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Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ Saturday 13th June online event

Join us on Zoom at 1.30pm to get settled in. Talk commences at 2pm. Click [here](#) or enter ID and password.

Meeting ID: 848 5849 5755

Password: 011308

The Humanist Case for the Abolition of Ageing



David Wood claims that the abolition of biological ageing lies within our collective grasp. If we decide as a species to make this project a priority, there's around a 50% chance that practical

rejuvenation therapies resulting in the comprehensive reversal of ageing will be widely available as early as 2040. Some people say this is bad science and naively over-optimistic. Others say it would be socially destructive and morally indefensible. David will argue instead that rejuvenation is a noble, highly desirable, eminently practical destiny for our species that could be achieved within just one human generation from now and that the abolition of ageing is set to take its place on the upward arc of human progress.

David Wood is Chair of London Futurists, co-founder of the Transhumanist Party UK, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and he holds an honorary Doctorate in Science from Westminster University.

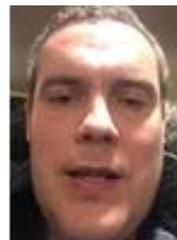
■ Saturday 11th July online event

Join us on Zoom at 1.30pm to get settled in. Talk commences at 2pm. Click [here](#) or enter ID and password.

Meeting ID: 891 8650 6757

Password: 459420

Beyond Binary An exploration into masculinity, femininity, and sexuality



An engaging, interactive, balanced and humorous look at the ever-evolving concepts and continuums of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. We hear a lot about equality, diversity, and difference but do we pay lip-

service to these concepts? How can we process them more meaningfully? Is it still OK to be a straight bloke or is this now deemed to be 'toxic' by definition?

Our speaker Richard Jones is a member of Dorset Humanists. He is a psychotherapist and a tutor for counselling diploma students for Portsmouth University. He's had thirteen years' experience working in the LGBT+ sector and also working with clients with Autism Spectrum Disorder. He has worked as a counselling supervisor and is due to start his Level 6 MSc qualification in September. He is very happy to identify as a gay male but often feels that he's about a quarter female.



■ **Virtual Coffee Morning Tuesday 11am**
Every Tuesday online until further notice.
Enjoy lively conversation over tea or coffee
at our online coffee morning. Our events
have an international flavour with visitors
from Cardiff and New York!

<https://www.meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists/>

☎ David Warden 07910 886629

■ **Virtual Pub Quiz Thursday 7.30pm**
Every Thursday online until further notice.
Pour yourself a beer or a glass of wine from
the comfort and safety of your own home,
click on the link, and join our quiz! Quiz
topics have included Thomas Hardy, Prime
Ministers, Science Fiction series, local
landmarks, music, science, and much more!
You don't have to be a brainbox to attend –
it's just a bit of light-hearted fun.

<https://www.meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists/>

☎ Dean 07713 858773

Join our 'Meetup' group

Please take this opportunity to join our page
on 'Meetup' where we post details for all of
our online events. Please also take this
opportunity to register with Zoom so that
you can easily join our online events. You
can sign up for free.

www.meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists

<https://zoom.us/>

Dorset Humanists Pastoral Team

Please contact our pastoral team if you
need help or would just like a friendly chat.
Our pastoral team members are:

Cathy Silman – Secretary of Dorset
Humanists and a Citizens' Advice Bureau
advisor. Tel: 07817 695615

Susan Bryson – A member of Dorset
Humanists committee and an experienced
therapeutic counsellor. Tel: 07980 276234

David Warden – Chairman of Dorset
Humanists and a qualified therapeutic
counsellor. Mobile: 07910 886629

Terry's incredible journey for Macmillan Cancer Support



"I'm Terry, 85. My wife is
Maureen, 82. Due to the
CV19 situation, we are
housebound. Having both
been hospitalised in
recent months, for heart
related problems, we

consider ourselves to be in the vulnerable
group. As so many have found, thanks to
technology we have good contact with
family and friends. At a recent virtual coffee
morning – arranged by Dorset Humanists –
people talked about keeping fit under these
circumstances. I explained that, with a
pedometer app on my smart phone, I'm
keeping up my previous step-count by
walking back and forth in our flat. The app
also calculates the distance travelled. With
only two or three miles per day, it is
surprising how the miles mount up. I
reported that so far I had covered nearly
100 miles. One of the group suggested that,
to give interest to what I was doing, I might
plan a journey and plot my progress. So,
using Google Maps, I planned a journey, on
foot, from my home to John O'Groats; a
distance of about 690 miles. I had read that
the CV19 crisis had caused a problem for
charities with many fundraising events
cancelled. It made sense to use what I was
doing to help out.

