



## Humanist Café

# The Meaning of Love

Everyone welcome – coffee and cake on arrival and a relaxed friendly atmosphere with live piano interludes on our chosen theme. Free entry. An optional donation of around £3.00 is always appreciated.

**Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2.00pm. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW**

Sometimes we're led to believe that love is the answer to everything — the force that can heal divisions, transform society, and give life its meaning. But is this really true? At our very first Humanist Café event, we'll explore what love really means in human lives: between parents and children, partners and spouses, families and friends. What happens when love is idealised — by religion, popular culture, or our own expectations? We'll reflect on love understood as care, connection, benevolence and sexual attraction — asking how love can support human flourishing. The discussion will be facilitated by David Warden.

## The Challenge of Forgiveness

**Humanist Forum on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 7.30pm. Bournemouth West Cliff Hotel, 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. All welcome – join us in the bar afterwards.**

At our first evening meeting of the New Year, we will continue our exploration of humanist themes with a discussion about forgiveness. It's usually thought admirable to forgive someone who has caused harm — but what does it actually mean to forgive, and is it always important? Why forgive rather than hold a grudge? And how does apologising fit into the picture? Simon Whipple will guide a reflective conversation on the many issues surrounding forgiveness.

*Please note that our evening events have changed from Wednesdays to Thursdays.*



# £2,379 cheque presented to Hope for Food by Dorset Humanists

Dorset Humanists committee member Dean Robertson presented Hope for Food trustees with a whopping cheque in time for Christmas. Thanks to all of our members who have donated so generously to the appeal. Hope for Food is a local charity based in Bournemouth, set up in 2015 and run entirely by volunteers. Dorset Humanists has also donated **£1,602.13** to the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust – see letters page.

## Dates for your diary

Saturday 10 <sup>th</sup> January 2pm	Moordown	Humanist Café – The Meaning of Love
Friday 16 <sup>th</sup> January 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Humanists in the hotel. Informal social evening hosted by Lyn Glass.
Sunday 18 <sup>th</sup> January 11am	Hurn Forest Walk	Hurn Forest + Avon Causeway pub. John Hubbard is our walk leader. Details will be on Meetup.
Thursday 22 <sup>nd</sup> January 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Humanist Forum – The Challenge of Forgiveness Simon Whipple to lead the discussion.
Sunday 25 <sup>th</sup> January 2pm	Lighthouse	Holocaust Memorial Day – see details on next page
Thursday 5 <sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm	Moon in the Square	Humanists in the pub. Informal pub social hosted by Dean or Lyn.
Saturday 14 <sup>th</sup> February 1.15pm	Moordown	Darwin Day Lunch and talk on evolutionary psychology by Daniel Dancey
Thursday 19 <sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Humanist Forum – What are Rights and What’s the Fuss? <b><i>Please note revised date for this event.</i></b>

Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes.



## Holocaust Memorial Day

Sunday 25th January 2026 at Lighthouse, Poole,  
2.00-4.30pm

David Warden represents the humanist community with concluding words at 4.30pm.

The theme for HMD 2026 is *Bridging Generations*. A young student will share her recent experience of taking part in the *Lessons from Auschwitz* project.

Our main speaker is **Melvyn Leach**, a representative of Generation 2 Generation (G2G), an organisation that trains descendants of Holocaust survivors to share their family stories. Melvyn will recount the story of his relative, Willy Halpert, using filmed testimony to describe Willy's survival as a hidden child in Belgium. He will also speak about what happened to Willy's parents and wider family. Willy now lives in Canada and remains closely connected to Melvyn's family.

Tickets are available from Lighthouse booking office: [01202 280000](tel:01202280000) or website <https://www.lighthousepoole.co.uk/book-online/1015601/>

Tickets are free but a suggested donation of £5.00 via BACS, cash or card is greatly appreciated to enable us to continue our work in the future.

Account: Bournemouth and Poole Holocaust Memorial Day Committee (business account)  
Sort code: 30-91-08 Account Number: 29336460

The image above was created by members of the Space Youth Project and is copyrighted to them.

---

## Darwin Day 2026

Saturday 14th February 2026 at Moordown Community Centre

- 1.15pm for lunch
- 2.15pm for talk on evolutionary psychology by Daniel Dancey



*Don't miss out! Book now for our legendary lunch!*

Join us for our legendary Darwin Day celebration. Our in-house volunteer chefs will create culinary delights for you such as chicken casserole, vegetarian lasagne, and vegan curry followed by desserts created by other volunteers. We will serve a selection of wines and soft drinks. All of this for an inflation-busting price of £5 for Dorset Humanists subscribing members and £15 for non-members/guests which can be converted to an annual membership on request. Please let David Warden know if you can volunteer to help with this event (such as providing desserts, laying tables and clearing up afterwards).

