

Photo by Aaron

## Making Sense of Humanism Today

### The next phase for Dorset Humanists

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March – informal lunch at 1.15pm Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW**

Join us for a delicious, informal, complimentary lunch – jacket potatoes with a choice of delicious toppings and salads – followed by David Warden's short talk on humanism and Dorset Humanists, our annual *Humanist of the Year* award, and AGM business. Non-members are very welcome to attend.

If you would like to offer any practical help on the day please contact David (contact details below).

Dorset Humanists is a vibrant and growing humanist group. You can be part of our success by attending our annual meeting and by contributing your views and ideas.

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## Pecking Orders – pros and cons

**Humanist Forum facilitated by Simon Whipple: Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> March 7.30pm Bournemouth West Cliff Hotel, 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. All welcome.**

We know that chickens have pecking orders – formally known as dominance hierarchies – but do similar structures exist among humans? Before opening the discussion, Simon will outline the many subtle clues that suggest people instinctively defer to those they perceive as being higher in the hierarchy. He will also explore the potential benefits and drawbacks of living in a hierarchical society. After this short introduction, we'll consider together how hierarchy shapes our behaviour, relationships, and sense of fairness.





50 members and guests (including Sandra and Helen above) enjoyed delicious home-cooked food at our highly successful Darwin Feast Day on 14<sup>th</sup> February at Moordown Community Centre. Photos by Aaron.

## Dates for your diary

|   |                    |   |
|---|--------------------|---|
| Thursday 5 <sup>th</sup> March<br>7.30pm  | Moon in the Square | Humanists in the pub. Informal pub social hosted by Dean or Lyn.                                |
| Saturday 14 <sup>th</sup> March<br>1.15pm | Moordown           | Free lunch followed by David Warden's talk on humanism, Humanist of the Year award, and AGM     |
| Friday 20 <sup>th</sup> March<br>7.30pm   | Westcliff Hotel    | Hotel bar social hosted by Sandra Lucie-Smith. No set agenda. Come along for a friendly social. |
| Thursday 26 <sup>th</sup> March<br>7.30pm | Westcliff Hotel    | Humanist Forum: Simon Whipple leads a discussion on 'Pecking Orders: pros and cons'.            |

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



# Evolutionary psychology & the humanist project

*More than 50 people attended our Darwin Day lecture by our treasurer Daniel Dancey. Daniel's lively and accessible style stimulated lively discussion and raised questions that go well beyond the subject itself. For humanists in particular, evolutionary psychology touches on some of the most fundamental issues we face: what is human nature, where do our moral instincts come from, and how might a clearer understanding of ourselves help us live well together? This article reflects on some of these broader issues while incorporating Daniel's main points. The whole lecture can be viewed on our YouTube channel.*

## What is evolutionary psychology?

At its simplest, evolutionary psychology is the attempt to understand aspects of human thought and behaviour in the light of evolution. Just as our bodies have been shaped by natural selection, so too – many psychologists argue – have our emotional and social tendencies. Traits such as empathy, cooperation, loyalty, jealousy, and even our sense of fairness may have developed because they helped our ancestors survive and flourish in small, interdependent communities over many thousands of years.

## The Darwin link

The roots of this approach go back to Charles Darwin himself. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), he suggested that moral instincts and social emotions evolved gradually, just like physical characteristics. In recent decades, evolutionary psychologists such as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby (University of California, Santa Barbara), David Buss (University of Texas at Austin), and Steven Pinker (Harvard University) have explored these ideas more systematically, examining how features of the human mind may have been shaped by the challenges of prehistoric life.

For humanists, this perspective is particularly significant because it offers a naturalistic account of morality. If empathy, guilt, gratitude, and concern for reputation have evolutionary roots, then moral life need not depend on divine command or supernatural sanction. Our ethical capacities may arise from our nature as highly social animals whose survival depended on cooperation and trust. At the same time, evolutionary thinking reminds us that less attractive tendencies – tribalism, suspicion of outsiders, and the impulse to divide the world into “us” and “them” – may also be part of our inheritance.

