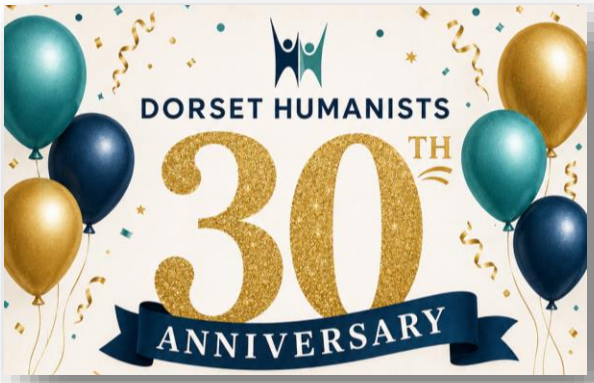
ONE LIFE

Dorset Humanists Magazine

30th Anniversary Year 1996-2026 *November 2026*



We made it!

Dorset Humanists reaches milestone 30th anniversary

Saturday 14th November 1.30pm Moordown Community Centre Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW

FULLY BOOKED – ADMISSION BY PRIOR RESERVATION ONLY

Eighty guests have booked for a wonderful celebration of thirty years of humanism in Dorset! We'll enjoy a fabulous buffet lunch, music from three of our resident pianists, and the company of members, old friends, civic dignitaries and special guests. But this is much more than a birthday party. We're celebrating thirty years of bringing people together to explore life's big questions, think freely and critically, build lasting friendships and contribute to our wider community. From public talks and lively discussions to schools outreach, charitable activities and interfaith cooperation, Dorset Humanists has become a thriving community committed to living well without religion. It's an opportunity to celebrate our achievements, thank those who made them possible, and look forward with enthusiasm to the next chapter!

How Can You Possibly Believe That?

Humanist Forum: Thursday 26th November at Bournemouth Westcliff Hotel 7 Durley Chine Road, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. Discussion led by Barry Newman.

Most of us believe that we are reasonable people capable of thinking and acting rationally. So why do apparently reasonable people hold such diverse views? Are we aware of the emotional or instinctive aspects of our thoughts and actions? How does reason interact with emotion, instinct, intuition and experience? And can we train ourselves to be more rational by recognising and controlling the role of emotion? Should this be a goal of humanism? Or does becoming more rational mean becoming less human? Join us for what promises to be a great discussion!

Email: chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk
Phone: 07910 886629
HMRC Charities Ref No EW10227

Click for events

Click for website

Do you have debating experience?

Help with a King's College London research study

Dorset Humanists has been invited to help publicise a PhD research project at King's College London exploring how people construct spoken arguments about public and social issues. The study is being conducted by Martin Anderson, a researcher in the Department of Psychology at King's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience. It aims to improve our understanding of how people develop, organise and communicate arguments when discussing matters of public concern.

Who can take part?

Martin is looking for adults who have current or recent experience of formal debating. This might include participation in debating societies or clubs, formal debate training, or organised competitive debating.

Although Dorset Humanists encourages lively discussion and dialogue at our Café and Forum events, attending these meetings does not, by itself, count as formal debating experience. However, some members may have relevant experience elsewhere.

What does participation involve?

The study begins with a short online questionnaire. Those who meet the eligibility criteria may then be invited to participate in an interview conducted via Microsoft Teams. Eligible participants who complete the interview will receive a £10 thank-you payment.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and all relevant information is provided before participants decide whether to proceed.

Interested in taking part?

You can find further details and access the questionnaire here: https://qualtrics.kcl.ac.uk/jfe/form/SV_5znBgVTPsVIdKKi

For enquiries, contact Martin Anderson at martin.a.anderson@kcl.ac.uk.

Please note that anyone who has already completed the questionnaire should not complete it again.

Dates for your diary

Thursday 5th November 7.30pm	Moon in the Square	Humanists in the pub. Informal pub social hosted by Dean.
Saturday 14th November 1.30pm	Moordown	Dorset Humanists 30th anniversary. Fully booked – admission by prior reservation only.
Friday 20th November 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Hotel bar social hosted by Sandra. No set agenda. Come along for a friendly social.
Sunday 22nd November	St Catherine's Hill Walk	Easy walk and pub lunch. Full details on Meetup or phone David 07910 886629.
Thursday 26th November 7.30pm	Westcliff Hotel	Humanist Forum at the Westcliff Hotel. Discussion on rationality led by Barry.
Saturday 12th December 2.00pm	Moordown	A Short History of the Mince Pie. Talk by John Hubbard. Complimentary mince pies and mulled wine.
Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes.		