You must pre-pay for this event so that we know who to cater for. You can book and pay in advance at our events or contact David on 07910 886629.



# Why Do We Laugh?

## Reflections on humour, humanity, and the limits of theory

*Fifty people attended our fantastic festive event in December to feast on mince pies, mulled wine and home made cakes – with piano and sax to follow. Many thanks to all our volunteers for making this such a memorable occasion. What follows is an edited transcript of Barry Newman's entertaining talk on humour.*

Let me begin with a disclaimer. I'm not a stand-up comedian. A comedy set is not my natural habitat, and if you came expecting slick delivery and killer punchlines, you may feel short-changed. What I can offer instead is a talk about humour — though I hope, here and there, it will also contain some humour. That turns out to be a surprisingly tricky thing to do. Humour is one of those deeply familiar human experiences that becomes more mysterious the moment you try to pin it down. We all know when something is funny — but we are often at a loss to explain why.

### From bodily fluids to bad jokes

The word humour comes from the Latin *humor*, meaning bodily fluid. Ancient physicians believed that human wellbeing

depended on a balance between four humours: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. An excess or deficiency in one of these supposedly produced particular personality traits — **sanguine** (upbeat, optimistic), **phlegmatic** (calm, chilled), **melancholic** (reflective, low), or **choleric** (quick-tempered, passionate). Early humour, in this sense, involved laughing at people whose personalities were unbalanced or eccentric.

By the sixteenth century, humour had come to mean poking fun at distinctive or exaggerated traits. Comic actors mimicked eccentrics; audiences laughed at those who deviated from a perceived norm. From the outset, then, humour had an ambiguous moral status. It could delight, but it could also humiliate.

So what is humour? Dictionaries tell us it is communication that causes amusement or makes us laugh — but that merely kicks the problem down the road. What is amusement? Why do we laugh? And why do we laugh at some things and not others?

### Humour is not laughter

One thing that helps is to separate humour from laughter. They are related, but they are not the same thing. ►

Laughter is overwhelmingly a social phenomenon. We are apparently around thirty times more likely to laugh when we are with other people than when we are alone. Laughing alone is, frankly, rather odd. Most everyday laughter has nothing to do with jokes at all. It functions as social glue: signalling agreement, empathy, reassurance, friendliness, or the easing of awkwardness.

We laugh nervously. We laugh politely. We laugh to soften disagreement. We laugh to show we belong. There is also laughter contagion — fits of the giggles that erupt between people who share a strong bond, often triggered by nothing in particular. Anyone who has experienced this knows how powerful and inexplicable it can be.

Because my background is in medicine, I can't resist mentioning pathological laughter — uncontrollable laughter associated with certain brain injuries or rare forms of epilepsy. I once knew a medical student who, after a head injury, giggled in utterly inappropriate situations for nearly two years. It was socially agonising, and it brought home just how context-sensitive laughter is. In the wrong place, at the wrong time, it becomes deeply disturbing.

**All of this suggests that laughter is a form of social communication, not simply a response to humour.**

### **The ancients were not amused**

Humour itself has had a rocky reception in the history of ideas. The ancient Greek philosophers — Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics — took a dim view of it. Reason was their highest value, and humour was seen as undermining rational control. Plato worried that comedy encouraged vice by ridiculing respectable figures and delighting in undignified behaviour. Aristotle was little more enthusiastic.

Christian thinkers were scarcely more relaxed. Augustine warned that laughter distracted from spiritual seriousness. A thousand years later, Aquinas conceded — with great

restraint — that appropriate laughter might be healthy if it served recreation and harmed no one. It took Christianity a remarkably long time to lighten up, and even then only slightly.

### **Superiority: laughing *at***

The first systematic theory of humour is the superiority theory, articulated most clearly by Thomas Hobbes. Laughter, he argued, arises from a sudden feeling of glory when we compare ourselves favourably to others. We laugh because we feel superior.

It is easy to recognise this kind of humour. It belittles through ignorance, error, or naivety. Modern comedians call it “punching down”. It can boost the self-esteem of the laugher, but it does so at someone else's expense.