Week 12 May 24 - May 30: I walked 36.6
miles this week, following the route from
Carnforth to Hackforth, Cumbria, via Kendal
and Shap. My total so far is 321 miles. The
journey is now 46.5% complete. Only 368
miles to go. I'm heading for the Scottish
border and hope to be there by the end of
this week. There's still plenty of time. I shall
leave the Just Giving page up and running
until I achieve my goal. Walking an average
of 20+ miles per week, I expect to 'arrive' at
John O'Groats sometime early October.
And I expect to finish fitter than when I
started in March."

<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/terry-scurr>



Game Changers for the Economy

“Don’t speak too soon for the wheel’s still in spin...” Bob Dylan

Henri Ruff spoke on this subject for us on May 12th. Henri is an economist and he has tutored for the Open University Business School. He facilitates a popular economics course for the U3A and this was his third talk for Dorset Humanists. This is an edited transcript of the talk. The video recording is available on our YouTube channel.

My aim for this talk is to explore and possibly identify game changers for the economy as a result of the crisis. I'm not going to be forecasting at all. The focus is on the economy but maybe the economy is less important than the human tragedy of the pandemic. In most people's minds economics is inseparable from politics but I'm going to separate them out and focus on the economics which is easier said than done.

Spoiler alert: I've no idea what the post-corona economy is going to look like. But I feel in quite good company because the great and the good economists don't have much of a clue either. Is it going to go forward to a so-called 'new norm' or is the economy going back to the 'old norm'? Or a mix of the two? Many will try to foretell but that's no different from saying 'The end of the world is nigh'. What does 'end' mean? Which 'world' are we talking about? And when exactly is 'nigh'? There are braver people out there who try and forecast. They put numbers and dates to their predictions. I will leave you to decide whether they are brave or foolish.

Common characteristics of game changers

Game changers come in different shapes, sizes and guises. So let's look at the most common characteristics of any game changer. The first key feature is that they represent *radical change* in terms of effects. The second key feature is that a game changer has an effect over a *significant area of life*. And the third key feature is that



it has a *lasting effect*. So it should be easy to start identifying them even in embryonic form. But it's not that easy because often we can only see the radical effects with the benefit of hindsight. It would be so much better if we could identify them with a little bit of foresight. Another thing that might help us identify them are so-called *push* and *pull* factors. Push factors are forces at work that prevent or constrain so-called normal behaviour and exert pressure to behave abnormally but they may not have a lasting effect (e.g. being pushed into a frenzy of enforced gardening during lockdown). Pull factors are newly found benefits or attractions which might have a more lasting effect (e.g. a rediscovery of the benefits of family time during the lockdown). We also have to look at the context – for example the whole of the UK or just a region of the UK, large or small economies, developing or developed economies, the real economy or the digital economy. We're looking for game-changers wherever they might appear.

I've looked in three areas: (1) the underlying aim of an economy; (2) the rules or principles by which an economy is governed; and (3) the likely winners and losers. So let's see if we can spot some game changers in these three areas.

The aim of the economy

Traditional economics places enormous emphasis on efficiency which means getting the most out of the resources available. Examples of this would be 'lean production' and 'just-in-time' methods of delivery, and all of this efficiency is measured by one metric: profit. But the crisis has made some

of us ask what should the aim of the economy be? Perhaps it should be to become an *effective* economy rather than merely an *efficient* economy. To be effective is *doing the right thing* rather than efficiency which is *doing things right*.

