Dorset Humanists

A partner of Humanists UK

National Secular Society Affiliated group

Dorset Humanists Bulletin – June 2024 *Think for yourself but not by yourself (Julian Baggini)*

Transhumanism & Superintelligence



Saturday 8th June, 2.00pm at Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW. Please RSVP via Meetup or email.

A talk by David Wood, Chair of London Futurists and co-founder of the Transhumanist Party UK

Everyone welcome - free entry - a voluntary donation of around £3.00 is appreciated but not obligatory. After the refreshment break, we usually have a friendly and popular *TalkBack* circle, finishing no later than 4.30pm.

Transhumanism is a philosophical and social movement that advocates the use of science and technology to enhance human physical and cognitive abilities, as well as to improve human health and extend human life spans. It explores the potential benefits and ethical implications of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and nanotechnology, to overcome fundamental human limitations.

David Wood is a superb presenter and this is his second talk for Dorset Humanists. He is Chair of London Futurists, co-founder of the Transhumanist Party UK, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

How can we trust science?



Wednesday 26th June, 7.30pm at West Cliff Hotel 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. Please RSVP via Meetup or email.

A talk by Tom Whipple, science editor at *The Times* newspaper

Humanists trust the scientific method in general, but how are we to choose between two competing theories or accounts of something, both of which claim to be scientific? For example, many sane and sober people have struggled to decide whether to accept Covid vaccines and there is an increasing scepticism about trusting medical advice. Tom Whipple, who is science editor at *The Times*, says that it's hard to talk about this problem in the abstract, but easier in the specific. He's well-versed in the evidence as to why the vaccines are safe and effective, and also some of the counterarguments and key players who are saying the opposite. He will explain how he decides whom to trust.

Email: chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk
Phone: 07910 886629
HMRC Charities Ref No EW10227

Click for events

Click for website



Is it cooked? John Hubbard and David Warden inspecting a sausage

World Humanist Day Barbecue

Friday 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. Please bring your own food to cook on the barbecue and some food and drink to share if you would like to. Experienced barbecue monitors welcome! RSVP on Meetup (click image above). Venue details will be provided to bona fide members and guests who RSVP. You can contact David on 07910 886629.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 8th June 2pm	Moordown	Transhumanism & superintelligence. A talk by David Wood, Chair of London Futurists
Sunday 9th June 1pm	Bournemouth	*Faith to Faithless* support group for people who have left high control religions. Join this group on Meetup to access the location. https://www.meetup.com/faithtofaithless/
Friday 21st June 6pm – 9pm	Member's house	World Humanist Day barbecue. RSVP on Meetup for location or contact David 07910 886629.
Wednesday 26th June 7.30pm	West Cliff Hotel	How can we trust science? A talk by Tom Whipple, science editor at *The Times*.
Saturday 13th July 2pm	Moordown	Save the date and look out for the next quarterly programme
Wednesday 26th June 7.30pm	West Cliff Hotel	Save the date and look out for the next quarterly programme
Plus other social events and walks which will be announced on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes.		

Summer trip to Down House





Book soon to reserve your place!

Simon Whipple has kindly offered to organise a Dorset Humanists trip to Down House – the historic home of Charles Darwin near Orpington in Kent.

Visiting Down House allows you to explore the very rooms where Darwin lived and worked, including his study where "On the Origin of Species" was written. The house is set within beautiful gardens that Darwin used as a "living laboratory" for his experiments. Highlights include a guided tour, an observation hive to watch bees, and Darwin's "thinking path" through the gardens. For more details, you can visit English Heritage's page on Down House.

Tuesday 3rd September

Pickup1 : Westbourne at 9.00am

Pickup 2: Ringwood (timing tbc)

Comfort break at Fleet services

Arrival approx. 12.00

One-hour separate guided tours arranged to visit the house and garden. Picnic lunch in the garden (bring your own sandwiches).

Departure time: 15.30

Going to: The Bridge Inn, Shawford, Winchester SO21 2BP ETA 17.30

Departure time: 18.30

Returning to pickup locations

Vehicle size: 34-seater

We regret that there are no provisions for disabled persons other than that the coach can sit down a little when people enter it, and wheelchairs are available for use at Down House.