Superiority humour can be softened — gentle teasing rather than cruelty — and it often becomes acceptable when the joke is told from within the group being mocked. A Jewish joke told by a Jew, or racial humour told by someone reclaiming their own identity, changes the moral dynamic. We are laughing *with*, not *at*.

Still, superiority theory fails as a general explanation. It cannot account for wordplay, absurdity, self-deprecation, or the rich seam of humour mined by comedians who laugh at the strangeness of everyday life rather than at other people.

I have sometimes wondered whether superiority humour reflects pre-Enlightenment societies, where individual dignity was not strongly valued and hierarchical mockery was normal. The Enlightenment, by affirming the worth of each person, may also have reshaped what we find funny — or acceptable.

### **Incongruity: expectation subverted**

The strongest contender for a general theory of humour is incongruity theory. Humour, on this view, arises when there is a mismatch between what we expect and what actually occurs — a subversion of expectation. ►

Puns rely on this. So do plot twists, anti-climaxes, and absurd situations. Even babies seem to laugh at incongruity: peekaboo, surprise faces, sudden appearances and disappearances.

### **There is something deeply human about delighting in the unexpected.**

Philosophers refined this idea in various ways. Kant thought humour came from the sudden collapse of mental tension — an expectation built up and then abruptly released.

Schopenhauer saw humour as momentary liberation from the suffering imposed by a blind, irrational world. Freud regarded humour as a mature defence mechanism, allowing us to confront painful realities while maintaining emotional distance.

All of these capture something real. Humour can defuse tension, provide perspective, and make the unbearable manageable.

But incongruity theory also has limits. Not all unexpected things are funny. Some are grotesque, horrifying, or simply puzzling. Surrealist art and bizarre architecture may be deeply incongruous, but they rarely make us laugh. Incongruity can evoke wonder, curiosity, or problem-solving rather than mirth.

One philosopher has sensibly suggested that incongruity becomes funny only when it is non-threatening. That strikes me as important.

### **After all this theorising, I am left with a slightly uncomfortable conclusion: I still don't fully understand why some things are funny and others are not. All the theories are partial.**

One intriguing observation is that artificial intelligence is very bad at humour. Ask it for a joke and you tend to get something technically structured but emotionally flat — often a pun you have heard before. If that is the best machines can do, it suggests that humour involves something more than pattern recognition.

Despite claims that animals have humour because they play, I remain unconvinced. Animal play looks more like training — coordination, speed, social bonding — than comedy. Humour seems to be a peculiarly human way of navigating meaning, surprise, vulnerability, and shared understanding.

### **Humour and culture**

Humour is also profoundly cultural. Western humour often relies on satire, irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, and self-deprecation. British humour prides itself on understatement; American humour often favours boldness and explicitness.

East Asian humour offers a striking contrast. In China and Japan, humour tends to be subtler, more polite, and more group-oriented. Wordplay is common, supported by languages rich in homonyms (words that sound or look alike e.g. the word 'bank' has more than one meaning). Humour that humiliates or undermines social standing is far less acceptable.

Traditional Chinese *xiangsheng* ("cross-talk") comedy involves dialogue rather than solo performance, with mild slapstick and little overt humiliation. Japanese *manzai* similarly relies on quick-fire exchanges between a straight man and a funny man, delivered deadpan. Both traditions focus on human interaction rather than set-piece jokes. There is also modern Chinese "Sang" humour — ironic defeatism expressed through memes and advertising slogans like "New day, new sadness." It may not be our kind of humour, but it clearly speaks to a shared emotional landscape. Across cultures, humour reflects what a society permits, values, and fears.

### **Ethics: laughing *with*, not *at***

This brings us to the ethics of humour. The key question is always: who is the target? Punching up — mocking power, authority, pretension — can function as social critique. Punching down — ridiculing the marginalised or powerless — reinforces harm. Locker-room humour may feel bonding in private, but it can perpetuate misogyny and violence. ►

Intention matters. Context matters. Laughing *with* is almost always better than laughing *at*. Humour is a social tool, and like all tools it can heal or wound depending on how it is used.

Humanists owe much to philosophy, so let me end with a philosophical joke.

