, councils must care for stray dogs for seven days, after which euthanasia is legal if no home is found. These figures, while troubling, are symptomatic of a broader pattern of disposability in how society treats animals.

Breeding

The problem of “exaggerated conformation” was also addressed—where dogs are bred to highlight extreme traits, such as flat noses or slender limbs. Around a third of vet consultations relate to issues caused by these human-imposed features. Breeds like pugs and bulldogs often suffer from severe breathing problems. These are no longer natural animals—they are, in many cases, designer creatures with serious welfare issues.

Ethics

The talk then moved into moral philosophy, with a brief introduction to Peter Singer, whose work in animal ethics has challenged

traditional assumptions. Singer argues that the capacity to suffer—not species membership—is the proper basis for moral consideration. On this view, dogs deserve the same basic moral protections as humans.

The environment

Environmental concerns were also raised. A Great Dane contributes around 2.5 tonnes of CO₂ annually—roughly the same as the average carbon footprint of someone in the developing world. Letting dogs roam can disturb wildlife, especially birds. Some nature reserves even create “sacrificial ponds” to divert dogs away from sensitive areas. Dogs treated with flea pesticides may also contaminate water sources, harming insect life or contributing to chemical resistance.

The session concluded with an invitation to explore these and other ethical questions after the break:

1. If humans control every aspect of a dog’s life, from reproduction to freedom of movement, is it truly friendship if one side holds all the power?
2. How can we justify routine procedures like spaying and neutering—especially when done for human convenience rather than medical necessity?
3. Why do many people love their animals more than people?
4. Are dogs merely a commodity for human pleasure?
5. Should anyone be allowed to own a dog?
6. Should dog owners be licensed?
7. When, if at all, should dog owners be permitted to end the life of their dogs?

Those who considered the question agreed that it is morally acceptable for dogs to be owned and controlled by humans although all tables agreed that dog owners should be licensed. Some thought that prospective owners should demonstrate competence before a licence is issued. Everyone agreed that it’s OK to euthanise dogs if they are suffering, but not simply for personal convenience.



What is beauty?

Barry Newman led a wide-ranging discussion on this topic at our evening event in May. One of the surprising revelations of the evening is that no one present considered Leonardo's 'Mona Lisa' to be beautiful. Perhaps this illustrates the evolving nature of what is considered to be beautiful. A more extreme example of art which is not beautiful, "Woman I" (left) by Willem de Kooning, was also presented. This is an edited extract of Barry's talk.

Barry defined beauty as "the quality of something that gives pleasure to the senses and/or the mind" and he asked "What is the relationship between art and beauty?" Art is not necessarily beautiful but beauty is a possible feature of art.

What are these things that give pleasure to the senses and the mind and why are they described as beautiful? Is there some common ground that all of us will agree is beautiful and for the same reasons? Or must we just accept that it is entirely subjective – a personal reaction to an experience? We cannot know what our distant ancestors thought was beautiful, but we can look at their art and artefacts and draw conclusions. The earliest known example of deliberate complex decoration – a small block of ochre inscribed with a deliberate pattern – is from the Blombos Cave in the Cape Province, around 70,000 years ago.



Paintings in the Chauvet Caves in south-eastern France, discovered in 1994, date from around 30,000 years ago. They are a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most important archaeological finds related to early human symbolic expression. Did they have religious, shamanic or spiritual significance? Are they beautiful to us – or just interesting?

East and West

In Western culture, the human form has long been seen as the ultimate or perfect expression of the universe. In the Western ancient world, beauty was almost entirely sought in the human form, except for architecture. In contrast, places where ►

Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism dominate, art – and perhaps therefore the appreciation of beauty – appears to be relatively free of Western anthropocentrism. Western art focuses on objects that occupy space. It is claimed that Eastern art focusses much more on the space between or around objects (what we would call the “background”) as well as the relationships between objects rather than primarily the objects themselves. In these Eastern worldviews, humans are far more integrated into and dependent on nature and its forces. Concepts such as emptiness, impermanence, and cyclical time are often central to artistic expression. In the Western tradition, art tends to focus more on human figures, objects, and linear time. Religion dominated Western expressions of beauty in art until the Renaissance. Before that, there was little—if any—painting of landscapes or animals in Europe, except as backdrops to religious scenes. This began to change during the Renaissance and especially with the rise of Protestantism in Holland, where a growing middle class created a demand for non-religious art.