## Evolutionary ethics

This is where evolutionary psychology begins to overlap with what philosophers sometimes call evolutionary ethics. While evolutionary psychology seeks to explain how our moral instincts developed, evolutionary ethics asks what we should make of them. If our sense of right and wrong has evolutionary origins, should we simply follow our instincts? Or should we sometimes question or reshape them in the light of reason and experience? For humanists, these are not abstract questions but part of an ongoing effort to understand how we might build more cooperative and flourishing societies. ►

## Prisoner's Dilemma

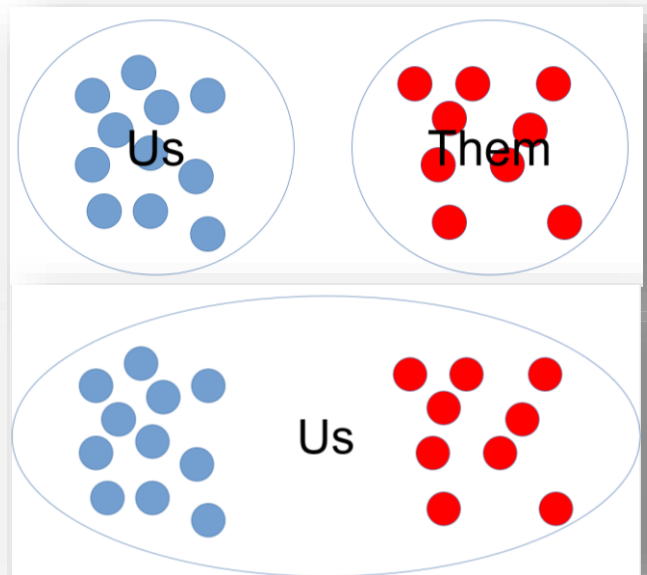
It was against this wider background that Daniel introduced his subject in an engaging and accessible way. Rather than beginning with theory, he invited volunteers to take part in a simple game based on the well-known "Prisoner's Dilemma". Participants could either share a small prize or attempt to take it all for themselves. Although self-interest might appear to favour selfishness, the volunteers chose to cooperate – reflecting a common finding in real-world studies that many people prefer fairness and mutual benefit to opportunistic gain.

Daniel used this and a second, repeated version of the game to illustrate a key point: in a world where we encounter one another repeatedly, cooperation and trust tend to be more successful strategies than short-term selfishness. Over time, relationships based on reciprocity, reputation, and occasional forgiveness are more stable and rewarding than those based on constant competition. In this sense, the "golden rule" – treating others as we would wish to be treated – can be seen not only as a moral ideal but as a practical strategy shaped by social life over long periods.

## Evolutionary roots

From there Daniel turned to the evolutionary background of human social behaviour. For most of our history, he suggested, human beings lived in relatively small communities where everyone knew one another and shared common customs and beliefs. In such settings, cooperation within the group was essential, but caution toward outsiders may also have been advantageous. The human tendency to form in-groups and out-groups – to distinguish between "us" and "them" – may therefore have deep evolutionary roots.

In modern, highly interconnected societies, however, these same tendencies can generate tension and misunderstanding. Daniel explored how tribal identities today are often signalled through language,



**Tribalism: From 'us and them' to 'us'**

symbols, and shared assumptions, enabling groups to identify insiders and outsiders quickly. He also reflected on the dangers of dehumanisation: when other groups are seen as fundamentally different or less than fully human, it becomes easier to ignore their suffering or justify harsh treatment. Understanding these psychological mechanisms, he suggested, may be one step toward resisting them.

## Optimism

Yet the overall message of the talk was not pessimistic. Daniel emphasised that human beings are also strongly disposed toward cooperation, honesty, and empathy. Studies suggest that most people behave fairly even when they could cheat without consequence. In emergencies, strangers often help one another at personal risk. Emotions such as guilt, gratitude, and love help to sustain relationships and repair them when they falter. From an evolutionary perspective, these traits may have played a crucial role in the survival and flourishing of human communities.