From Meritocracy to Inheritocracy

A personal dilemma



Should we leave our money to our children, even when others need it more? This was the dilemma Cathy Silman brought to our One Life Café on Saturday 10th October, attended by thirty people at Moordown Community Centre. With Barry Newman facilitating, the discussion explored some challenging questions about family loyalty, inheritance and fairness. What follows is an edited account of the afternoon, concluding with a reflection on how these competing moral considerations might be reconciled.

Cathy introduced a dilemma that had troubled her for several years: should she leave her estate to her children, who are already reasonably comfortable, or use it to help people in greater need? She had already helped her children buy homes, partly using money she herself had inherited. Continuing to favour them seemed natural, but was it consistent with her humanist principles? She reminded us how profoundly our circumstances at birth shape our opportunities in education, employment and housing.

Do we have the right to determine what happens to our wealth after death?

Cathy began by questioning whether we have a moral right to determine what happens to our wealth after death. Although the law allows us to make wills, this right has evolved through centuries of changing customs and legislation. She cited Thomas Jefferson's argument that the Earth belongs to the living rather than the dead, and the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who argued that death is nothing to us because we can no longer experience anything once we have died. If we no longer exist, can we really claim ownership of property or determine who should receive it? Cathy invited us to consider whether our legal freedom to dispose of our estates is also morally justified.

The first round of discussions revealed differing views about the right to decide who inherits our property. Some defended this freedom, arguing that respecting people's wills also provides reassurance to their families. Others favoured restrictions on very large inheritances or suggested that wealth could be redirected towards public services such as healthcare and education, a view Cathy welcomed. One participant suggested distinguishing modest family inheritances from enormous fortunes, while another proposed limiting the amount any individual could inherit. There was no consensus on whether testamentary freedom should be unrestricted.

Why do we favour our own descendants?

Cathy's second question turned from property rights to human behaviour. Why do parents feel such a powerful desire to provide for their children, even when those children no longer need financial support? She drew on evolutionary biology, particularly the ▶



Chris contributing some thoughts to the discussion. Photo by Aaron.

concept of kin selection developed by W. D. Hamilton and popularised by Richard Dawkins, to explain why we are naturally inclined to favour our relatives. But does this instinct justify leaving wealth to children who may need it less than others? Should we follow our instinct to favour descendants or challenge it in the interests of a fairer society?

The discussions reflected differing views about family loyalty and wider social responsibilities. Some emphasised the natural desire to provide for one's children, while others argued that parental responsibilities were primarily about care, upbringing and passing on values rather than wealth. Several participants saw inheritance taxation as a reasonable compromise, although one advocated a 100% tax. There was also a suggestion that inheritance should take account of the recipient's financial circumstances. Others questioned whether substantial inheritances were always beneficial, referring to the book *Die Broke* (1997) which argues that inherited wealth can sometimes undermine independence and motivation.

From meritocracy to inheritocracy

Cathy introduced the term *inheritocracy*, popularised by British historian Eliza Filby in her 2024 book *Inheritocracy: It's Time to Talk About the Bank of Mum and Dad*. Historically, ownership of land was a principal source of wealth and status, but industrialisation, education and professional employment created greater opportunities for advancement through ability and hard work. This helped establish the ideal of meritocracy: a society in which people's achievements depend more on their abilities and efforts than on their family backgrounds. Cathy questioned how far that ideal still applies.

Housing was central to her argument. She contrasted the relative affordability of homes for previous generations with the much greater difficulties facing many younger people today. She described the growing gap between house prices and earnings, the importance of parental assistance with deposits, and the advantages enjoyed by those whose families can provide financial support. She argued that the increasing dependence on family wealth creates a serious problem. Those who inherit property or receive parental assistance can establish themselves much more easily than equally capable people without such support. Cathy recognised that, by helping her own children, she was participating in the very process she was questioning.

The final discussion considered whether inheritance was beneficial or detrimental to society. Some argued that inherited wealth provides security and opportunities for education, enterprise and creative achievement. Charles Darwin was cited as someone whose financial independence enabled him to pursue his scientific work. Others highlighted the concentration of wealth, historical injustices and the disadvantages faced by those without family resources. The consequences of selling ▶

council housing were also discussed. One table considered unearned inheritance inherently unfair, although participants acknowledged the difficulty of defining fairness. Overall, opinions remained divided, with no clear consensus.

