



Humanistically Speaking



November 2022

Speaking out for the non-religious. On values. On issues. On life.

Truth, Lies & Porky Pies

Exclusive interview with Professor Jim Al-Khalili
Julian Baggini's consolations for a post-truth world
Did the Tories crash the economy?
Norwegian humanists promote critical thinking
When is it permissible for Muslims to deceive?
Rushdie stabbing welcomed on WhatsApp
Africa's new slavery
Lying to children
Do chimps lie?



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In this Issue

Come in, sit down, put your feet up...

David Brittain
Executive Editor



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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by any associated Humanist groups or Humanists UK.

How concerned should we be about lying in politics? According to Machiavelli, politics has always been about deception. Should a leader be selective with the truth to soften bad news so as to avoid panic? Should we care about an otherwise effective politician if she cheats on her husband, or should we reject someone because of something said in confidence? There are, perhaps, few straightforward answers and I, for one, would be very interested to know what our readers think.

Is deception peculiarly human in nature, or do other animals deceive one another? The answer to the second question seems to be a resounding 'Yes'. Indeed, it is discomfoting to realise that the more intelligent the animal, the greater the capacity it has to deceive. Penny Morgan explores this issue in her contribution this month.

Also this month, we are delighted to feature an article on critical thinking by Even Gran who is the critical thinking campaign manager at Human-Etisk Forbund (Norwegian Humanist Association) and we report on a talk by Mike Flood about the concerns of the newly formed *Future of Humanism Group*.

My interview with Jim Al-Khalili is not, at first sight, related to the question of lies, but as a physicist Jim is, in a way, dealing with the pursuit of ultimate truth in a scientific sense. Lies may be constructs of the mind but scientific truth seems to be natural and on solid ground – or is it?

It's rare for me to mention a reader's email but the message about the stabbing of Salman Rushdie is disturbing. It draws attention to extremist elements within the Islamic community which should concern us all.

I was delighted to read about the first humanist child-naming ceremony in Nigeria. We offer our congratulations to proud parents Ingye and Joy and to baby Doose, and to Leo Igwe for performing the ceremony.

I would also like to formally welcome Taunton and Somerset Humanist group into the fold as group subscribers. We would love to receive comments and news from our new colleagues in Somerset. So, until the next issue, read on...



Humanist News



University Freshers Week

Aaron, David and George from Dorset Humanists attended the Bournemouth University Students Union Freshers event in September with the usual pop-up banners, leaflets, free pens and popular badges etc. There is currently no humanist group at the university, but we raised awareness of humanism and the fact that David Warden is an official humanist advisor on campus. He will be leading a seminar on campus on the **Philosophy of Friendship** in October to help address the problem of loneliness which is a concern for many students these days.

The team engaged hundreds of friendly and excitable students who mostly seemed eager and happy to speak with us. Some had a peripheral knowledge of humanism, and at the very least we filled in the blanks and gave

everyone a [Humanism in Ten Points](#) card, a tangerine and an invitation to the seminar.

We have partnered with a student humanist group here before and would love to build a new one. We will certainly report back on how things develop.



We were an island of rationality in a sea of faith groups including Gideons and JW's.



We would love to hear from other groups about the events and activities that you do outside of the normal monthly meeting or pub social.



Leo Igwe, baby girl Doose Dooyum, and proud parents Ingye and Joy

First humanist child-naming ceremony in Nigeria

Humanistically Speaking sends warm congratulations to Leo Igwe who conducted his first humanist child-naming ceremony on 17th September in Benue State, Nigeria. This is the first child naming ceremony recorded by the the Humanist Association of Nigeria since it was founded in 1996.

In his introduction, Leo explained that “A naming ceremony is an exciting event because it provides an opportunity for families and friends to celebrate a new arrival, a new addition to the family. A humanist naming ceremony is a ceremony that is consistent with humanist values. It has no rules. A humanist naming ceremony is unique, personal, flexible, sincere, and collaborative. As a humanist celebrant, my job is to help parents, in this case, Ingye and Joy, to mark the arrival of their new baby. Nonreligious and religious parents who desire an inclusive

service for their baby can organize a humanist naming ceremony.”

Ingye and Joy made promises to their daughter, and Leo was appointed to be her mentor. Daniel Nnaji from the Humanist Association of Nigeria read one of the poems.