For humanists, the significance of these ideas lies in the way they illuminate both our limitations and our possibilities. If some of our less admirable instincts have deep evolutionary roots, this need not lead to ►

fatalism. Rather, it invites a more realistic understanding of human nature – one that recognises both our capacity for cooperation and our susceptibility to division. Ethical progress, on this view, is not a matter of denying our inheritance but of understanding it and working consciously with it.

### Questions for further reflection

At the same time, evolutionary psychology raises important questions about the nature of the good. Most humanists share a commitment to human flourishing, fairness, and compassion, yet they may differ in how they believe these ideals are best realised in practice. How far should we seek to transcend inherited tendencies toward group loyalty or cultural attachment? To what extent do stable communities depend on shared norms and boundaries as well as openness and inclusion? Such questions do not have simple answers, but they are the kind of questions that a reflective humanist community is well placed to explore.

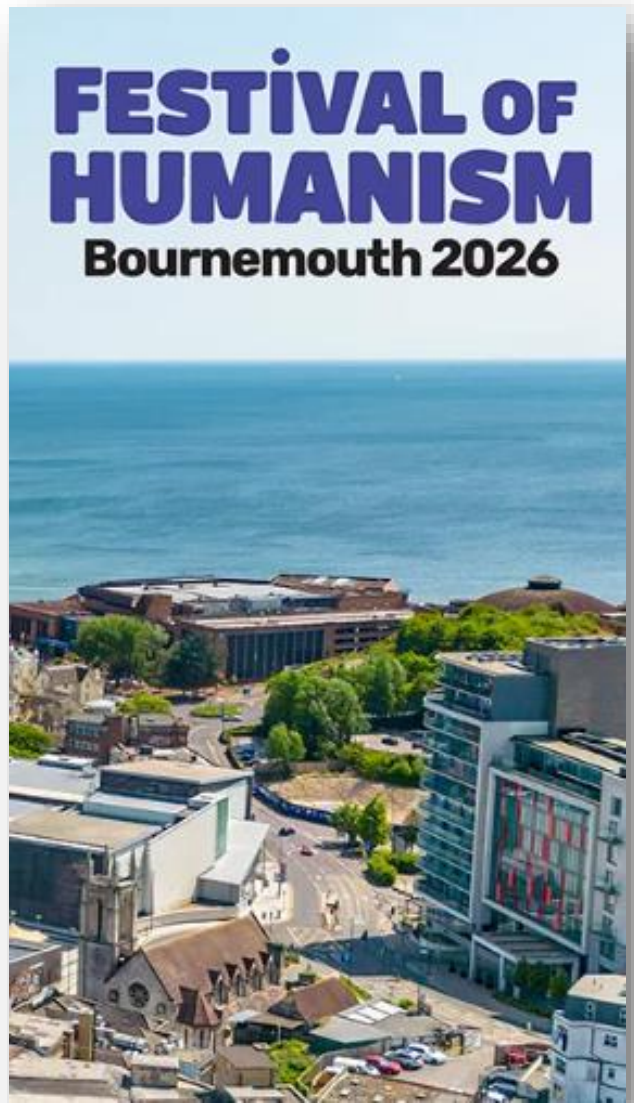
Seen in this light, Daniel's talk served as a valuable starting point for a wider conversation. Evolutionary psychology does not provide a complete account of human behaviour, nor does it dictate a single ethical outlook. What it offers is a powerful lens through which to view ourselves: as a species shaped by a long evolutionary past, yet capable of reflection, dialogue, and deliberate moral choice. For humanists committed to understanding what it means to live well together, that is a conversation well worth continuing.

### Further reading

Steven Pinker *The Blank Slate* (2002) is a readable introduction to the idea that human nature has biological roots.

Steve Stewart-Williams *The Ape That Understood the Universe* (2018).

David Buss *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (1999 but new editions have been published).