Cathy acknowledged that most of her estate was still destined for her children, although they were already reasonably secure. An inheritance might allow them to pay off their mortgages, but she knew people whose needs were much greater. She also described an alternative that appealed to her: leaving property or money to a charity providing accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. She mentioned Routes to Roots in Poole and an example of donated funds being used to purchase houses. Her children were not demanding an inheritance! Indeed, they had indicated that they did not wish to influence her decision, and one son had suggested making provision for a grandson. Nevertheless, Cathy remained troubled by the disparity between her wish to help her children and her concern for people in greater need.

The discussion did not resolve her dilemma. It did, however, demonstrate how questions of inheritance bring together some of our deepest moral commitments: love of family, personal freedom, fairness, responsibility, opportunity and concern for the wider community.

Can love and justice be reconciled?

The following reflections extend the discussion rather than report Cathy's own conclusions.

Perhaps Cathy is responding to two equally legitimate moral impulses: love and responsibility towards her children, and compassion for people beyond her immediate circle. The first expresses lifelong relationships, affection and loyalty; the second reflects concern for people whose needs may be much greater. Neither impulse is inherently selfish or morally superior. A humanist approach can recognise both our particular relationships and our wider responsibilities towards humanity. This suggests several considerations when deciding how to distribute an estate.

Relationships: We have special responsibilities towards family members, friends and others whose lives are closely connected with ours. These relationships are themselves important constituents of human flourishing.

Need: The same sum of money can make very different contributions to different people's wellbeing. Helping someone secure a home or escape serious financial difficulty may accomplish more than adding to an already substantial fortune.

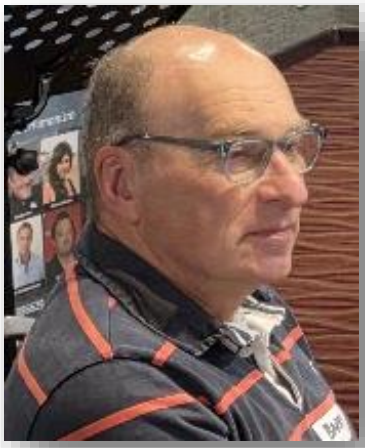
Consequences: We can reasonably consider what our gifts will actually achieve, whether for individuals, families or charitable organisations.

Personal meaning: A bequest can express gratitude, love, solidarity or a commitment to a cause. It is not merely a financial transaction.

These considerations do not provide a mathematical formula. They call for practical wisdom: the ability to weigh competing goods in the circumstances of a particular life. Someone might decide to leave enough to their children to provide additional security while directing the remainder towards housing provision. Someone else might give different amounts to different relatives according to their circumstances. Equal affection need not entail equal financial gifts.

Concern for disadvantaged people does not necessarily require a commitment to equalising everyone's wealth. It may instead reflect a desire to ensure that people have reasonable opportunities to live secure, fulfilling and independent lives. The principle here may be *sufficientarianism* – ensuring that everyone has enough to flourish – rather than *egalitarianism*, which places greater emphasis on reducing inequalities.

Personal generosity and distributive justice are both important to humanists, and they need not be mutually exclusive.



You Can't Say That!

Free Speech and its Limits

Twenty members and newcomers grappled with the contradictions and conundrums of free speech at our October Humanist Forum at the Westcliff hotel. The discussion was facilitated by Barry Newman. Photos by Aaron.

Is freedom of speech the right to say whatever we like, regardless of the consequences? Or should we exercise restraint when our words might offend, distress or harm other people? And who should decide where the boundaries lie?

These were some of the questions explored at our October Forum. The evening began with a humorous and provocative poem performed by Aaron, featuring a succession of insults, taboo words and complaints about what people are supposedly no longer allowed to say. Its underlying message was that context matters: words exchanged between friends can have a very different meaning when used to humiliate or intimidate someone.

Barry began by introducing some of the philosophical and human rights foundations of free speech. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms everyone's right to freedom of opinion and expression. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) similarly protects freedom of expression, while recognising that restrictions may sometimes be necessary to protect the rights and reputations of others, public order and other legitimate interests.

Barry also referred to the Oxford Declaration on Freedom of Thought and Expression, adopted by the international humanist movement in 2014. This affirms the importance of free enquiry and the right to challenge religious, political and other beliefs, including those that others hold sacred. There is no general right not to be offended by the expression of contrary opinions.

