



## Darwin Feast Day

This lunch event is now fully booked – contact David Warden for any late availability. Spaces still available for the talk only at 2pm.

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> February 1.15pm Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW

Our Darwin Feast Day is always a special occasion, when we come together to eat, drink, and celebrate the human spirit of curiosity, adventure, and enquiry into the origins of life. Humanists do not ‘worship’ Charles Darwin the man. Instead, we mark the moment in our shared human story when careful observation, intellectual honesty, and the courage to follow evidence wherever it leads reshaped how we understand our place in the living world. This year, after good food and in good company, Daniel Dancey will guide us into the fascinating territory of evolutionary psychology — exploring what our deep biological past might still be quietly shaping in our modern minds, relationships, and social lives.

## What are ‘rights’ and why have they become so controversial?

Humanist Forum facilitated by Barry Newman: Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm  
Bournemouth West Cliff Hotel, 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. All welcome.

Human rights is a core topic for humanists, and one Barry is keen for us to examine together. If we’re so attached to rights, we’d better have a proper chat about what we actually mean by them. Are rights natural, inalienable, and universal? Or are they invented and culturally relative? Are rights linked to duties or are they unconditional? Barry won’t be presenting a fixed view or arguing a case; instead, he’ll guide a gently ‘Socratic’ conversation by posing thoughtful questions for us to consider.



## Wellies & wellbeing

Our 2026 walk season got off to a slightly soggy but happy start with a leisurely walk in Hurn Forest led by John Hubbard. David won the 'most sensible footwear' prize with a vintage pair of wellies, purchased circa 1996 for the Glastonbury Festival.

After the walk we enjoyed a pint and a pub lunch at the Avon Causeway. Our next walk will take us around Holes Bay, led by Aaron.



## Dates for your diary

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 Feast Day followed by Evolutionary Psychology talk
Thursday 19 <sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Humanist Forum: Barry Newman leads a discussion on the controversy surrounding human rights
Friday 20 <sup>th</sup> February 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Hotel bar social hosted by Sandra Lucie-Smith. No set agenda. Come along for a friendly social.
Sunday 22 <sup>nd</sup> February 10.15am	Holes Bay	Holes Bay walk led by Aaron. Details will be posted on Meetup.
Saturday 14 <sup>th</sup> March 1.15pm	Moordown	Members lunch followed by AGM. Guests are welcome to attend.

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



Photo by Aaron

## Humanist Café: the Meaning of Love

*37 people came along to our inaugural Humanist Café event at Moordown Community Centre. David Warden led a discussion about the meaning of love with reference to popular songs and humanist psychology. Cakes, piano, and daffodils made this a memorable start to our new humanist café!*

### Etymology

The English word love comes from Old English *lufu* meaning love, affection, friendship, benevolence, delight. So the early English word for “love” was not narrowly romantic or erotic. English has collapsed many meanings into one word which explains much of our confusion about the concept.

The Greek language makes some very useful distinctions to help us:

- **Eros** — desire, attraction, longing
- **Philia** — friendship, mutual regard
- **Storgé** — family affection (‘STOR-gay’)
- **Agapé** — esteem, regard, charitable concern (‘Agga-pay’)

### Popular songs about love

The Beatles song ‘All You Need is Love’ is probably the most influential modern myth about love. It promises a single solution to

complex problems; it echoes religious ideas about love as if love as a universal solvent or redemptive force (offering us salvation); This has crept into some humanist slogans such as “Just be kind”. My view is that love is appropriate to family relationships, intimate relationships, and possibly friendships. I don’t think we should try to ‘love’ everyone. It seems an inappropriate word to apply universally. Words that *could* apply universally include treating everyone with humanity, respect, consideration, and fairness.

There was a table discussion about popular songs including Love is the Sweetest/Greatest Thing (Ray Noble, 1932); Will You Love Me Tomorrow? (Carole King 1960, 1971 Tapestry album); What the World Needs Now is Love Sweet Love (Bacharach/David, Dione Warwick, 1965); Love is All Around (I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes) – A big hit for The Troggs during the Summer of Love 1967; Love is the Drug (Roxy Music, 1975); Love’s in Need of Love Today (Stevie Wonder, 1976).