Plato and Aristotle – contrasting views

Plato took a metaphysical view of beauty, seeing it as an ideal that exists beyond the physical world. In his philosophy, beauty is not merely a feature of individual objects or experiences—it is part of the eternal and unchanging realm of Forms. According to this view, everything in the material world is an imperfect copy of a perfect archetype. The Form of Beauty serves as the ultimate standard against which all beautiful things are measured. What we perceive as beauty in the world around us is merely a reflection—an incomplete glimpse—of this higher, perfect reality. For Plato, knowledge is essential to cultivating a deeper appreciation of beauty. Beauty is not a matter of taste or subjective preference; it is something to be approached through reason and philosophical understanding.

In contrast to Plato, Aristotle understood beauty primarily in terms of order, symmetry, and proportion. For him, beauty arises from the harmonious organisation of parts into a coherent and balanced whole. This structural clarity was central to his aesthetic thinking, especially in art and nature. He also advanced the idea of mimesis, or imitation, as the foundation of all art. Yet for Aristotle, imitation was not mere copying—it was a creative act that represented reality in a meaningful, often idealised form. Art, therefore, could reveal deeper truths about the world by portraying life not exactly as it is, but as it could or should be.

Aristotle also saw art as playing an important role in the moral and intellectual development of individuals. Through art, especially dramatic works like tragedy, people can learn about virtues and vices, and reflect on human life in a way that contributes to personal growth.

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

Medieval aesthetics was shaped by the doctrine of “the transcendentals”: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas saw these three as intimately connected and ultimately inseparable. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty were not independent concepts but aspects of God’s nature. This theological framing gave beauty a spiritual dimension: to encounter beauty was, in some sense, to glimpse the divine.

Aesthetics

The modern study of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline began in 1750 with the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten. He introduced the term to describe the study of sensory experience and perception. For Baumgarten, aesthetics was concerned not just with art, but with how we engage with the world through our senses. Over time, the scope of aesthetics expanded beyond visual art to include all forms of sensory and emotional response. ►

Today, the term is closely associated with the appreciation, analysis, and philosophical exploration of beauty—understood as a quality or experience that elicits the response, “this is beautiful.”

Eighteenth century philosophers: Hume, Burke, and Kant

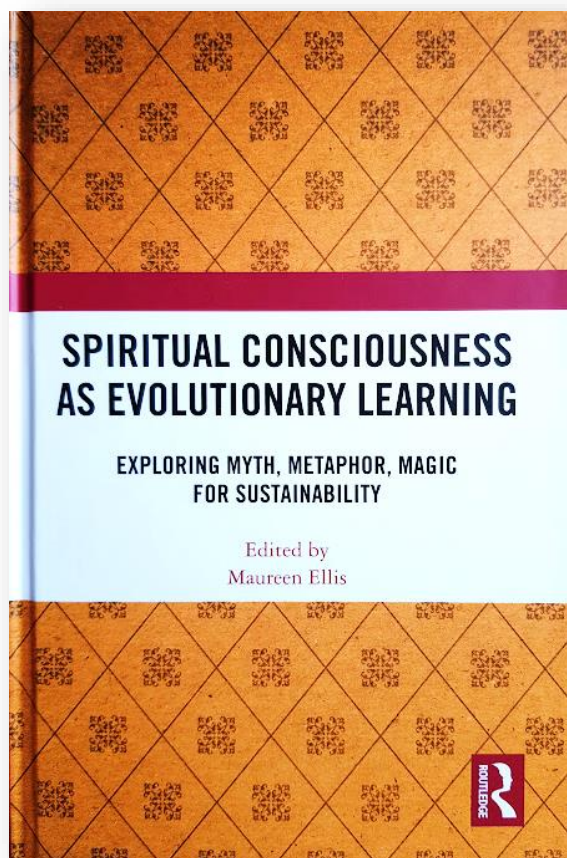
David Hume recognised that, while beauty is in the eye of the beholder, some tastes are more “refined” or “correct” than others. Experts and connoisseurs are better able to recognise beauty because they have a more developed capacity to appreciate the subtleties of art. Edmund Burke’s ideas about beauty have a clearly gendered dimension in that he associated beauty with the feminine, describing beautiful things as delicate and fragile, qualities traditionally attributed to women in the 18th century. Immanuel Kant agreed that aesthetic judgments are subjective but also that these judgements can claim “universal validity” because they are not simply private feelings. They can be communicated and therefore shared.

