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Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ Saturday 9th May 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: 816 2157 3909

Password: 009506

The Future of Sentience Should we edit our genetic code?

This talk will explore some of the pitfalls of editing our genetic code. Should all babies be 'designer babies'? What could go wrong?



Our speaker David Pearce is a prominent figure in the transhumanism movement which advocates transforming the human condition through technology.

He is author of *The Hedonistic Imperative* (1995) which outlines how pharmacology, genetic engineering, nanotechnology and neurosurgery could converge to eliminate all forms of unpleasant experience from human and non-human life, replacing suffering with 'gradients of bliss'. Pearce calls this the 'abolitionist project'.

In 1998 David Pearce and Nick Bostrom co-founded the World Transhumanist Association, now known as Humanity+, an international non-profit organization that 'advocates the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities.'

■ Tuesday 12th May online event

Join us on Zoom at 7.00 to get settled in. Talk commences at 7.30pm. Click [here](#) or enter ID and password.

Meeting ID: 891 6963 3248

Password: 017156

COVID-19: A Game Changer for the Economy?



A talk and discussion led by Henri Ruff. The aim of this session is to think about the post-corona crisis economy, and to consider whether

the crisis is a 'game changer'. If so, in what ways might it radically change the shape of the economy to become the 'New Normal'? If not, can we expect to revert to the 'Old Normal' and when? Taking a broad-brush approach, which will be very light on statistics and avoid any forecasting, Henri intends to map out a few of the key aspects of the economy where we can consider whether or not the crisis constitutes a game changer. In doing so he aims to uncover some of the fundamental issues at stake, and address the questions and comments raised during the discussion.

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 is his third talk for Dorset Humanists.



■ **Wednesday 27th May online event**
Join us on Zoom at 7.00 to get settled in.
Talk commences at 7.30pm. Click [here](#) or
enter ID and password.
Meeting ID: 876 5179 4045
Password: 017721

Living Longer: A Positive Trend or a Problem?

We are living longer than our antecedents and the age distribution of the world is shifting fast. Is this a positive trend or a problem? Or both? And what is “old age” anyway? What does it do to you? How do you adjust to the changes? And how should society change to accommodate these trends? The increasing wants and needs of older people are impacting the lives of the young and creating intergenerational conflicts not seen before. Our speaker Barry Newman will offer no definitive answers to these uncomfortable questions, but he believes they are well worth airing and discussing.

Barry is a retired intensive care medicine consultant and this is his second talk for Dorset Humanists. He qualified at the University of Cape Town and was appointed consultant at Poole Hospital in 1988.

■ **Virtual Coffee Morning 11.00am**
Every Tuesday until further notice. Enjoy friendly conversation over tea or coffee at our online coffee morning. Join Dorset Humanists on Meetup to get regular reminders and to access the Meeting ID and password.

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

☎ David Warden 07910 886629

■ **Virtual Pub Quiz led by members**
Every Thursday 7.30pm 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! Join Dorset Humanists on Meetup to get regular reminders and to access the Meeting ID and password.

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

Terry Scurr raises £1,100 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. It pleased me to see that I had already reached Stow-on-the-Wold on my virtual journey. The adventure had begun! 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. I’ve set my target at £1000.00. I don’t know whether that’s too modest or over ambitious. Let’s find out.

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>



Are you a 'Zoom Virgin' or a 'Techophobe'?



From self-confessed 'Zoom Virgin' Lady Carolyn Mellor:
"Thank you so much everyone for having me - and for being so forgiving of a Zoom Virgin's first video conferencing attempt! You're all brilliant. So so good to get interactive with people other than my telly people - well worth the effort and preparations and stepping over the technophobic line. Much love to you all."

Lots of members and supporters of Dorset Humanists have now joined our online events using Zoom but maybe you consider yourself to be 'technically challenged' or even a 'techno-idiot'! Well please don't despair. Some of our most technically challenged members have overcome their reluctance and are now chatting away merrily online. It's a great way to keep in touch with friends at Dorset Humanists, get to know each other better, meet new people (and their cats, chickens, cuddly toys etc), and even get a peek into their homes, libraries, art collections, and box set obsessions!

If you would like to join us on Zoom please contact me for a friendly chat about your set-up and how to get Zoom on your device.