Cost £36.80 per person. Free entry to Down House for English Heritage and National Trust Members, otherwise £12.33 for adults, and £10.80 for jobseekers and those aged over 65. Dorset Humanists Hardship Fund grants may be available to members without the means to pay. Contact David Warden or Cathy Silman.

To book:

Book and pay a deposit of £10.

Email simon.whipple@hotmail.co.uk

Or phone 07740 432159 or 01725 238237



Is "Just War" a contradiction in terms?

Edward Hadas, a Research Fellow at Blackfriars Hall, Oxford University, and a Catholic by conviction, gave us an informative although controversial talk on this topic at the end of April. This report includes excerpts from his talk. You can watch the talk and discussion here.

The just war tradition largely originates from the Catholic Church. I do not actually favour the just war tradition, making my stance somewhat heretical within the church. Spoiler alert: my argument will be that just war is indeed a contradiction in terms.

I contend that wars don't fit into the realm of justice. We can describe an act or a person as just, but I suggest that wars can rarely be justified as very just. I will argue that contemporary wars, for reasons that may be apparent, are particularly challenging to justify as just. What I think of as a terrible failure – a noble failure, but a terrible failure – is the idea that if we start taking seriously the notion that war should be just, it would somehow reduce the frequency and intensity of wars. In fact, the quest for justice in war has made wars worse, not better. This is a controversial claim, and I hope it will provoke a lot of questions.

The notion of just war, while noble in theory, often fails to constrain the practice of war. War is deeply ingrained in human behaviour, with justice often taking a secondary role.

Why do people go to war? This profound question is more relevant in modern culture because, historically, the necessity of war was taken for granted. War was seen as character-building, requiring bravery, loyalty, and endurance. People wanted to go to war to exhibit these traits. Moreover, men have an inherent desire for violence, which societies have always had to manage. War provides a legitimate outlet for this violence.

Traditionally, war also offered the prospect of plunder. Soldiers could become rich by seizing the possessions of the vanquished. War also gave men the opportunity for rape, a grim but acknowledged aspect of historical warfare. Social disruption caused by war allowed poorer individuals or younger sons of aristocrats to gain wealth and social mobility.

When considering just war, particularly in the context of fighting justly and fairly, we can refer to conventions established in the 19th and 20th centuries. These conventions clearly outline that soldiers should not unduly harm civilians and non-combatants, must wear uniforms to be identified as soldiers, and should treat prisoners with dignity. These guidelines are part of the Geneva Conventions, which set the rules for how wars should be conducted to maintain some level of humanity. The notion of just warfare offers moral satisfaction by suggesting that there are ethical ways to conduct war. For example, the use of chemical weapons is banned, and other weapons have been prohibited at various times. However, these rules have rarely been strictly obeyed.

People have a deep-seated desire to go to war, which has little to do with justice. War involves the desire to kill and destroy others' property and lives. Understanding this helps us think about war in ways other than justice, allowing us to explore alternative viewpoints on the nature and conduct of war.

Observing the 1914-1918 War, Freud initially believed that people were guided by a Pleasure Principle, but the fervour with which

people engaged in killing led him to propose the existence of a death instinct, a deep-seated drive towards destruction and violence.

Hegel's view of war

Justice aims to maintain peace and prevent conflict, while war is inherently about destruction and violence. This fundamental difference suggests that the history of just wars may miss the true nature of war. For instance, the philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) argued that war is a significant force in advancing history. Although Hegel's complex theory can't be fully explored here, he believed that war disrupts society and reshapes both the victors and the vanquished, thereby opening space for new developments and destroying outdated structures. He believed that certain wars eventually lead to greater political and social organisation, more rational laws, and enhanced freedom. Influenced by the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution, Hegel saw these conflicts as transformative, breaking the old regimes and paving the way for new ones. He viewed history as a slaughter bench, where the violent upheavals of war are necessary for progress. This view contrasts with the idea that war can be just or unjust. Hegel posited that justice is relevant in peacetime, where higher standards of rationality and fairness can be developed. War, by contrast, is about breaking old standards and structures to make way for new ones. He argued that the wild, uncontrollable nature of war is essential for clearing the ground for improvement. Thus, war's true essence lies in its capacity to destroy and renew, rather than in any notions of justice.