*An angel appears at a college faculty meeting and offers the head of the philosophy department one of three gifts: wisdom, beauty, or ten million dollars. The professor immediately chooses wisdom. There is a flash of light, and he sits in silence, transformed. A colleague whispers, "Say something." The professor lifts his head and says, "I should have taken the money."*

**Humour, like philosophy, reminds us of our limits. It punctures pretension, releases tension, and — at its best — connects us. Perhaps that is why, for all our theories, humour remains stubbornly resistant to explanation. And maybe that is exactly the point.**



## Letters & Emails

*It's your  
column...*

### ***From Barney about our festive event***

I wanted to pass on my huge thanks to you, Phil and of course Barry for a really good event – well thought out and supremely entertaining. It was definitely one of my favourites ever – just a great feel-good event, enjoyed the camaraderie, and it's very kind of you to include me in the jazz concert. Really can't praise the event enough, it was much needed light relief. If you do jazz again I'll try my best to come up with something suitable again.

### ***From Penny***

Just thought I'd let you know, what a great afternoon today! Thank you so much for your organising, and hard work, in making it happen. I really enjoyed the jazz. I'm not crazy on it, but I think it can make a lovely change. Lovely eats too. I much appreciate those who are able to volunteer.

### ***From Chris Smith***

The whole event went very well, not least the jazz duo, quite a surprise. And an efficient team dealing with the logistics.

### ***From Graham and Julia***

Just like to say thank you for the effort you and others put into the event yesterday. It was encouraging to meet so many talented and like-minded people. Hope to see and meet more from the Humanist Society in the New Year.

### ***From Uganda Humanist Schools***

I was pleased to find the £1,602.13 that Dorset Humanists had generously deposited in the UHST bank account. We really appreciate your group's ongoing support to provide a liberal, Humanist environment for the education of those children who have the good fortune to attend one of the 11 Humanist schools in Uganda. Promoting decent reading standards and the use of books to promote learning is an important priority for the Humanist Schools. The schools do what they can to promote a reading culture in an effort to enable students to make their own enquiries and to form independent judgements about issues. I hope you will be happy for us to send the money to a bookshop so that schools can choose appropriate books for independent learning. We really appreciate the interest that the Dorset Humanists have shown in the Humanist Schools and the support you have all provided. A big thank you.

Steve Hurd, Chairperson  
UGANDA HUMANIST SCHOOLS TRUST  
<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org>



# A point of view

**David Warden**

This morning I attended a Zoom meeting for Humanist Groups Working Together. This online network includes groups from Birmingham, Shropshire, London, Milton Keynes, Gloucestershire, Bristol and many more. It's one of the lasting and genuinely beneficial legacies of the Covid period: the ability for geographically dispersed groups to meet regularly, share ideas, and support one another.

Chrissie Hackett from Bristol Humanists gave a very upbeat assessment of how they are doing, including regular invitations to civic events. Other groups, however, reported that they are struggling to survive, with dwindling numbers and limited capacity. It was encouraging to hear both the successes and the challenges spoken about openly.

It was particularly good to hear that a number of groups have run, or are planning to run, One Life courses about humanism – something we pioneered at Dorset Humanists over a decade ago. You may have noticed that I have renamed this newsletter One Life as a nod to that very humanist idea: that this life is the one we have, and therefore matters deeply.

One of the ongoing challenges for humanism is how to present it in positive terms rather than purely as a negation. Humanism is typically described as a “non-religious worldview”, which is not inaccurate, but this can sometimes feel like a millstone rather than an invitation. I'd like us to experiment with more affirmative ways of describing what humanism is really about.

Humanism is an interlocking set of ideas that are already familiar to most people: freedom of thought, empirical and naturalistic science, intellectual humility, living a good life, acceptance of our mortality, and human flourishing. This provides the basic framework within which humanists are free to think, question, and disagree, guided by the best available evidence and reflection. The framework itself is ancient, but it remains a living tradition. Nothing is set in stone, even as the underlying orientation remains recognisably humanist.

Seen this way, humanism can be described as a pro-human philosophy of life. Most people are already trying, in their own ways, to live well and to flourish. What humanism can offer is a way of making that quest more coherent and reflective, drawing on the wisdom of the past and the knowledge available to us today. Crucially, it does this not by offering fixed answers or settled doctrines, but through learning, sifting, discussion, and a willingness to let our mental maps change over time.

This habit of thoughtful dialogue is also how a humanist community can avoid some of the pathologies of our age, including dogmatic and polarised thinking. Humanism, practised well, can be a quietly counter-cultural force for good in a divided world.

This is the thinking behind Humanist Café on Saturdays and Humanist Forum on Thursdays: less passive listening, more active engagement; not just consuming ideas, but exploring them together. It is about deepening our understanding of the lifelong challenge of being human, and about cultivating our small but meaningful corner of the human world.