☎ David 07910 886629

Ronnie aims to raise £100 for Poole Hospital Heroes



Ronnie Barr, our Young Humanists Ambassador and Diversity

Representative, plans to raise money for Poole Hospital by doing a 'virtual 5k'. Ronnie explains: "I'm taking part in a virtual 5k

for Poole Hospital Charity because they need our help during the COVID-19 crisis. A 'virtual race' takes place in the real world but is tracked online. Using my mobile app I intend to walk the whole 5k in one go at my local park as part of my daily exercise - due to my health problems I'm still building up to jogging or running. I shall be completing the 5k itself by mid-May. I'm hoping that by completing this I can encourage friends and family to donate towards Poole Hospital Heroes. The money will be going towards front-line workers to support their mental health and wellbeing while they support us. The fundraising pages on Facebook and JustGiving will be staying up until 20th July, hopefully with some help we can raise £100 for hospital staff!

Let's smash through Ronnie's target!

Please donate here:

<https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/poolehospitalvirtual5k>

President of Nigerian Humanists arrested



Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria has been arrested following allegations that he has insulted the Prophet Muhammad in a Facebook post. If Mubarak were to be

charged with 'blasphemy' and he is found guilty, he could face the death penalty.

David Warden has written to his MP to raise this matter. **Please take action** by visiting Humanists International [here](#).

A Coronavirus Conversation



33 people joined us online for Jonathan MS Pearce's energetic and thought-provoking talk on the current crisis. Jonathan is a blogger, author, teacher, writer,

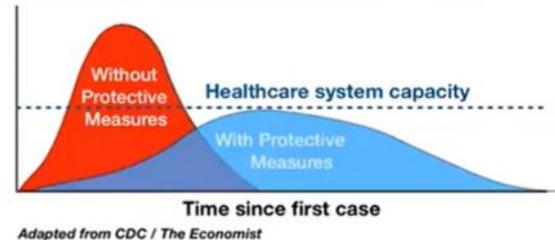
and philosopher. This is his eighth talk for Dorset Humanists. Previous topics have included God, morality, free will, the nativity stories, Islam, and the European Union. He's written and edited many books of interest to humanists including an anthology of poetry called 'Filling the Void' and a book countering William Lane Craig's Kalam Cosmological Argument. This report is republished from Jonathan's blog with permission.

"Excellent; a well-presented and informative talk with valuable subsequent comments, almost the better for being online. Thank you."
Roger

1. A new vaccine will probably not be the panacea you are expecting it to be

As I have frequently maintained, the only way out of this is with a viable vaccine or robust treatments. This was what Professor Chris Whitty also finally admitted at the government briefing at Westminster a few days ago. A lockdown mitigates against overwhelming the healthcare systems in whatever context is in question. But all a lockdown does is to move when someone dies from one place in time to another in order to flatten the curve and delay things until better treatments are available or we have more understanding of the virus. It doesn't mean that, at this other time, a person who is vulnerable to dying from coronavirus will somehow not be vulnerable. They will still be equally as vulnerable, other things being equal. Those

people who are likely to die from coronavirus are just as likely to die (though there may be some shift with a better understanding of the virus as time advances). The only way around this, at present, is to have a lockdown indefinitely, or at least until a vaccine is developed.



'Flattening the curve' means the same number of deaths but just spaced out a bit

The problem is, vaccines for flu-type viruses are notoriously either ineffective or difficult to create. This is because of the mutability of the virus. We are already aware of a huge number of strains of Covid-19 (thirty-three in China alone as of four days ago), which means that dealing with the virus in terms of a vaccine is demanding. Not only this but, just like flu, it is likely that we would need to change the vaccine every year. The spike that we had in 2015 with regular influenza deaths was as a result of the vaccine not working against that particular strain of the virus.

Vaccines for such viruses generally work to make the sufferer have a greater chance of fewer, less harsh symptoms. They aren't necessarily the cure-all panaceas that we are led to think they are.

In other words, putting all of our eggs into the vaccine basket, whilst it might be our best bet, is by no means something to rely on in perhaps the way that we are.

2. The virus will need to "rip through" society

Another depressing nugget to take out of the Q&A session is that, arguably, the only way to deal with the virus is perhaps not to deal with it at all, sort of. As State Epidemiologist for Sweden Professor Johan Giesecke has stated, the outcome for countries, no matter what mitigation or policy they adopt, will most probably be



about the same, give or take. That means that, whether you are in Sweden with herd immunity, or in Britain with a lockdown, the outcome of deaths will be largely similar, adjusted by population. Even if Sweden's death rate was double the UK's, there can be an argument made that, if they don't shut down their economy, such loss of life is a price worth paying. It has been suggested that we should let the virus "rip through" society whilst trying our best to shield the vulnerable and have it give least impact – as such, there is an air of inevitability to it.