Contemporary culture

Today, aesthetics extends far beyond classical art forms like painting, sculpture, and music. The digital age has brought new forms of aesthetic expression through photography, film, video games, virtual reality, and design. Art is more interactive than ever before.

Questions for discussion

- Why is nature beautiful to us and what is beautiful about it?
- Is the appreciation of beauty an entirely subjective experience or is there any place for objectivity?
- What about beauty in everyday life – a tasteful greetings card, a neatly laid dining table, food on a plate, a car design?
- Has beauty been stripped from everyday life by commercialism and the drive for utility? For example, can modern buildings be beautiful if they are made from concrete, steel and glass?



New book featuring humanism

Four years ago, David Warden was approached by the editor of this book to contribute a chapter on humanism. The book has now been published by Routledge with David’s chapter “Humanism as a Worldview and Way of Being” included as chapter 19. The book is very expensive to buy as it is intended for the academic market but David is happy to lend his copy to paid-up members of Dorset Humanists. If you borrow it, please be sure to return it promptly.

The other chapters in the book are very academic and somewhat esoteric, but David learned a lot about metaphor whilst engaged in discussions with contributors from all over the world. His chapter tells the story of his conversion from Christianity to humanism and what humanism means today.

Spiritual Consciousness as Evolutionary Learning: Exploring Myth, Metaphor, Magic for Sustainability edited by Maureen Ellis was published by Routledge on 16th May 2025.



Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Aaron on technofeudalism

Having enjoyed the talk, especially what can be told from a photograph, I found myself considering the pros and cons of the internet. YouTube, for example, provides free video storage to users, and free access to watchers. Should they do this for free at their own cost? Obviously not. Should they charge us? There are paid access options if you want them. When that lottery win comes through I will do this as I hate adverts. I outright refuse to watch them. I cover the screen and press the skip button as quickly as possible. It's an invasion of my time. I will not comply!

As for Google, I love it. I store my photos there, use its free maps, and let it track my movements because I find it helpful to look back on where I've been. What I do hate though is the constant appearance of cookie consent boxes. Most of the time, I reject the options, say no, or just close the page if there's no clear choice.

Having lived part of my life without the internet I value it hugely. It's life transforming. I was never much of a library person, but there isn't a day that goes by when I'm not researching something online, now mostly via ChatGPT.

News websites, however, have become almost unusable. The Echo is a prime example—its pages are cluttered with adverts and distractions, breaking up the text and making it very unpleasant to use. I can see sites like this dying out.