The crisis has made us question whether an economy hell-bent on efficiency takes suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks such as outsourcing production overseas, over-reliance on a seemingly perfectly-integrated supply chain and the risk of measuring efficiency only in terms of what can be quantified financially. Contrast that with an *effective* economy which captures not only the known and anticipated risks but also using scenario analysis or so-called 'What-if' analysis and identifying unknown risks – sometimes called black swans. These are risks of extreme impact – unpredictable outlying events. And risks that are not easily quantifiable in money terms. For example, the value of life. So in an economy that is moving towards being an effective economy rather than a merely efficient one, the focus moves towards becoming a *resilient* and *robust* economy that can withstand the shocks. And the measure of a robust economy is not the size of GDP or the rate of growth which is what efficient economies are obsessed with. The measure is stress-testing. After the 2008 financial crisis the major banks have been stress-tested. And so what we may be talking about is a game changer that moves from a *fragile* economy to an *agile* economy.

The principles and rules by which an economy is governed

Every economy is governed by economic principles such as the division of labour and specialisation because of the advantages in terms of improved productivity and international trade. The modern mantra of globalisation has been institutionalised in organisations such as the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF etc., and a host of supranational groups such as NAFTA, the EU, and the TPP. But the influence and *raison d'être* of these groups is being challenged, for example by China. But something else is developing which could



be a real game changer and that's tearing up the rule book entirely. As a result of the crisis, concerns over supply chains have fuelled the sentiment of protectionism. And this amplifies the concerns of those who have been disadvantaged by globalisation for some considerable time. The protectionist lobbies have taken the fight to the multi-lateral organisations (WTO etc.) undermining their authority and seeking to tear up the rule book. This 180 degree turn appears to be a game changer. But there may be a more subtle game changer appearing: "Some globalisation bad; some protectionism good".

"Inequality is not simply a moral issue of unfairness. Addressing inequality could be a big game changer because stimulating demand is a requirement of economic recovery..."

Winners and losers

The trap here is extrapolating from recent experience. The current winners appear to be online businesses and entertainment and essential goods providers. The losers are live entertainment, some higher education, household finances, the oil industry, live sport, tourism and travel. But to avoid the trap let's look at some of the fundamentals. I'd like to look first at government involvement in the management of the economy. A game changer here is not whether we continue to move toward what's called 'small government' which is ideological and political as opposed to 'big government'



which again is ideological and political but to move to something rather different and that's *essential* government.

A second fundamental which I think is worth exploring is economic recovery itself – if you like, a recovery in consumption. Modern economies are demand-driven. So we've got to look at the demand side as well as the supply side. And economists are quite fond of distinguishing between two types of demand: one I'd like to call non-discretionary consumption (i.e. essential needs) which contrasts with *consumerism* which means 'discretionary wants'. So where should we be looking for a resurgence in demand and economic recovery? I think we can look at income inequality and a move towards greater equality because that will stimulate consumption, non-discretionary needs, and the big game changer here is that [addressing] income inequality becomes a requirement of economic recovery and not simply a moral issue of unfairness.



Living Longer: A Positive Trend or a Problem?

Barry Newman spoke to us about the problems of ageing on May 27th. Barry is a retired intensive care medicine consultant and this is an edited version of his talk. The full version can be viewed on our YouTube channel.

This is going to be a survey of a vast topic – a skate across a large expanse of very thin ice. I hope if I fall in you'll pull me out!

What are the causes of living longer? If you look at the natural world you will see that genes must play a very significant part. For

example, different types of geese have very different life spans. Canada geese typically live for twenty-five years while Brent geese and Emperor geese have much shorter lifespans (10 and 12 years respectively on average). A common question is this: 'Where is the gene for ageing?' Many genes influence human ageing but they regulate other things as well so if you fiddle with them you may have lots of unintended consequences. Is there a natural limit to human longevity? We seem to be getting older and older on average – where is it going to stop? According to one (disputed) research paper the absolute upper limit appears to be 125 years.

Other than genes, what are the causes of living longer? Environmental factors and prevention of infectious diseases are important; we no longer think of dying from typhoid or cholera. It's very hard to disentangle lifestyle from other factors but calorie restriction of 15% below the optimum diet reduces your basal metabolic rate which in turn reduces oxidative stress. Metabolism produces poisons called free radicals which basically mess up your cells and your genome. Restricting this effect means that you may be able to live a little longer. Regular exercise too can't be a bad thing, as is getting the right job. All the statistics tell us that wealthier people live longer than poorer people so you really ought to go out and make a lot of money! Or become an academic – they seem to live a long time, actuarially. But the best job for living longer is to be a man or a woman of the cloth: an imam, a vicar, or a rabbi. The job appears to confer longevity.