This is also predicated on the fact that the only viable way out of this is a vaccine or treatments since a lockdown can't go on forever. This means that, at some point or another, lockdown will eventually become a sort of slower herd immunity, the ease becomes what I like to term a "leaky lockdown". We already have leakage in our lockdown as we can see from continued deaths and infections in the UK during a fairly tight lockdown well-adhered to by the vast majority of the population.

In the absence of a vaccine (further given its potential lack of golden key status), both options [lockdown or 'let rip'] are merely differentiated by a lack of overwhelming of the healthcare system achieved by successful lockdown and probably not achieved by herd immunity policies. Other than that, the outcomes look fairly similar over time.

3. Neither are ventilators a panacea as they come with their own problems

As the ICU expert in the Dorset Humanists audience stated, ventilators are problematic: they require an awful lot of effort and manpower before, during and after use, and are very expensive. The patient also often requires a very taxing amount of recovery, in both time and physiological effect. The specialist quoted a 70% death rate in those put on ventilators. It may even be higher.

In China, 86 per cent of twenty-two COVID-19 patients didn't survive invasive ventilation at an intensive care unit in Wuhan, the city where the pandemic began,

according to a study published in *The Lancet* in February. Normally, the paper said, patients with severe breathing problems have a 50 per cent chance of survival. A recent British study found two-thirds of COVID-19 patients put on mechanical ventilators ended up dying anyway, and a New York study found 88 per cent of 320 mechanically-ventilated COVID-19 patients had died.

It's wonderful being part of Dorset Humanists. I find it completely engrossing listening to people with expertise and intelligent debate from people with such diverse political views. I look forward to my next trip down south when this is all over! Diolch yn fawr, a hwyl am y tro, Huw from Cardiff

That said, the results are very variable. Of course, for the many people they work for, they are life-saving. The whole process is thoroughly complicated. I suppose my point is that these measures, whether lockdown, herd immunity, vaccine or ventilators, are far more complex than we initially give them credit for, and we need be wary.

4. Beware second and third waves

As we come out of mitigations, and we can learn from the Spanish Flu here, we will be in store for some potentially even bigger hits. A controlled easing, if done properly, will result in a very long process since the lag time for measuring impact of each given change in lockdown procedures will be two to three weeks. Change one thing, wait two to three weeks, measure; roll it back or accept it and change another, wait two to three weeks, measure; and so on. Rush these things and we will swamp the healthcare systems.

As time passes, though, more and more of the population will have come into contact with Covid-19 and will have passed through the system. Are these waves largely an inevitability, even if in a different curve shape (deaths from overwhelmed systems notwithstanding)?

Conclusion

All of this is thoroughly pessimistic. We have done such a good job around the world (to varying degrees, admittedly) of locking down in order to mitigate against overwhelming our healthcare systems. There have been many ancillary benefits to this as well as serious challenges (not even considering the economic ramifications).

The million-dollar question will be, of course: will the evasion of the overwhelming of healthcare systems be worth the price paid for shutting down economies? This will be the main evaluation that people will be demanding, though it appears callous. This is what libertarian protestors are shouting about in the US – they think the line has been reached where inconvenience and economic cost is now not worth paying to save lives.

I have been in support of the lockdown here, primarily concerning flattening the curve and saving lives; but that million-dollar question remains to be answered for me. And, importantly, I think we will end up not too far from where somewhere like Sweden ends up. People won't isolate forever. People will want to return to some kind of normal. And the price to pay for this is running the gauntlet with COVID-19. And, if you are vulnerable like me [Jonathan stated at the start of his talk that he has MS], or perhaps over 80, you might even be able to quantify this.

"I could stay inside and have no physical contact with anyone for the rest of my life, or for the next year at least, or I could be damned with it and take an 18 per cent chance of me dying from this thing, dying horribly, or living the kind of life I think I want."

I do wonder how people will approach this from now on.

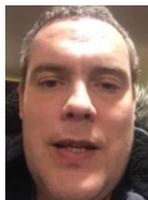
■ Jonathan's talk can be watched in its entirety on You Tube. Click [here](#).

Additional links:

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/tipling/>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/tipling/2020/04/02/my-coronavirus-lightbulb-moment/>

How to Survive the Lockdown



Our newest member Richard Jones shares his tools and tips for surviving the lockdown. Richard is a Gestalt Therapist and he regularly attends our virtual coffee mornings.

Obviously this guide is entirely subjective and you may not find my suggestions helpful. Feel free to use or ignore as you wish!