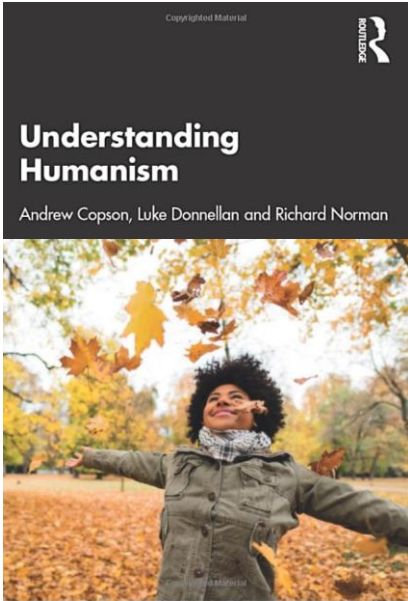
There is a growing demand for non-religious ceremonies in Nigeria. These demands are mainly at the theoretical levels due to opposition and hostility from religious family members. Many humanists have expressed the desire to have their weddings, child namings, and funerals celebrated in ways that are free from superstition. The Humanist Association will work to fulfil this need and aspiration of humanists.

Leo Igwe is a board member of the Humanist Association of Nigeria and Humanists International.





Humanist News



New text book on humanism published

A new textbook on humanism has been published by Routledge, written by Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, together with Humanists UK's Director of Understanding Humanism Luke Donnellan, and humanist philosopher Richard Norman. 'Understanding Humanism' is an up-to-date, modern account of humanism, written primarily for undergraduate students and school pupils wishing to deepen their knowledge of humanist philosophy and the lives of humanists today. Andrew wrote that he hopes it will be the go-to introduction to humanism in education settings, bolstered by Humanists UK's work in schools and its many education resources.

Humanistically Speaking is delighted to see one of our editors, Dr Anthony Lewis, featured in the book.

Humanist car stickers

Supplies are running out so don't delay!

A member of Dorset Humanists has designed these simple but very effective humanist car stickers to raise awareness of the word 'humanist' and the happy human symbol. If you would like one of these stickers to display on your windscreen or rear window, or a batch for your humanist group, please email:

chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk.



Humanistically Speaking is for humanist groups everywhere, but our readership is growing and is fully open to non-humanists and persons of faith.



Future of Humanism Group event

Two dozen humanists attended a 'Room and Zoom' event (October 13th) organised by Milton Keynes Humanists to listen to a presentation by Mike Flood on the new Future of Humanism Group, which has been set up to encourage a more open debate within the humanist movement on what should comprise our 'core issues' and how we might strive to be 'good ancestors' for those who come after us.

The Group is focused on three major concerns:

1. Misinformation, which undermines reason and truth, two pillars of humanism;
2. Artificial Intelligence, which has huge implications for jobs, human rights, social justice and democracy; and
3. Sustainable Development, in the light of accelerating habitat and biodiversity loss, coupled with widespread damage to the environment / marine ecosystems, and climate change.

The Group has noted that none of these issues merit mention in Humanists UK's 5-Year Plan.

Independent expert panel proposed

The Group would like Humanists UK and/or Humanists International to:

1. Set up an independent panel to look into and comment on the moral and ethical issues posed by these (and possibly other) issues, and identify authoritative potential partners that are actively campaigning in these areas; and, in the light of the panel's findings

2. Critically review and revise their campaign priorities and explore creative ways in which they might collaborate with others to address the threats identified.

It was noted that there is abundant relevant expertise amongst Humanists UK's 200 or so patrons. The Group feels that current humanist programmes fall some way short of what one might expect in the light of the 2022 Declaration of Modern Humanism, that humanists "feel a duty of care to all of humanity, including future generations, and beyond this to all sentient beings."

Mixed response

There was a mixed response from those present: some felt strongly that Humanists UK should stick to its current priorities, such as humanist marriage and blasphemy law abolition, because very few other NGOs are tackling these topics and a myriad of others are focused on issues such as 'truth decay', AI, and the climate crisis. Others argued (equally forcefully) that members would appreciate guidance on how to respond to these evolving threats, and that failing to recognise them diminishes the humanist brand. Humanists UK commented recently on Facebook that "there are lots of very serious ethical questions raised by artificial intelligence" and that it is hoping to explore some of these in its events next year. This is encouraging, but the Group hopes this means something more than putting on a specialist lecture.





Labour support for humanist marriage

Humanists UK found widespread support at the Labour Party conference for extending legal recognition to humanist marriages in England and Wales. Andrew Copson (centre) is with Lord (Alf) Dubs, Nia Griffith MP, Jeff Smith MP, and Rachel Hopkins MP.

Darwinian shaved monkeys

Assistant editor David Warden was delighted to stumble across Darwin's Bar when visiting Salzburg, Austria.

Have you any humanist-themed photos to share from your travels?





Dear David...