### Reflections on love in popular culture

Does the pop industry treat love as a God substitute or religion substitute? Is love being idolised and totalised? Is the pop industry responsible for a lot of unrealistic ideas and myths about love? Can it make you feel like a failure if love goes wrong or if you haven’t found it in the first place? The belief that ►

“You are incomplete without romantic love” can cause chronic dissatisfaction. People *can* live happy and fulfilled lives without finding the Holy Grail of “their one true love”. Humans do of course need connection and affection but there are different ways of meeting these needs. Romantic or sexual love is one way, not the only way. Sexual love can of course be intoxicating – at a biological level it’s a neurotransmitter response to human attraction and physical intimacy. But the idea that it’s ‘endless’ (Endless Love – Diana Ross and Lionel Richie, 1981 film) may be fanciful. The initial ‘rush’ is often temporary and marriage can evolve into companionship. Breakups can feel like existential collapse but a lot of songs talk about resilience (I Will Survive – Gloria Gaynor, 1978). Unconditional Love (Donna Summer, 1983) seems to apply to mother/baby and parent/child relationships but love should have boundaries to avoid abusive behaviour.

### **Eric Fromm on the art of loving**

Eric Fromm was a German-American psychoanalyst and humanistic philosopher. In 1957 he published a book called *The Art of Loving* which is very dated but he did make some interesting observations. He wrote that love is or should be a “social phenomenon” – not just something which is “highly individualistic”. Presented love as a capacity or competency – not just something we experience. Something we do. Almost like a skill to be practised. “Love depends on our capacity to grow, to develop a productive orientation in our relationship towards the world and ourselves”. He wrote: “...the main condition for the achievement of love is the overcoming of one’s narcissism” (defined by him as excessive egotism, my subjective world is of paramount or exclusive concern). “Love requires the development of humility, objectivity and reason”. He believed that self-love is the opposite of selfishness: “If it is a virtue to love my neighbour as a human being, it must be a virtue – and not a vice – to love myself, since I am a human being too”. “Genuine love implies care, respect,

responsibility and knowledge... an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person. From this it follows that my own self must be as much an object of my love as another person. The affirmation of one’s own life, happiness, growth, and freedom...”.

### **Alfred Adler on love**

Adler was an Austrian psychotherapist, a younger contemporary of Sigmund Freud. He proposed that ‘contributing to others’ (social interest or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*) was how each individual feels a sense of worth and belonging in the family and society. He emphasised that healthy love requires a ‘horizontal’ relationship – a partnership between equals. ‘Vertical’ relationships, characterized by a dynamic of superiority and inferiority or control and submission, cannot sustain ‘true love’. Happiness in love comes from shifting focus from ‘me’ to ‘us’ – from receiving love to actively giving and contributing to the shared well-being and happiness of the partnership. In a loving relationship, partners should not intrude on each other’s areas of responsibility or try to change one another. Relationships built on control, jealousy, or possessiveness are not indicative of love. Love should feel liberating and empowering.

### **Summary of main points**

- “Love” is an overloaded word – there are plenty of other words we can use in English to get the right meaning in the right context. Care, connection, affection, benevolence, and compassion are useful alternatives.
- Love is not just a feeling; it can also be treated as a virtue or a competency that can be developed and nurtured. To love is to be prosocial – rather than antisocial.
- Self-love is a virtue – this doesn’t mean selfishness or narcissism. It means that care for oneself is an important precondition for human flourishing.



Should we just  
“forgive” neighbours  
who fail to dispose of  
their rubbish properly?

## Forgiveness in theory and in practice

*Twenty people attended our inaugural Humanist Forum event at the Westcliff Hotel. Simon Whipple led a stimulating, thought-provoking and sometimes controversial discussion. This is not a verbatim report but an AI-assisted rendering of the event.*

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I hope you’ll forgive me for beginning in a cathedral. I went to Evensong at Salisbury Cathedral last Sunday. The sermon was, I think, on forgiveness — though I should admit the PA system was so poor I couldn’t hear most of it.

So I went home and did what any sensible person would do: I read up on forgiveness instead. What I’d like to do this evening is talk about what forgiveness means, some of the misconceptions around it, the different types of forgiveness, the benefits it might have for the person doing the forgiving, and finally a practical method — one associated with Harvard Medical School — which claims to help people learn how to forgive. Whether it works or not, we can decide together.

### What do we mean by forgiveness?

Rather than define forgiveness myself, I’d rather hear what you think. One suggestion I quite like is that forgiveness is to stop holding a grudge — letting go of malice or negative feeling. Another is that it’s about trying to understand why someone did what they did, without necessarily saying they were right. David S has put it rather nicely as “reaching an accommodation with an injury” — acknowledging that a wrong has happened, but finding a way to live with it rather than carrying it around like a stone in your pocket.