René Girard's theory of mimetic violence

French historian and literary critic, René Girard (1923-2015) believed that humans are inherently violent, driven by mimetic or imitative violence. This starts from simple imitation, as seen in children: one child picks up a toy, and another child immediately wants that toy, despite there being many others available. This mimetic desire leads to escalating violence, as each act of aggression provokes a stronger response. Girard suggested that this escalating violence is foundational to human civilisation. To curb this violence, societies find a scapegoat – someone to blame and punish, thus restoring peace. In Girard's view, war serves as a societal scapegoat. Instead of internal conflicts, societies unite against a common enemy, thus channelling their violence outward. However, according to Girard, this process requires divine sanction to be effective. Without the belief in divine approval, the cycle of violence resumes. Modern secular societies, even those with religious individuals, have largely lost this framing. Consequently, there is nothing to prevent modern wars from escalating indefinitely. Girard was critical of the just war theory, viewing the quest for justice as inherently escalating mimetic violence. He argued that true peace is unattainable in a just war framework, as the notion of justice perpetuates the cycle of violence until one side achieves total destruction. Girard critiques the idea of just war, suggesting that it is inappropriate for understanding war, which is fundamentally about aggression and often irrational. Justice in war tends to justify and intensify aggression, making conflicts endless. Historical attempts to manage war through rational means, like treaties, often fail because they do not address the underlying irrational impulses that fuel conflict. Girard suggests that just war theory, by providing moral justifications for violence, often leads to a cycle of retaliation, where each side believes their cause is just, pushing them to continue fighting rather than seeking peace.

Just war might sound like a noble idea, and it would be if we could elevate our moral standards. But realistically, that's unlikely to happen. We might salvage something from the just war doctrine but, historically, fear has proven a stronger deterrent than justice, reason, or Christian love of neighbour.



Letters & Emails

It's your column…

From John Hubbard on "Just War"

As I walked away and reflected after Edward Hadas's talk (24th April) on 'just war' I became increasingly uneasy about his premise about our basic nature and the way it mischaracterises basic humanity and the male sex in particular.

It seems particularly difficult in the current era to sustain the claim that war and military service gives a permissive shelter for fundamental tendencies to enjoy violent activity such as murder, wounding, rape and pillage when, with a population in the tens of millions we cannot recruit enough people for the forces, the numbers of which are now only in the tens of thousands. This despite the fact that the services' recent recruitment drives have always emphasised very marketable lifelong skills in technical trades and managerial and organisational fields. If the deep tendency of men to destruction and conflict were individually so delightedly overriding, surely there would be no problem here?

Nor is it true that such tendencies have always been dominantly expressed by a majority of volunteer men, many of whom join up for reasons of pure economic hardship. In any population those willingly engaged in military service has always been a minority, and even in times of conscription the proportion has still been limited by age and other necessities. Those deciding on and directing conflicts politically have always been an infinitesimally smaller group than that. It seems it would be fairer to say that the institutionalisation of male violence and its persistent acculturation results, not from a fundamental malignity in our nature, but because it has always served the interests and egotistical ambitions of ruling classes whose indifference to the suffering of those beneath them has until relatively recently been the principal narrative of history.

In addition, our day-to-day experience of our fellow human beings must tell us that in most relatively stable societies our majority tendency is in fact towards productive, kindly and peaceable co-existence rather than the reverse, and that is the result of what we are as much as the laws we have created to express it.

Would it be an assertion too far to suggest that a world outlook which sees us in need of universal redemption must find that we are deeply flawed in order to give that mysterious mechanism psychological power and meaning?