### Humanists UK's Festival of Humanism coming to Bournemouth this summer

12-14 June 2026 at Bournemouth International Centre, Exeter Road, BH2 5BH.

“Kicking off on Friday evening with a fantastic evening of entertainment and welcome drinks in the bar, from Saturday morning through to Sunday afternoon we welcome scientists and campaigners, historians and artists, politicians and journalists, to fascinate, educate, entertain – and inspire!”

Tickets for Humanists UK Festival 2026 are £159, or special rate of £79 for students, disabled people, and people in receipt of universal credit or pension credit.

Click image for further information or visit <https://humanists.uk/events/our-events/>

# Wrestling with Human Rights

*21 people attended our lively Humanist Forum at the Westcliff Hotel in February. The discussion was led by Barry Newman. Barry posed a series of questions about the nature, purpose, and limits of human rights, and invited us to examine assumptions that often go untested.*



The first question we considered was this one: “What is the purpose of human rights?” Some saw rights primarily as safeguards against coercion and abuse. Others emphasised their role in securing access to goods such as healthcare or education. Already it was clear that rights can be *negative* (liberty) rights – i.e., guarantees of protection from harm and the freedom to do and own things; or *positive* (claim) rights – i.e., guarantees that you will receive material goods or services from other people who commit time and resources to fulfilling those rights.

We then considered whether rights always place obligations on the givers of rights. It seemed difficult to deny that they do. A right to healthcare, for example, requires doctors, nurses, infrastructure, and funding. A right to free speech requires restraint from those who might suppress it. However, the underlying assumptions that rights are “given” was challenged. Are they not rather claimed or asserted? The discussion revealed a subtle tension between viewing rights as donations, as legal constructs, or as moral demands that precede law.

A further question concerned the philosophical or even ontological status of rights. Are rights *natural*? There was some agreement that our sense of fairness, reciprocity, and mutual restraint are likely to have evolutionary roots. In that sense, rights language might codify deep-seated moral instincts. Yet this does not settle whether rights are inherent features of the world or human constructs layered upon social life.

The question of “inalienability” also proved tricky. A state can clearly remove rights in

practice, whether through imprisonment, emergency powers, or systemic injustice. Yet individuals and movements may continue to claim rights even when they are denied – as in apartheid South Africa. This suggests that rights operate simultaneously as legal realities and as moral protests against injustice.

Universality was perhaps the most contested theme of the evening. Are human rights genuinely universal across cultures? Attempts to identify uncontroversial examples quickly ran into difficulty. Even practices widely condemned in liberal societies, such as female genital mutilation, are defended within some cultural frameworks as protecting social or familial structures. Likewise, discussions of torture and the right to life revealed uneasy tensions. Would torture ever be justified to prevent catastrophic harm? Can the right to life be forfeited through murder or terrorism? During the pandemic, basic liberties were curtailed in the name of public health. Each example suggested that rights are often balanced against other goods rather than treated as absolute.

By the end of the evening, there was no neat synthesis. If anything, the conversation made the concept of rights feel more complex and less settled than before. Human rights language is powerful, but it carries philosophical ambiguities and practical tensions. It can express moral aspiration, legal structure, evolutionary instinct, and political negotiation all at once. Rather than resolving these tensions, the forum exposed them – and in doing so offered a reminder that rights are living concepts, shaped by history, culture, and ongoing debate.

# Committee nominations

*We received 10 nominations for the 2026/27 committee by the end of February deadline stipulated in our Constitution. Members will be invited at the AGM to vote for the entire list of 10 names. A separate vote is taken to elect a committee member to the role of Chair.*

**Simon Whipple** is not standing for election this year. Simon has been a member of our committee for eight years and we are enormously grateful for the contributions he has made, including legal guidance and finding guest speakers. He will continue to be one of the lead facilitators at our Humanist Forum on the fourth Thursday of each month.