Emails to the Editor

Rushdie stabbing secretly welcomed

You rightly pointed out in your September 2022 editorial that more needs to be done by Muslim leaders than mere condemnations of the barbaric attack on Sir Salman Rushdie. However, the issue is that I am not aware of any believing Muslims who would not have secretly been happy at what happened to Sir Salman, even if condemning it for the non-Muslim general public. Being from a Muslim background myself, there was a flurry of congratulatory messages on Muslim WhatsApp groups that I am a member of immediately after the attack on Sir Salman. Closet agnostics like myself cannot post any message condemning this attack. I am sure Julie Siddique would not have condemned this attack in front of a Muslim audience.

Unfortunately, the policy of multiculturalism and open funding of Saudi petrodollars to mosques and madrassas has led to a Muslim population with an extremist mindset. All non-Muslims are 'Kuffars' i.e. infidels. They are unclean, not worth associating with nor greeting at Christmas or offering condolences on a death. I myself heard the Imam of my local mosque telling Muslims that there is no need to offer condolences to anyone on the Queen's death as she was a non-Muslim. No need to lay flowers etc. as no one is going to read your messages with the flowers. Strangely, these Imams and their followers seem very keen to come and remain in the UK, despite it being a nation of 'Kuffars'! So in

my opinion it is the fault of the UK authorities not to deal with the separatism/elitism of Islam. The high birth rate of the Muslim population has to be dealt with by an aggressive secularist education to make future ethnic populations free of the prejudices of Islam. France is going in the right direction. The UK needs to follow.

Name withheld

Killing of Mahsa Amini

Thank you very much for the latest edition of *Humanistically Speaking*. I am utterly appalled by the shameful killing of Mahsa Amini, purely for wearing her hijab (which she should not have been forced to wear in the first place) in a way that was deemed to be inappropriate.

In solidarity, Jake Yeates

Is there a secular version of 'Rest in Peace'?

A 'godless' friend has queried the almost universal use of the phrase 'Rest in Peace'. Since humanists cannot wish that on a deceased person – even on the Queen – what alternative phrase should be used? You might ask this question in the next edition of *Humanistically Speaking*. Those providing the best three phrases are welcome to attend my cremation – the date yet to be announced.

Eric Hayman



We love hearing from our readers, so why not drop us an email and let us know what you think...

Will King Charles III do anything for non-believers?

In the case of our new king, I'm not so certain he will do anything at all for non-believers. It is simply not in his interests to do so as he is appointed by a super-deity to be king (unlike in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where the king was appointed by 'a strange woman lying around in a pond distributing swords'). Also, let's face it, his green credibility is very shallow. I mean, just how many houses do you really need? How much power is wasted keeping the dwelling up to habitation just in case the owner pops in for lunch? And don't start me on his homeopathy beliefs...

Aaron Darkwood and Mike Flood wrote about humanist groups in the October issue of *Humanistically Speaking*. I tend to be a loner and I am not a member of a local humanist group. But I love the Humanists UK organised events where I can get to see some truly famous people. I have been lucky enough to talk to (and probably, no doubt, annoy) some of the greatest scientists, philosophers and celebrities in the world at Humanists UK events, AND often get a few free glasses of wine as well.

Penny Morgan's article about conformity was most interesting to me! Once again it allows me to recommend a writer to you all. Michael Shermer's book *The Science of Good and Evil* mentions the Milgram experiment and explains why people cheat, gossip, care, share and sometimes obey the Golden Rule. It is a must! Finally, the book reviewed by Anthony Lewis, *An Immigrant's Love Letter To The West*, is now on my list of books to buy. Anyway, another very good newsletter from you. I look forward to next month.

Neil Camp

Community humanism

Mike Flood, in his article 'Community Humanism' last month, was right about not panicking over the sharp decline in local groups, but in my view some things need to change. They could be summarised as:

- Member-centric empowerment
- Defining our mission and criteria
- What we expect from our members
- Raising our standards of training and communications throughout

We should aim to create a feeling of belonging to a powerful, democratic organisation by thoroughly thinking out the potential needs of our own members, with a concentration on young people. The human strengths which any group would welcome from its members include sympathy for our aims and values, taking responsibility for promoting humanism to potential new joiners, leading by example and behaviour, showing the world a better way through service, attending events, and donating money or helping to raise funds. We could restore Humanists UK's Member Forum to spread good ideas and practice and allow potential new members to get an overview of problems, solutions and how individuals could usefully contribute. We could restore special interest groups such as education, secularism, sentientism, science, and even golf! And we could schedule a Zoom conference of experienced group leaders with the aim of developing a start-up package for each new proposed group, with an emphasis on local autonomy but with outside mentoring and support. A change in group dynamics, especially at the moment when prospective members decide to become helpful and contributing members, could work wonders.