From Simon Bowden on last month's "View from the Chair"

In response to last month's *View from the Chair*, I was shocked to see the view expressed that there is something wrong in national governments "being constrained" by organisations such as the IMF, OECD, EU, UN, WEF and EHCR. The opinion piece goes on to complain about "unelected bodies and quangos" such as the Bank of England and the OBR. Did the author think of the decision by Liz Truss to publicly scorn the OBR – and the result for our economy? Or the role of the Bank of England in ending the 60s and 70s cycles of Boom and Bust. Or the importance of the IMF in dealing with the global disaster of the Banking Crash in 2008? The campaign by the 38 OECD countries to secure a minimum global tax rate for the multinational companies – to ensure they pay some tax back from their profits? Or the importance of the UN as a forum where competing national interests can painfully struggle to achieve understanding and consensus? ▶

The impression that I derived was that the author was trying to be all things to all men – and after a swipe at the extremely wealthy and multinational companies, he was moving on to say that the ordinary citizen should have no truck with unelected bodies of experts – such as economists, senior civil servants, diplomats, international aid bodies or human rights lawyers. True, these people are not elected. But does anyone seriously think that we can attempt to run our world without experts, including all the scientists who sit on international panels?

So it seems to me that not only is this argument quite wrong in its drift. But it also smacks of the culture wars, by which right wing parties representing wealth and power seek to gain support from frustrated members of the working or not-working class – by rubbishing the elites and the experts on whom we all rely. The next time I have serious disease, I won't be going to a democratically elected doctor for help.

From Rt. Hon. Tobias Ellwood MP

This email was received on 1st May

Thank you for writing to me regarding the ongoing conflict in Gaza / Israel. As I am sure you can appreciate, I have received hundreds of emails on this highly emotive matter, and each time I've prepared a response the situation on the ground has changed – warranting inclusion in my response. So what I say today goes some way to addressing your concerns and setting out my point of view.

As a former Middle East Minister, I am very familiar with the region and have visited Israel, Gaza and the West Bank a number of times. The situation is far more nuanced than some of the reporting suggests. To that end it is possible to support Israel's right to defend itself after those barbaric attacks on the 7th October but be critical of how it's using its significant military might which seems to be without a plan of what comes next and is seriously compounding humanitarian challenges in Gaza. Similarly, it is possible to support the pro-Palestinian voices seeking a two state solution but criticising those who do not condemn Hamas.

"I fully support the Humanitarian Pause as a stepping stone to a full ceasefire."
Tobias Ellwood



UK Parliament official portrait

I hope we can all agree that Hamas has lost any claim it may have to represent the people of Gaza. The question is how can this terrorist group be replaced and an acceptable temporary technocratic council put in place until a more long-term democratic governance structure can be created.

It's clear Israel cannot do this alone, and it requires the participation of regional Arab countries (especially those that signed the Abrahamic Accords) and the international community to agree a grand strategy of how this can be achieved. Britain could easily be the convening power here and I have written to the Foreign Secretary to suggest this.

I have joined others, including the President of the US, in calling for an immediate Humanitarian Pause. A UN Security Council resolution has now passed – but implementing it is a serious challenge. But it would allow not only a lull in fighting to get urgent aid into the strip, but a period for Israel to receive input from the international community on a more structured approached to destroying Hamas, its tunnels, HQ's and ammunition caches without further infra-structure damage and handing over security responsibility to an agreed third party.

This is different from a full cease fire which requires terms and conditions to be agreed, and an accepted neutral force to step in so the cease fire can be monitored and enforced. It also means Hamas would be ▶

empowered as a signatory bolstering its claim to continue to represent the Gazan people. For this reason I fully support the Humanitarian Pause as a stepping stone to a full ceasefire.

Progress is slowly being made. The US and 17 other countries including the UK, France and Germany are calling for the release of hostages by Hamas, urging a deal that offers "an immediate and prolonged ceasefire in Gaza" in return. An Egyptian delegation is set to travel to Israel this weekend to kickstart a new round of ceasefire talks. US troops have finally begun construction of a pier off the coast of Gaza that aims to speed the flow of humanitarian aid.

However, the chances of escalation are ever-present. The recent missile exchanges between Israel and Iran illustrate that this is a proxy war which could run out of control unless the international community steps up. In an era where the UN is neutralised and the West is deemed weak by our rivals, I would prefer to see Parliament call for the UK to host an urgent international summit aimed at isolating the conflict, bringing all regional players together and seeking a workable solution.