Demographic projections

According to a House of Lords report *Ready for Ageing* (2012), by 2030 we will have 51% more people over the age of 65, 101% more people over 85, and 80% more people over 65 with moderate or severe dementia. We also now have a 50% increase in people with three or more long-term health conditions although we may need to adjust the numbers because of Covid-19 in the years to come.



Physical effects of ageing

The physical effects of ageing include *slowing down* and *wearing out*. There are also functional consequences. Reduced mobility, strength, co-ordination, fine motor skills, speed of reflexes. We experience cognitive deterioration in thinking and memory. We also experience reduced intensity of experience – our sensory experience (love, joy, sadness etc.) is blunted and there is a narrowing of the emotional spectrum. I wonder if this is a source of intergenerational misunderstanding?

Are these effects of ageing modifiable? Sadly, it appears not, despite the best efforts of the wellness industry, doctors and so on. Globally, mild to moderate disability does not appear to have changed significantly in the last 30 years (World Health Organisation report 2014).

Problems with defining ‘old age’

How should we define old age? It’s often defined by an arbitrary number but I could only find one definition by functional status: “In the developing world, old age is often defined, not by years, but by loss of previous roles, by new roles, or inability to make active contributions to society’ (World Health Organisation). In other words, you are as old as what you can do. This has tremendous appeal to me.

Does living longer mean that youth and middle age are also being extended? Sadly, a lot of the messages and images in the wellness and holiday industries are promoted as ‘aspirational norms’ and I believe this distorts the discussion about how age should be managed.

Psychological effects of ageing

The psychological effects of ageing are, unfortunately, overwhelmingly negative. Depression and isolation are often driven by physical and cognitive deterioration, poverty, supporting a spouse with dementia (over the age of 65, the incidence is 7%, over 80 it’s 17%, and over 90 it’s 33%).

The ‘age concern lobby’ makes statements like this: “We believe that more people living longer represents a huge opportunity for

society. But changes are needed so more people enjoy good health, are financially secure, are socially connected, and have a purpose in later life.” Such statements tend to be hopeful thinking.

Intergenerational incomprehension and conflict

Assumptions about the needs and wants of older people are generally made by younger people. For example: “The elderly must surely want what they have lost” seems to be the undercurrent of many discussions. This is influenced by the media and advertising and exceptions are held to be aspirational standards: a muscular, tanned 70-something heading out on his surfboard. The assumption may be quite wrong and part of a generational disconnect. Studies where the elderly express themselves produce different priorities to those commonly assumed. The conclusion I come to is that perhaps older people should be listened to more. We should not ask what we want for them but what they want for themselves and what they regard as living well.

I call these gaps in understanding ‘intergenerational incomprehension’. I’m speculating here but maybe the old have forgotten what it’s like to be young and the young have no insight into what it’s like to be old. Each generation lives in its own world. I’ve had much experience of this with younger family members expressing views about what should happen to their sick elderly relatives.

Looking at the topic of ‘intergenerational conflict’, in the UK there is a perception that the baby boomers (now aged 56-76) are ‘having it good’ at the expense of the young (free university education, early retirement, generous pensions, cheap housing, still working and taking jobs from the young, damage to the environment). How do we tackle the thorny issue of resource allocation in society? For example, how much should a society spend on people in their last years? Deciding what is just is very difficult but the ‘tropes of blame’ have been absorbed and almost sanctified in society (for example, in the assumptions made in the 2019 House of Lords report



Intergenerational Fairness and Provision. Intergenerational justice is being brought into sharp focus by current stressors including environmental damage and overpopulation. But unfortunately, this incredibly important and difficult debate has been hijacked by two very unpleasant factors: 'presentism' (the tendency to interpret the past by modern values and concepts) and 'the blame game'.

The economics of ageing – positive or negative?

Coming now to the economics of ageing, we can say that, after infant mortality, increased lifespan is a primary measure of economic development. And a routine prediction is that the cost of pensions, social care and healthcare for the elderly will rise to the point of unsustainability by the working population. One figure bandied about is that 10 million people in the UK can expect to have 'inadequate incomes' in retirement.