The philosopher John Stuart Mill, writing in *On Liberty* (1859), famously argued that coercive interference with individual freedom is justified principally to prevent harm to others. But what constitutes harm? Is being offended harmful? What about feeling insulted, humiliated, threatened or dehumanised? And how serious must the harm be before restrictions on speech become justified?

This led to our first table discussion: What kind and severity of harm should justify limiting free speech? Where would we draw the line, and why?

The discussion demonstrated how difficult it can be to translate abstract principles into practical judgements. Barry subsequently introduced the distinction between harm and offence, together with legal concepts such as defamation. A final question considered whether liberal ideas about free speech are specifically Western cultural values and how they should relate to different cultural traditions in an increasingly multicultural society.

The evening generated lively conversation, although many questions necessarily remained unresolved. ▶



A humanist approach to free speech

What principles might help us make progress with these questions? First, freedom of thought and expression is fundamental to humanism. Humanism depends on our freedom to question inherited beliefs, criticise religious doctrines, challenge political orthodoxies and examine claims through reason and evidence. Without freedom of expression, intellectual and moral progress becomes much more difficult.

The persecution of Salman Rushdie, the murders at Charlie Hebdo magazine, and the imprisonment of dissidents in authoritarian states remind us that freedom of expression cannot be taken for granted. Criticising or insulting religion can also lead to lengthy jail sentences in some countries, as in the case of humanist leader Mubarak Bala in Nigeria.

Second, we should distinguish between the legal right to say something and the moral question of whether we ought to say it. These are not the same. We may have a legal right to express an offensive opinion without having a good moral reason to do so. Conversely, the fact that someone finds our opinion offensive does not necessarily justify suppressing it.

Third, freedom of speech must be considered alongside other humanist values, particularly empathy, equality and respect for human dignity. There is an important distinction between criticising ideas and attacking people. We should be free to argue that religion is mistaken, that a political ideology is dangerous or that a particular belief is irrational. But deliberately humiliating, intimidating or demonising people because of their race, religion, sexuality or other personal characteristics is another matter.

This distinction is not always straightforward. Criticism of religious or political beliefs may be experienced as a personal attack, especially when those beliefs are central to someone's identity. Nevertheless, the distinction remains important. Ideas must remain open to criticism, while people deserve to be treated with dignity.

Political correctness and moral progress

Our discussion also raised the familiar complaint that political correctness has made ordinary language increasingly difficult. There are certainly occasions when people become excessively anxious about causing offence, and when accusations of prejudice are used to silence legitimate disagreement.

But we should also recognise the considerable moral progress reflected in changing social attitudes towards derogatory language. Expressions that were once ▶



routinely used to describe black people, gay people, disabled people and other minorities are now widely regarded as unacceptable. Is this really a regrettable loss of freedom? We have become more conscious of how language can reinforce prejudice, exclusion and humiliation. Terms that once reduced people to stereotypes have increasingly been replaced by language recognising their equal humanity.

This has not generally happened because governments have prohibited particular words. It has happened because attitudes have changed, often through the efforts of people who experienced discrimination and challenged society to think differently.

What is sometimes dismissed as political correctness can therefore represent the application of empathy, the extension of equal respect and an advance in human dignity. Of course, context remains important. Quoting an offensive expression in a historical or educational discussion is different from directing it at someone as an insult.

Freedom and responsibility

Perhaps the most useful distinction for humanists is between freedom from coercion and the voluntary exercise of moral restraint. John Stuart Mill's harm principle helps us consider when society may legitimately interfere with expression whereas the Golden Rule invites us to consider how we would wish to be treated ourselves. Neither principle makes the other redundant.

We should resist censorship of unpopular ideas while also encouraging people to exercise their freedom responsibly. We should be willing to challenge beliefs without unnecessarily humiliating believers, defend the right to offend without making offensiveness a virtue, and recognise that empathy is not the enemy of reason.

We may not always agree where the boundaries should lie. But that does not mean we have no principles to guide us.

Perhaps one of the difficulties we had in discussing this topic is that we were trying to answer two different questions as though they were one. Freedom of speech concerns what we should be permitted to say; the Golden Rule concerns how we ought to treat one another. We can defend someone's freedom to express an offensive opinion without approving of their behaviour. Equally, we can recognise that someone has been offended without concluding that the offending opinion should be suppressed.

Humanism offers us principles for both questions: freedom of thought and expression on the one hand, and empathy, dignity and respect on the other. There may be no definite threshold of offence, but we can usually appreciate which principles apply in which circumstances.