This will not be easy. As I've said publicly many times, Israel's utility of its superior military force – without a clear strategy to follow has led to international voices criticising its tactics. Something I warned of in the House of Commons immediately after the 7th October attacks but before the Prime Minister sent the tanks in.

At present there is no strategy as to what follows Hamas and more widely how we challenge Iran's proxy influence in the region which if left in place will see Hamas 2.0 to emerge.

We cannot be by-standers here. The West's threshold to deal with challenges across the world is being tested and I am pleased to see the Foreign Secretary devote ever more time in the region to address these matters.

Humanists UK

Faith to Faithless

Apostate Event Organiser Role

Are you an ex-religious person in the Bournemouth/Southampton area? Would you like to volunteer for Faith to Faithless?

We need another person to help host social events. The role involves you turning up once a month to socials and making people feel comfortable. We have a volunteer here already, but she could do with someone else with her for support.

Faith to Faithless is a Humanists UK section which is dedicated to supporting individuals who leave high-control religious groups, often referred to as 'apostates'. This initiative provides a crucial platform for these individuals, offering both a voice and support in their transition. *Faith to Faithless* organizes events such as panel discussions and lectures across the UK, and also provides apostate socials and peer support meetings. It offers specialized training to frontline service providers, including police and social workers, to better understand and respond to the unique challenges faced by apostates. This includes addressing the emotional and physical abuse that apostates often endure from their communities and families, which can lead to severe social isolation and mental health issues.

For more information, join *Faith to Faithless* on Facebook

https://www.facebook.com/100069551363841/posts/781687677492937/?mibextid=rS40aB7S9Ucbxw6v



View from the Chair

David Warden
Chairman of Dorset Humanists

In my talk on human flourishing last month I more or less conflated the concepts of "flourishing" and "self-actualisation". The two concepts are not completely identical, but they are related. An acorn "self-actualises" to become an oak tree, but whether the oak tree flourishes will depend on a number of conditions. Aaron commented afterwards that the takeaway message for him was that "self-actualisation" is not some elusive peak goal like reaching the South Pole or getting to the summit of Mount Everest. Of course, for some exceptional people it may be. But for most of us, we can experience degrees of "self-actualisation" and "flourishing" in whatever we are doing, whether it be cooking a meal, playing the saxophone, wearing well-chosen clothes, cogitating on the state of the world, pursuing a fitness goal, cultivating a garden, engaging in conversation, or reading a book. Barry suggested that "self-actualisation" is something which only rich Westerners can enjoy but I attempted to challenge this view. Opportunities for "self-actualisation" and "flourishing" are, of course, constrained by poverty, ill-health and other adverse circumstances. But even in the direst conditions, humans can experience the joy of being alive. We considered the extreme case of Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist who survived Auschwitz and Dachau, who found meaning in serving his fellow prisoners and helping them cope with their suffering. By focusing on the needs of others and providing support and encouragement, he transcended his own suffering and connected with a deeper sense of humanity and compassion. Humanists are, of course, motivated to try and make the world a better place but the world will always be sub-optimal. Whether you're a millionaire or having to budget very carefully, every day brings opportunities for "flourishing" and "self-actualisation". You can watch my talk on Dorset Humanists YouTube.

Thanks to Simon Bowden for pushing back on last month's *Chairman's View* (see *Letters*). He derived the impression that, in my view, "the ordinary citizen should have no truck with unelected bodies of experts – such as economists, senior civil servants, diplomats, international aid bodies or human rights lawyers", and he asks "does anyone seriously think that we can attempt to run our world without experts?" Simon may have been thinking of the (in)famous statement made by Michael Gove during an interview with Faisal Islam on Sky News on June 3, 2016: "I think the people in this country have had enough of experts... from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong". Of course we do need experts. But experts disagree and sometimes experts fall prey to groupthink and political bias. Often, they do not see the full picture, precisely because they are experts in a narrow field. So yes, we need experts, but we should be careful about experts taking over from democratically-elected politicians. As Tony Benn wisely observed, if politicians get it wrong we can boot them out. But if unelected experts become our *de facto* rulers, then democracy will have become an empty façade.