There’s also an emotional strand running through all this. Forgiveness, for some of you, is being able to think about what happened without feeling the initial surge of anger or hurt. The memory remains, but the emotional charge fades.

David W introduced a metaphor that I’m going to keep coming back to: debt. When someone wrongs you, it can feel as if they “owe” you something. Forgiveness, in that sense, is cancelling the debt. ►

## Four awkward questions

Once you start pulling on that thread, things get complicated very quickly. So I'm going to throw four questions at you and let you wrestle with them at your tables.

1. **Can you forgive without forgetting?**
2. **Can you forgive without an apology?**
3. **Can you forgive without effectively condoning the bad action?**
4. **And can you forgive without reconciliation?**

What becomes obvious almost immediately is that forgiveness covers a vast range of offences. It runs from someone stepping on your toe, through family betrayals, all the way to murder, massacre, and genocide. That alone should make us suspicious of neat, one-size-fits-all answers.

One point does keep surfacing, though, and I think it's an important one: forgiving is not the same as condoning. You can let go of resentment without declaring that what happened was acceptable. And you can forgive without inviting a repeat performance.

We also touched on something slightly awkward. Do you even need to tell someone you've forgiven them? Saying "I forgive you" can sometimes sound sanctimonious — as if you're placing yourself above the other person. For some people, especially those who feel they've been on the receiving end of moral judgement in the past, the phrase itself can provoke resistance.

## When apologies become political

Now, this question about apologies has taken us somewhere I hadn't quite planned — from personal relationships into history and politics. We've started talking about the Amritsar Massacre (1919) and later apologies made by representatives of the British state. David S has been very clear in his view: such apologies can be fatuous or even insulting. How can someone who didn't commit the act presume to apologise for it?



*Can a British monarch meaningfully apologise for the Amritsar Massacre? On 13 April 1919, British troops under Brigadier General Reginald Dyer opened fire on a large, unarmed crowd gathered in a walled public garden in Amritsar, Punjab (then British India), where many people were trapped with few exits. The official British figure recorded 379 deaths, while Indian estimates place the toll in the hundreds or more, with many additional wounded. The event caused international outrage and became a major turning point in the Indian independence movement.*

Others have argued that while the apologise isn't personally guilty, they may still stand as a representative of an ongoing political body, and the apology can be symbolic — a way of recognising harm and trying to repair a relationship between peoples rather than individuals.

Clare has brought in her own experience of India and what she's been reading about Empire, pointing out how differently these histories are often weighed there compared to how we tend to remember them in Britain.

And Aaron raises a practical and slightly uncomfortable question: if you apologise, are you opening the door to reparations? That leads us into the legal side of things — the fact that in law, saying "sorry" can imply ►

liability. Which helps explain why institutions are often advised never to apologise, even when they might want to express regret.

What this digression shows me is something quite important. Forgiveness and apology change their character at scale. What works between two people doesn't translate neatly to nations, systems, or history.

## A working definition

Let me try to pull this back to a working definition. I want to start with the opposite of forgiveness: unforgiveness is *resentment* due to a perceived wrong done to you. That resentment might be mild irritation or profound moral outrage. *Forgiveness, as I'm using the term tonight, is about removing that resentment.* It's very much from the wronged person's point of view. I'm going to suggest that people seem to get rid of resentment in at least three ways.

**The first way** is by *outsourcing justice*. You decide you won't carry the burden because someone else will. In religious form, God will deal with it — fire, brimstone, and all that. In secular form, the state will deal with it — courts, prisons, punishment. Knowing that justice is being handled elsewhere can, psychologically, lighten the emotional load. You don't have to be the one carrying vengeance around in your head.

**The second way** is by *reducing the offender's responsibility*. You tell yourself they didn't know any better, were unwell, culturally conditioned, or simply foolish. The act may still be wrong, but you let the person off the hook to some degree, and resentment loosens its grip.

**The third way** is more direct. You accept that the act was wrong and that the person is responsible — but you *choose to put down the burden of anger* anyway. This is the part I want to link to what's often called the Harvard method: the idea that resentment is something you can, at least in principle, decide to stop carrying.

Steve asked, "Is this just about self-interest? Are you just talking about making yourself feel better?" My answer is yes. Principally, that's what it is. There may be side benefits — reconciliation, social repair, moral example — but the core mechanism is *internal relief*.