1. **David Warden** has been Chair of Dorset Humanists since 2009. He produces the bulletin, co-ordinates our events programme, and leads our pastoral team. He is an Honorary Member of Humanists UK and Editor of *Humanistically Speaking* magazine. David is willing to stand again for election as Chair.
2. **Lyn Glass** has been our Vice Chair since 2013. She was also our 'Speaker Finder' for many years and she often hosts our pub nights. Lyn is a former Chair of Poole Arts Trust (Lighthouse), and board trustee director of BH Live.
3. **Steve Neel** is our Secretary and social media lead.
4. **Daniel Dancey** is our Treasurer (since 2021). Daniel works in software engineering.
5. **Phil Butcher** is our main audio-visual technician. He organised our walks and short talks programme for a number of years. Phil worked for over 40 years in the nuclear industry.
6. **Barry Newman** is one of our Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) representatives, he leads our school visiting team and he is one of the lead facilitators at our Humanist Forum on the fourth Thursday of each month.
7. **Roger Mann** is our webmaster.
8. **Sally Hawkworth** is one of our Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) representatives. Sally is a retired teacher.
9. **Sandra Lucie-Smith** organises our festive event at the Marsham Court Hotel and hosts social nights at the Westcliff Hotel.
10. **Dean Robertson** is one of our pub night hosts and event chefs. Dean is an independent financial adviser.

Dorset Humanists currently has a full and active committee, but we always welcome expressions of interest from members who share our vision and could contribute particular skills in the future. We're particularly keen to hear from members who have a strong understanding of humanism and its values, bring skills in organisation, communication, or group facilitation, are reliable team players with a spirit of cooperation and goodwill, who share our vision of Dorset Humanists as a flourishing community, and can commit to attending most of our meetings and taking an active part in our programme of events.

If you're passionate about helping us grow and thrive, please contact David Warden or Steve Neel to arrange an informal conversation about what's involved.

[secretary@dorset.humanist.org.uk](mailto:secretary@dorset.humanist.org.uk) or [chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk](mailto:chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk)

# Dorset Humanists Impact Report 2025/26

## Aim 1

Promote Humanism understood as a non-religious ethical worldview

**Aim 1:** We hosted **2** well-attended evening courses about humanism. During the 2024/25 school year, our **school visiting team** and the **Many Faiths Team** spoke to around **6800** students about humanism. We take a leading role in editing and writing for an **online humanist magazine** with global reach. **522** people subscribe to our YouTube channel which contains **152** videos. **1,032** people subscribe to our Meetup site and our Meetup satisfaction rating is **4.5** stars out of **2216** ratings. Our monthly bulletin is sent to **741** subscribers.

## Aim 2

Develop, and serve the needs of, the Humanist community in Dorset

**Aim 2:** We now have **215** paid-up members. We continue to host a full programme of speaker and discussion events on a wide range of topics. We held a barbecue in a member's garden in June to celebrate **World Humanist Day** and a charity fundraising afternoon tea in the Chairman's garden in August. Our **Pastoral Team** and **Hardship Scheme** have assisted members in need. Our **walks programme** promoted fitness and friendship and our **social events** in a pub and a hotel bar promote friendship and connection. Our **Dorchester humanist group** holds monthly discussion events.

## Aim 3

Promote the public understanding of science

**Aim 3:** We hosted an 'origins of the universe' dialogue event which brought Christian and humanist perspectives together and our Darwin Day lecturer spoke about evolutionary psychology.

## Aim 4

Be a force for good in our local community and globally

**Aim 4:** We paid out **£3981** to charities **Hope for Food** foodbank and **Humanist Schools in Uganda**. The son of one of our members paid an extended visit to one of the humanist schools in Uganda. David Warden spoke at the **Bournemouth Remembrance Service** and at the Bournemouth & Poole **Holocaust Memorial Day** event.