David McKnight



Are you sure about that?

Norwegian humanists promote critical thinking
by *Even Gran*

The climate crisis is a hoax! The pandemic was a setup! Follow the money! Vaccines are made to control us! We are all ruled by the Illuminati!

Some would say a person arguing this way is very critical. Super-critical! We don't, of course. This is definitely not the "critical thinking" the Norwegian Humanist Association was trying to promote in our campaign on critical thinking last year.

Critical thinking is not about denying common knowledge and constantly accusing elites of power-abuse and hidden agendas. Conspiracy theories and pseudo-critical accusations like these remain powerless unless they are consistently grounded in science, logic, and rationality.

The mindset we wanted to promote in our campaign was openness. Anyone who criticizes something must be willing to change her/his mind. We must be willing to accept that the answer to our critical investigations might also be a big and resounding "We were wrong!" Despite what we thought, there's nothing to be afraid about!

Basic attitude

For humanists, critical thinking is a fundamental attitude where you constantly ask yourself whether the world really behaves the way you think. Critical thinkers are constantly trying to find faults and shortcomings in what they themselves and



Even Gran is the critical thinking campaign manager at Human-Etisk Forbund (Norwegian Humanist Association)

others believe. This might not seem like a very positive or constructive attitude, but it has a very positive effect. Because if you don't find serious errors or deficiencies in what you assumed, there is reason to believe that it might have some truth to it. The goal of the process is constructive. You are trying to figure something out.

Defending the method, not the answers

Surely, no one can deny the existence of hidden power structures. But a critical thinker understands that all claims – including claims about hidden power networks – must be examined critically, based on logic, rationality, and science. If you're unable to find a good, rational reason to believe that the claims are true, you have to abandon them. That's where the conspiracy theorists always get it wrong. ▷



The Norwegian Humanist Association is sometimes accused of suppressing the “free thought” of people who sign up to various unhinged conspiratorial ideas. The idea is that *they* are the ones who think freely, and we are the oppressors. But critical thinking is not about “suppressing free thought”. On the contrary, we need knowledge to make free choices. For example, politicians often ask for more information on a subject before they decide. Is it reasonable to say that such information suppresses a politician’s “free thought”? Of course not. It is only when you have enough knowledge on a subject that you’re able to make decisions. Knowledge sets us free! Critical examination is a prerequisite to be able to choose freely and make good decisions for yourself and others. A person who wanders around in a dark room is not free. Freedom comes when the light is turned on that you see where the exit door is. It is only when the light is switched on, when you gain knowledge, that you can choose what you want to do.

Relativism leads to totalitarianism

Our liberal, democratic society depends on mutual trust in each other, and agreement on some mutual standards that help us distinguish truths from falsehoods. Without widely accepted rules for how to get rid of bad ideas, we are unable to concentrate on the ones which work. In such a situation, we risk ending up in a directionless relativism where the winner will be the one who shouts the loudest and gathers the biggest crowd of followers. This is a recipe for totalitarianism. Nothing pleases a dictator better than a climate where “truth is relative”, because then the dictator is able to dictate “the truth” to be whatever he wants it to be.

Critical thinking based on reason, logic, and science can be used by everyone. It is inherently democratic and an indispensable

prerequisite for the free and liberal society we defend as humanists. That is another important reason why we chose to promote critical thinking in last year’s campaign.

Take a look in the mirror

The campaign we launched last year, called “Er du sikker på det?” (Are you sure about that?), aimed at counteracting the distrustful, conspiratorial mindset described above. To achieve this, we addressed the individual and urged people to ask: “Where do I get my information from?”; “Do I have it from reliable sources?”; “Does this agree with logic, scientific consensus and what we otherwise know about the world?”; and “Could I be wrong?” We wanted all of us to take a solid look in the mirror and ask ourselves questions like these. We did so by producing around twenty short films where we tried to explain some of the biases and fallacies we often fall victim to. We also made three films with real-life people who have changed their minds on the destructive attitudes they had previously; a short motion-graphics movie that seeks to explain the core message of the campaign, a podcast with fifteen hour-long episodes, an online quiz and a critical thinking card game.