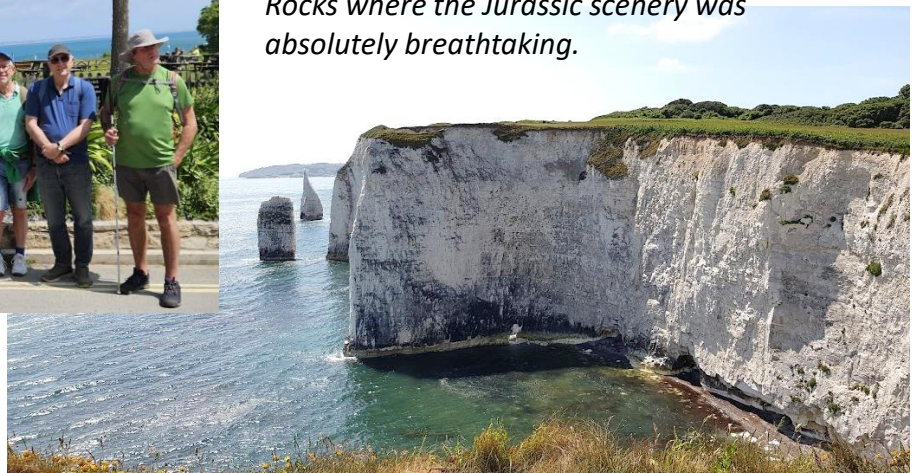
As David mentioned in his remarks, there are likely young people who feel trapped by their phones. But we are adults—we are disciplined, and we control our own destiny. I don't browse my phone when I'm in the company of others or attending Dorset Humanists talks. Social media is for home. I never place my phone on the table in company. These habits are proven distractions, anti-social, rude—and they increase the risk of theft. The internet and the smartphone are tools. We should control them, not let them control us.

From Bronia on our walks

Many thanks to Aaron and the whole gang for a memorable day spent in good company. Looking forward to many more walks.



Aaron has led three superb walks for us so far this year. The latest one was to Old Harry Rocks where the Jurassic scenery was absolutely breathtaking.





A point of view

David Warden

As humans we have a natural capacity for appreciating beauty. Evolutionary psychologists generally regard beauty as a useful adaptation. For example, physical attractiveness is thought to signal health, fertility, and good genes and similar mechanisms are observed in other species, such as the peacock's tail. Standards of beauty vary across cultures and time, but some patterns are pretty consistent across societies, suggesting an evolved base that culture builds upon. Perhaps we find some landscapes beautiful because they represent fertile, resource-rich environments. Appreciation of beauty may also be a by-product of cognitive processes such as pattern recognition and symmetry detection.

Whatever the philosophical and scientific explanation for beauty, engaging with the world through our senses is essential to the intense enjoyment of our one life on Earth and it's a capacity we can develop and refine. For example, without John Hubbard's expert eye to guide me, I would wander around foreign cities in a daze, noticing litter and ugliness at street level. He's taught me to look up and appreciate the infinite variety of architectural styles. I'm now able to say why some buildings are beautiful and why others miss the mark or are downright ugly. It's usually to do with proportion, harmony, rules of design and materials.

Much of the modern world has sacrificed beauty to function and, from the point of view of enjoying our built environment, this has been an environmental catastrophe. Old photographs of Bournemouth, which are regularly uploaded to Facebook, are a daily reminder of how much we have lost and wilfully destroyed. And yet the skills and techniques have not been lost. We just have to pay a bit more, or perhaps much more, to get beauty back into our built environment. Beauty is a humanist value but it can't be done on the cheap.

Let's be honest. There's a great deal of ugliness in the human world including monstrous carbuncles, boarded-up buildings, urban decay, litter, squalor, rubbish bins and graffiti. It's depressing if we only focus on the ugliness. The trick is to notice the beautiful things both natural and human-made: birds, trees, flowers, gardens, sea, clouds, landscapes, colours, faces, bodies, buildings, homes, gardens, garments, jewellery, paintings, artefacts, music. We should appreciate the importance of beauty to the project of 'living good lives' and try and bring more beauty into our human world. As humanists we hesitate to use the s-word, but beauty can lift our spirits and be a source of human happiness and joy.

Committee members Simon Whipple and Barry Newman have recently been experimenting with more interactive events. We want to provide more opportunities for you to add your voice to our discussions rather than just passively listening. But do let us know what you prefer so that we can get the right balance in the future.

Let's continue this discussion in our new chatroom <https://talk.dorsethumanists.org/>

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