## Aim 5

Support the work of our partners

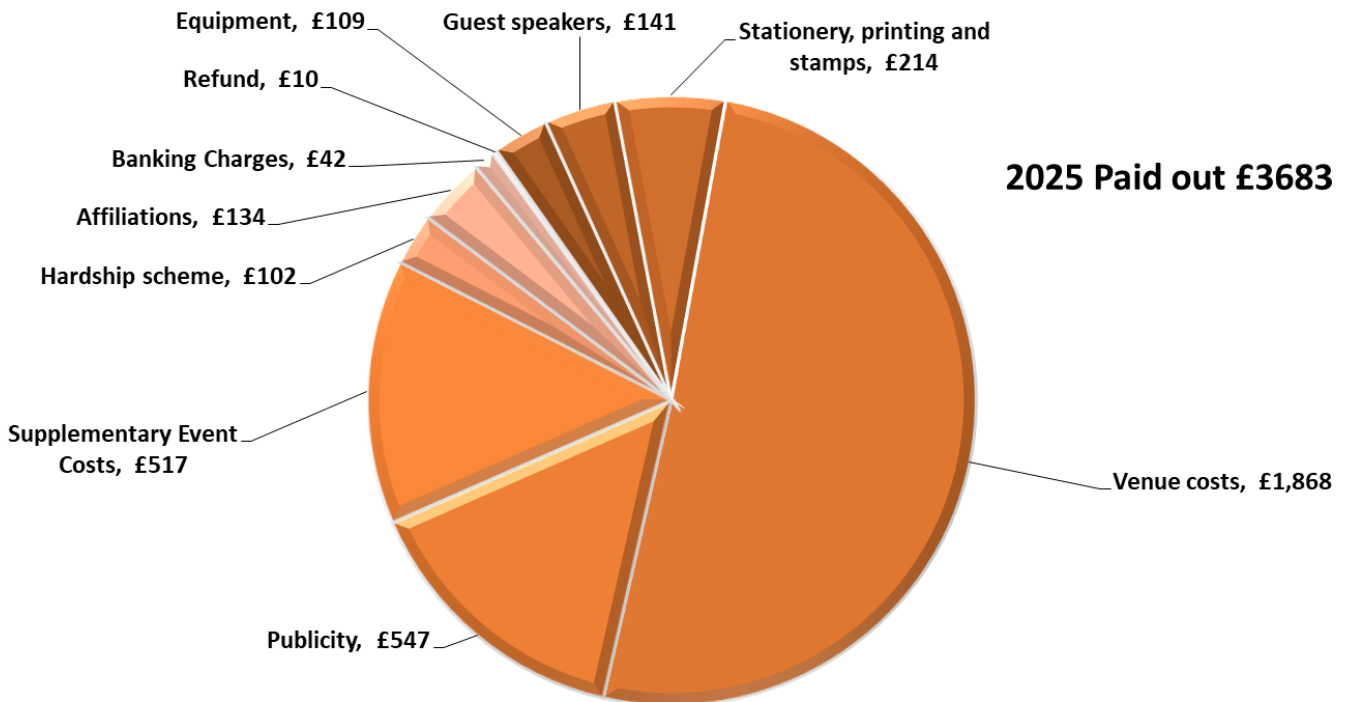
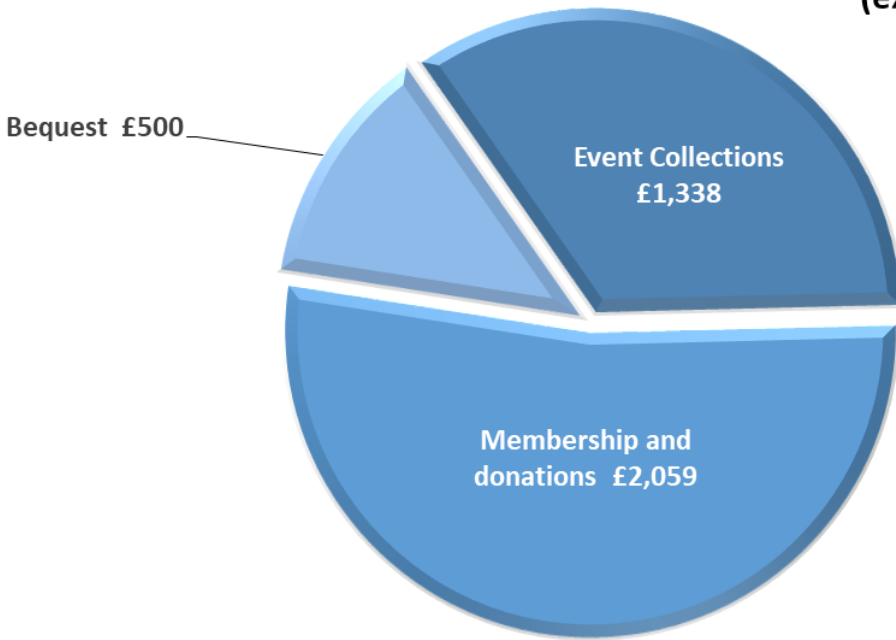
**Aim 5:** Committee members attended the **Group Representatives Annual Meeting** in Reading and the **National Secular Society Members' Meeting** in London. We pay subs to Humanists UK, the National Secular Society, and Humanists International.