1. Structure and routine

I have always moved more towards the spontaneous and creative in life. However, during recent times I have found structure helpful. Trying to create a routine around weekdays and separating out what constitutes the weekend is one such move. I tend to get up slowly, take a long time over coffee, have my meals at particular times and schedule online chats or phone calls. This way I have a variety of activities throughout the day. I have found it very important to try and vary activities and not stay doing one thing for more than an hour. Creating variety gives me a sense of difference, and however small your space, moving between rooms, has helped me create different perspectives.

Conversely, it's important not to become a slave to your routine. There is no point writing so many lists or schedules that they in themselves become a stress. So allowing flexibility around the structure is a useful adaptation.

2. Bringing the outside in

Unfortunately, I am unable to go out for the daily walks and this is a big challenge. When I was caring for my mother, she pretty much lived in one room and was not able to go out in a similar vein. Some of the skills and tips that I tried to utilise to help her, I am ironically now using for myself. We would talk about walks and imagine where we had walked, the holidays she had been on, making good use of reminiscence, I would play types of birdsong or Nature





“Connect with the outside world as much as possible” (Persian Ironwood tree in Bournemouth Gardens – photo credit DW)

Sounds, show her photographs from nature books, and use BBC country file.

I'm guessing we all have opening windows. So even if you cannot go out, making sure your environment is fully aired and that you can hear the outside world and connect with it as much as possible, seems very important.

3. Externalising thought processes and dialogue

Throughout the day we are used to contact with others' discussions, text messages et cetera. Obviously some of these opportunities have become somewhat sparse. It is important where possible, I feel, to continue a dialogue, even if to some extent it is with oneself. Some scholars have seen this as insanity, although I am overlooking this point. I will not consult the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until after lockdown! Seriously though, having a conversation in one's own head and speaking out loud about what one's plans are or what we will for cook for dinner, is actually quite useful. It gives you a chance to hear your own voice and to muse over various ideas. If you are fortunate enough to have pets, I have never before found myself talking to my two cats quite as often! We know that vocalising thought processes aid mental health, otherwise why would talking therapies exist?

Similarly of course we can use writing to aid self-expression, or drawing or artwork for example. Be careful not to put too much pressure on yourself when doing artwork for it to look like something or become an academic task. For me it is more helpful for it to be an expression of emotion or use of

colour. If I find myself using a lot of red then this may have be an expression of irritation or anger, conversely perhaps pastoral tones convey more passive emotions.

4. Mindfulness

This has been very much the buzzword in the world of therapy for some time now. Particularly at the moment, it could be very useful. I am not the most reflective and meditative of characters but mindfulness exercises have become helpful. The simplest way to do this is to shut one's eyes or lower one's gaze, and simply pay attention to all of the five senses for a very short period of time. For example what can you hear, what can you smell, what can you feel within your body, and so on. Try to divert your attention from future plans, just stay in the present. It takes practice, and try not to be too hard on yourself. Just two minutes of mindfulness the day, is known to aid mental health and relaxation. It can be done anywhere and it's free!

5. Goal-setting

As a Gestalt therapist goalsetting and more CBT-based techniques are not usually my preferred method of working. However, at the moment goal-setting can be particularly helpful. In summary, when setting a goal it is useful if it is “SMART” (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed). So for example, I set a goal for today to clean and tidy the kitchen. In order to make it specific, is there a particular area of the kitchen that needs more attention? Then is it measurable, will I be able to tell when I have done it, what is my measure of success? For achievability, is it within my physical capabilities, do I need any additional supplies or cleaning materials? Concerning size of the task, is this realistic, do I have the physical energy and ability to do it? Finally, what will the anticipated timescale be for the task and when does it need to be finished by? Following this simple structure can allow me to plan goals that are realistic are within my capabilities. Then I don't get into a spiral of setting a goals beyond realistic expectations. This then avoids feeling depressed or anxious, as I have not achieved or met expectations.



6. Ongoing processes

At a time like this, I feel it is important to have things which are ongoing, having a sense of continuation. An example of this is baking bread. If all the ingredients are available, it can be extremely useful. This is a task that one can take time with and be mindful over. It utilises the senses creating pleasant smells, and is a thorough and precise process. Further it needs regular attention and gradually progresses towards completion. I have noticed that there can sometimes be a desire to speed up or get to the end of processes. I find I have to resist this, in order to fully appreciate the whole task in a therapeutic way.

Similarly, if I am downloading a series of nature programmes for example, it can be tempting to binge watch. Of course companies like Netflix, other providers are available, would actually like us to do this, as it creates more revenue. However if we schedule in the series, and watch it as we would've done like live TV it creates anticipation each night and slows down my whole reflective process.