## Types of forgiveness and common misconceptions

I'm going to suggest a few "types" of forgiveness.

1. Divine forgiveness/forgiven by God
2. Intergroup or diplomatic forgiveness — the sort we've just been discussing in relation to history and politics; and
3. Personal forgiveness, which I think has two parts. The first part might be called "decisional forgiveness": deciding you will not seek revenge or punishment. And the second part is "emotional forgiveness": letting go of resentment and bitterness.

I'll also list what I see as some **common misconceptions**:

1. That you can't forgive without forgetting
2. That you can't forgive without an apology
3. That you can't forgive without reconciliation
4. That forgiveness means condoning wrongdoing

Judging by the reaction in the room, none of those are as straightforward as they first sound.

## Why bother forgiving at all?

This is where the "Harvard" framing comes in. The claim is that forgiveness works a bit like mental hygiene. It reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, improves sleep, and cuts down on the kind of late-night mental loops that begin with phrases like "that bastard..."

In other words, forgiveness is being sold not just as a moral virtue, but as a way of being kinder to your own nervous system. ►

## The Harvard Method meets seagulls

Right. Let's try the method. Steve has very kindly volunteered an ongoing grievance: rubbish bags left in a shared doorway in town, ripped open by seagulls, turning the entrance into a daily tip.

**The first step** is to recall what's happened, as objectively as possible, and why it hurts. Steve describes repeated antisocial behaviour — not a one-off, but something that happens day after day.

**The next step** is empathy. What might the offenders' motives be? Convenience. Laziness. Guests passing through who don't live with the consequences.

*At this point, the room did something quite revealing. We stopped talking about forgiveness and started talking about systems. Signs. Bins. Landlords. Reporting littering. In other words, problem-solving broke out!*

David W quite reasonably said Steve shouldn't simply forgive — this is behaviour that needs addressing. Others suggested that if nothing changes, the only reliable solution might be moving house — not necessarily an option.

I think this tells us something important. Forgiveness works most easily with past wrongs. It struggles when the wrong is ongoing, predictable, and preventable. Letting go of resentment may lower your blood pressure, but it doesn't stop repeat offending.

## Where does this leave us?

I'm not going to pretend we've reached a neat conclusion. I may even write to Harvard and tell them their system didn't work on the one sample we tried. But I do think we've clarified a few things.

Forgiveness isn't the same as condoning. It can be decisional or emotional. It can be done inwardly, even without apology or reconciliation. It can sometimes help offenders as well as those who've been wronged, as in restorative justice.

## The Harvard Method of Forgiveness

(Harvard Medical School) is a practical approach that treats forgiveness as a skill rather than a feeling. It typically involves four steps:

1. Recalling the event objectively, focusing on what happened and why it hurt;
2. Empathising with the offender, trying to understand their context or motives without excusing the behaviour;
3. Remembering a time you were forgiven yourself, to foster perspective and humility; and
4. Making a conscious decision to release resentment, choosing emotional relief over continued anger.

The emphasis is on improving the well-being of the person who forgives, rather than on reconciling with the offender.

And it has limits. It doesn't replace justice, boundaries, or practical action, especially when harm is ongoing.

If nothing else, tonight shows how hard it is to generalise about forgiveness — because it runs from petty irritations to the gravest moral injuries — and yet how persistently it returns as a human problem: how to live without being permanently chained to resentment. And, occasionally, how to get along with seagulls.

## Postscript

Since we held our discussion on forgiveness Steve has reported that he is feeling more relaxed about the rubbish left out by his neighbours. He is also contemplating erecting a notice to ensure that his neighbours are reminded of their duties to ensure that their rubbish is properly disposed of before the seagulls get to open the bin bags.

It appears that Harvard method may have been effective in helping Steve to forgive his neighbours, even if it does take a little time to work through before feeling the benefits.



# Letters & Emails

*It's your column...*

## ***From Aaron Darkwood on the importance of self-love***

A definition of self-love: “Regard for one’s own well-being and happiness.”

The topic of self-love came up briefly during our recent discussion on love, following a book David introduced and some table conversation afterwards. A comment made in passing — and the tone of the discussion — prompted me to reflect more deeply on what self-love actually means, and why it matters.

I offered at the time that self-hatred and self-loathing, which can lead to self-destruction, must be balanced by self-love. I’d like to expand on that.

For people living broadly happy, stable lives, self-love may never feel like a concept that needs examining. It may seem obvious, or even unnecessary. But for those who have made serious mistakes, carry deep regret, or have seen their self-esteem collapse, self-love is not a luxury — it is often the first step back.