*If you like what we do, please show your support and solidarity by becoming a member for an incredible £15 a year. 215 of you already have – thank you!*

# 2025 accounts at-a-glance

Our treasurer Daniel Dancey will present definitive accounts for member approval at our AGM on 14<sup>th</sup> March. These indicative graphs are for illustration purposes only.

**2025 Paid in £3897  
(excluding appeal)**





# A point of view

By Steve Neel, Secretary of Dorset Humanists

I thought our discussion on human rights at the Westcliff Hotel was interesting and thought provoking. However, I was a little surprised that as humanists we had no real consensus on the 'right to life' and the 'right not to be tortured'.

I realise that humanists are proud of having no doctrine or creed, but I thought two of the core principles of humanism were 'this one life' and a 'belief in self-determination'. So the idea of bringing back the death penalty or condoning torture in certain circumstance seem very anti-humanist to me.

Putting aside abortion, as that's a different argument, I believe that once a person is born they have a right to life and protection from adults that might harm them. Those harms would include all forms of abuse especially FGM, non-medical circumcision and cutting off ear lobes etc. A child is born intact and has a right to remain intact. So in this sense, I have no problem identifying some human rights as absolutes. Richard Dawkins would go even further having described religious indoctrination as 'child abuse'.

I think some of the problems in the discussion centred around what we think 'should' be rights and I would argue that a lot of what we call rights are actually just privileges that have become enhanced by legislation which has given them the appearance of rights. I wish I'd thought of this on the night, but as we add more and more so-called 'rights' into the body of UK law we seem to lose sight of the two fundamentals I've mentioned. In my view, they're unconditional. Other, so-called 'rights' may well be conditional in some way.

I would be the first to agree that, in general, rights legislation has become bloated with a large proportion of those rights actually being privileges. For example, you don't have the right to drive. It's a privilege, it's conditional. And health care for migrants might well be considered a privilege, as are many other things. But having said that, I wouldn't want to assume all rights are conditional.

Personally, I'm not in favour of the death penalty or torture as both of these are susceptible to 'thin end of the wedge' arguments. People make mistakes with the death penalty and governments, such as in Iran, can justify all sorts of things under emergency powers. The problem with torture is simple: if you torture your captives then don't be too surprised when your enemy does the same. The Americans went right out on a limb at Guantanamo Bay with waterboarding, pushing what was acceptable and legal to an extreme.

Relying on the vagaries of culture or society is very risky. Surely we haven't forgotten what happened in 1930s Germany when culture and society changed for the worse. It could easily do so again with the right kind of persuasion. We may not be able to do much about some of the world's atrocities but I don't think we should passively accept such things and say 'Well, it's just their culture'. We always need to condemn what we believe is wrong so in that sense what few things we do decide are 'rights' are universal – or else are they really rights or just local privileges and preferences?