7. Downtime breaks from the news and technology

Social media, iPads, mobile phones, Instagram, Skype et cetera, all provide us with useful ways of connecting. This is of course helpful. However, I am mindful that it is easy to become absorbed in the competitive exchange of photographs or experiences, almost trying to prove that we are having the best and most exhilarating lockdown! This would be rather than simply using them as a tool to exchange information. In order to combat this I have created downtime between 7pm and 10pm in the evening whereby, other than live television, I turn off all technology; phones iPads et cetera. This I feel, creates a useful balance between being bombarded and using the tools as they were designed.

Similarly, news items, in particular mortality figures, and other very difficult subjects, seem to be bombarding us at the moment. I would suggest one news program per day is more than adequate. If I become too absorbed in the news it is very easy to lose

all perspective. I then just become anxious or somewhat obsessed.

8. Creative space and willingness to explore different or new concepts

Lastly, I think for me it is about a willingness to try new things and embrace new experiences. Obviously, this can be very difficult if we are used to doing things in a particular way and have done something in a specific format for many years. For example, I was talking to one of my carers about challenges of not being able to go to my hairdressers! Is it possible, I thought, to experience components of this regular activity, but in a different way? So I contacted my hairdresser over Skype. This had little to do with the actual cut and more about drinking coffee and having a chat and a laugh with her. However, it still met a social need. My carers then produced a device similar to sheep-shearing ones I imagine, in order to just give me a grade 3 all over. Okay, not quite the same experience as usual but the overall task was addressed.

Conclusion

I would reiterate that it's very personal. Any ways we can find to help ourselves will be valuable for us all as individuals. I would suggest being very mindful of self-care, looking after oneself and creating those opportunities at the end of difficult days is vital. Whether this be relaxing bath, a nice bar of chocolate, or a G&T or whatever? I feel it is important having followed some strategies, to create an end to a day, where one rewards oneself for having survived. I remember when having done some training for an alcohol and drug awareness project, that one of the main stragglers they use is a sense of 'it will pass'. I.e. whatever moment we are in, there is probably unknown, almost certainly some level of distress, but that moment will pass that is certain. If we live from moment to moment, or hour by hour, rather than week to week or month to month, we will survive. Therefore, I will survive! "I statements" in the first person, to oneself are helpful. This owns our feelings and enables us to remain focused. At the risk of bursting into song with a well-known ballad I will now sign off.





Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
May 2020

It now seems certain that 2020 will become one of the great axial dates in history, BC and AC, a year when the foundations of human civilization were shaken by a mutant virus. We were caught off guard, having grown complacent after a century of relative calm. Like an invisible gas the virus spread across the world to take up its deadly occupation in densely populated cities, a Bhopal for the entire globe. At first, there was just one case. Then twenty. Then a thousand. We quickly became acquainted with the concept of 'exponential growth'. Normal life continued, apart from official instructions to "Wash Your Hands" and "Catch it, kill it, bin it." On Thursday 12th March I had my last haircut and on Friday 13th March my last meal out with friends. On Saturday 14th, we decided that our annual members' lunch was too risky. The novel concepts of 'self-isolating' and 'social distancing' entered our daily conversations. We held out for one last week, until scientists warned us that 500,000 would die, and so we entered the strange new world of 'total lockdown' - a world of screens. For a few weeks, we put aside past divisions and tribal enmities and came together as a nation, as a species, to fight this alien force. The Queen addressed the nation. But the truce couldn't last. A Sunday newspaper broke ranks and blamed the calamity on the complacency and incompetence of the government. Even the near death experience of the Commander-in-Chief was viewed as a publicity stunt. We've had a crash course in flattening the curve, PPE procurement, testing kits, track and trace, face mask design, ventilator supply chains, giant pop-up hospitals, demographic risk profiling, co-morbidity international league tables of death, the city of Wuhan, wet markets, bats, the R rate, herd immunity, epidemiology, virology and vaccinology. Supermarkets now operate one-way systems and checkout operators sit behind plastic screens. Every Thursday night, in a strange new communal ritual, we clap the NHS and bang pots and pans along with neighbours we've never seen before. Economists talk about the economy 'cratering' as if we've been hit by a massive asteroid, which in a way we have. One of the most hopeful if humbling signs is that Asian countries have fought much more effectively and scientifically against this threat than the old freedom-loving West. It took us a few fateful weeks to realise that we had to trade freedom for life itself. From now on, we're going to have to plot our own individual exit strategies and get used to being tested, released, or quarantined. The working population need to get clearance as quickly as possible. Humans have got through worse calamities before. But this was the big one we thought would never come.