I came across the old age support ratio (OSR) which indicates the number of economically active people supporting the economically inactive. In the UK in 2015 it was 3.22. The projection for 2035 is that this will drop to 2.87. The Very Old Support Ratio (VOSR) is more dramatic. In 2010, just over eight 50-64 year-olds were supporting those over 85 but by 2050 this will slump to just over three. In addition to which, the needs of the elderly rise with age. The economics of ageing appear to be extremely troublesome. But confusingly, there are other more positive views such as this WHO statement. 'Research in the UK in 2011 estimated that the contributions of older people through taxation, consumer spending, and other economically valuable activities were worth more than £40 billion more than expenditure on them through pensions, welfare and health care combined'. So are the elderly really net contributors to the economy? And if this is true, why is there a preoccupation with the 'burden' of the elderly? I'm sure there are explanations but they are not immediately apparent to me.

What can be done?

A House of Lords Select Committee Report *Ready for Ageing* (2013) came out with these recommendations: (1) End 'cliff-edge' retirement – i.e., not by an arbitrary age but when you can't or no longer want to do your job; (2) An older statutory retirement age; (3) More part-time, flexible work; (4) rethink defined contribution pension schemes (not a good thing according to the House of Lords); (5) Encourage savings; (6) Restructure healthcare (i.e., changing priorities, integrating social care, changing how we fund state healthcare).

Making your own decisions

Coming now to the ethics of ageing, the issue of autonomy (making decisions about your own life) is particularly acute. Full autonomy requires full mental capacity. Many elderly people will not have full autonomy for the major decisions. The law sets out guidance for those who make decisions for others. The phrase often used is 'best interests'. But who really knows what is in the best interests of an elderly person? I would suggest that we can only know if we ask. Ask before it's too late (I'm talking about advanced directives, expression of wishes etc.) and respect the decision made. This can be difficult for a younger person who feels that an older person is not making the right decision. Families, lawyers etc. are likely to apply values that seem appropriate to them at their stage in life. It's difficult to empathise with an older person if you've just never had the experience.

Conclusion

It's been pretty gloomy but want to lift the mood with a personal reflection on the miracle of life as a humanist. To me, life and a long life is definitely worth having because it really is a biological 'miracle' of improbability. It is something to be really savoured. But we also have to focus on the quality of life and the quality of old age.

Recommended reading

Being Mortal (2015) by Atul Gawande





Dorset Humanists **Chairman's View**

June 2020

Personally speaking, I wouldn't go around saying that the Prophet Muhammad was a 'paedophile' on the basis of his reputed marriage to a child because it would be gratuitously offensive and culturally anachronistic. Neither would I go around saying he was a 'terrorist' because, again, it is culturally anachronistic to use this word about a military leader who lived in 7th century Arabia. But if, in the knockabout world of Facebook posts, such words are used about the Prophet Muhammad I would not expect the alleged offender to be arrested on a charge of blasphemy carrying the death penalty. But this is what happened to our humanist brother Mubarak Bala on 28th April 2020. Mubarak is in his thirties and he is the President of the Nigerian Humanist Association. He was raised as a Muslim in the city of Kano in the north of Nigeria which has been a Muslim stronghold for centuries. Sharia law is in force in twelve out of seventeen states in Northern Nigeria. But Mubarak has renounced Islam and become an outspoken atheist and critic of Islamic extremism, inspiring many young atheists to come out of the closet. In 2014 he was detained in a psychiatric hospital on the grounds that leaving Islam is a form of mental illness or insanity. With the support of Humanists International, he was freed in July 2014. But the current situation is extremely worrying. The police are intimidated by jihadists who threaten to burn down police stations holding apostates and police actions seem to be motivated by attempts to placate extremist opinion, even though Nigeria is a pluralistic country whose constitution upholds freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Nigerian human rights advocate and humanist Leo Igwe has written that 'The volatile religious situation in Nigeria has negatively impacted the non-religious, leaving humanists, atheists and agnostics with very limited options... the religious account for over 95 percent of the population but fear, intimidation, violence and the threat of violence largely account for Nigeria's religiosity. There is no freedom of religion in the country'.

There are three things you can do to help:

1. Spread the news online to raise awareness #FreeMubarakBala
2. Contribute to the Humanists International Crowdfunding Campaign
3. Write to the UK government using Humanists International's template letters

Full details are here: <https://humanists.international/2020/04/action-alert-what-you-can-do-to-save-mubarak/> Thank you.