When the idea was first offered to me in 2001 as a starting point for dealing with my own difficulties, my reaction was blunt: “How on earth do you love yourself? What does that even mean?” Several books and many years later, I’ve learned that self-love is not about ego, vanity, or positive thinking. It’s about regard — caring enough about yourself to act in your own interests. That means:

- looking after your mental and physical health
- standing up for yourself
- rebuilding self-esteem rather than reinforcing shame
- owning mistakes without being controlled by them
- choosing not to neglect yourself because you feel you “don’t matter”

It also means learning how to think differently. I replaced “shoulds” with “coulds”. Shoulds berate; coulds teach. I learned to notice what went well instead of only replaying failures. Not to ignore mistakes, but to learn from them without punishment.

Affirmations helped too — not because they were magical, but because when you’re in a deep hole you can go weeks without a single kind thought about yourself. In the early days I printed them out, stuck them around my home, and listened to them while running. They were forcefully injected into my awareness until they began to take root.

Another lesson was stopping people-pleasing. Doing things because I chose to, not because I felt compelled. Giving others genuine opt-out choices ‘No wrong answer’ — something I learned from Chris S — so that connection was voluntary, not demanded. Interestingly, others adopted this approach too.

I’ve spoken to eight counsellors over the years, blogged about this, and continue to explore it in depth. I’m not “there yet”. But the results matter.

In 2025, four situations arose which in earlier years would have led to self-harm, overdose, and hospitalisation. This time, although I was derailed — including a panic attack in one case and shutdown in others — there was no physical damage. The outcomes were different. Self-love, practiced as care and protection rather than indulgence, made that possible.

As someone who has survived those earlier years, I want to say clearly: self-love matters. For some people, it is not optional. It is a vital part of harm-reduction and of moving forward at all.

The brief dismissal of the idea during discussion is what prompted me to write this. Not to argue, but to explain why, for some of us, self-love isn’t a slogan — it’s a lifeline.



# A point of view

David Warden

Dorset Humanists is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year – a milestone we can be proud of. But if Dorset Humanists is going to continue long into the future, say until 2056, it seems important to me that we should cultivate a sense of our community memory. One of the small ways we can do this is to recall some of the Darwin-themed events we have hosted over the years.

One talk which made an impression on me was by Dennis Bannister at Moordown Community Centre in September 2009. Dennis, a leading member of our group, attempted to answer the question whether Darwin was a humanist. When Darwin died in 1882, the word ‘humanism’ in its modern sense was only just beginning to emerge. It didn’t fully gain traction until the 1940s. But was Darwin a humanist in all but name? Unfortunately, our archive does not extend to a transcript of Dennis’s talk but I do recall his conclusion: Yes, Darwin counts as a humanist. How did Dennis arrive at this conclusion?

As a young man, Darwin trained for the Anglican clergy and accepted much of the religious worldview of his time. But the long intellectual journey that led to *On the Origin of Species* carried him away from orthodox belief. As his understanding of the natural world deepened, he found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the scale of suffering in nature with the idea of a benevolent, all-powerful designer. In later life, he described himself not as an atheist, but as an agnostic.

What resonates strongly with humanists today is not simply where Darwin ended up, but how he got there. His work exemplifies a commitment to careful observation, patience, and intellectual honesty. He spent more than twenty years refining his ideas before publishing, out of a desire to be as accurate and fair as possible. Truth, for Darwin, was something to be earned through attention and evidence, not received through authority or tradition.

Darwin transformed how humanity understands itself. By placing human beings firmly within the natural world rather than above it, he challenged the idea that we are the centre or purpose of creation. In his later writings, he emphasised the continuity between humans and other animals – in emotions, social bonds, and moral instincts. This continuity invites humility rather than supremacy, and kinship rather than separateness. He was deeply troubled by cruelty and suffering, both in human society and in nature itself. He opposed slavery and expressed strong moral sympathy for the vulnerable. His struggle to publish his theory was not only intellectual but personal, shaped by concern for how his ideas might affect his religious wife and the wider social world.

Perhaps the most honest humanist claim for Darwin is that he modelled a way of being in the world: attentive, questioning, morally serious, and willing to live with uncertainty rather than settle for comforting answers. In that sense, Darwin stands less as a secular saint and more as a quiet exemplar of humanist virtue – the courage to follow the evidence, and the consequences, wherever they lead.