You can watch four of the films with English subtitles – make sure you click the closed caption CC button to display the English subtitles:

1. **When Jan found the letter from his son, it changed him completely:** [LINK](#)
2. **Bjørn Thomas was trapped in right-wing extremist ideology. But then something happened:** [LINK](#)
3. **Caterina thought she had cured breast cancer in herself, but then she realized something was wrong:** [LINK](#)
4. **Critical thinking – motion graphics film:** [LINK](#)



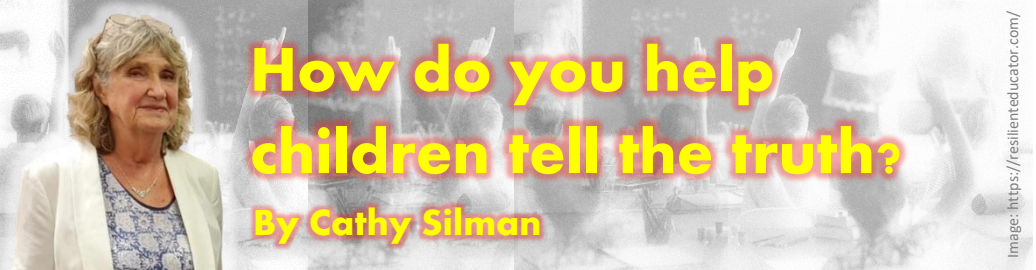


Image: <https://resilienteducator.com/>

How do you help children tell the truth?

By Cathy Silman

What should we tell children about Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy, God, and there being only one life?

Humanists reject the idea of the supernatural. They make ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings. To do this, I would argue, necessitates having respect for the truth. It follows, therefore, that I wanted my children to develop the same respect for truth. This placed a big responsibility on me as a parent, grandparent and teacher of young children.

I feel that it's very important that the children I am close to will see me living my life respecting the truth in as many respects as possible. Otherwise, my life is demonstrating the opposite of what I am saying. In fact, living a lie. But this is easier said than done. You need to ensure that you are a role model from an early stage in a child's life. You're being watched so consider your words and actions carefully! I once accidentally snapped the stem of one of my daughter-in-law's sunflowers and thought I had concealed it behind some other stems, only to find that my grandson (under two years old) was tugging his mother's hand on her return and pointing, saying "Grandma broke".



Image: Raising children network

Different categories of lying

There are two main categories of lying: prosocial and antisocial. I and most adults, humanist or otherwise, view these very differently. Children use anti-social lying to ease their path through life very early on, so how I challenge it changes as their cognitive abilities develop. Between about 18 and 36 months a child may tell what seems like a lie: "I didn't paint the wall, the cat did". At this stage they are saying it how they would like it to be, rather than how it actually happened. Their understanding of the world is still driven by their wants. They genuinely don't understand that adults would not see the situation from a point of view different from their own.

By around three or four, use of language develops, as does understanding of right, wrong and the consequences of their actions. They say they didn't paint the carpet; the brush dropped on it. They understand ▢



that this *could* happen and they just hope that the adult will believe them. In the first case, I would say to the child “I expect you wish the cat had done it, but I think it was you and that has made me really sad.” Then leave it. There’s no point trying to get them to admit what they have done. Around the age of four I might say “I think you know it’s naughty to spoil things and the way to make things better is to tell the truth and say sorry”. That makes everyone, including them, happy. If they still refuse to admit it, I recommend not labouring the point. Just say it makes me sad and look pointedly sad, but not angry for any length of time. I have hardly ever known any child under about six admitting to a lie. Making a big thing of it doesn’t stop it. It just makes for an angry child and parent – never a good combination. When dealing with young children, less is usually more in gaining a long-term, positive outcome. I try to put my humanistic ideals into practice – the wish to show reasons and also empathy.

As children grow older, their understanding of how to use anti-social lies develops. Rather than just using them to get out of trouble, they use them to try and gain advantage. This is when quiet discussions about the reasons why you think it is wrong are helpful. Often, you have to dig deep to winkle out what you really think. If you tell a lie that harms others then there will be a consequence, a punishment. The consequence will vary with the severity of the potential harm of the lie. Once you have said this, you need to stick with it. If the consequence is “No tablet use for a day”, don’t give in for a quiet life. So make the consequences manageable. Tell the truth when you say the tablet will disappear for the day.

The necessity of prosocial lies

Humans have evolved to live successfully in mutually helpful societies. Indeed, Oliver



Scott Curry in his 2021 Darwin Day lecture argued that there is a co-operative gene. But co-operation without prosocial lies seems an impossibility to me. Children as young as three seem to understand the necessity for these types of lies.

Researchers Victoria Talwar and Kang Lee* used a ‘Reverse Rouge’ task in which the experimenter had a conspicuous mark of lipstick on their nose. The child was asked to take a picture of the experimenter, but before the picture was taken, the experimenter asked, “Do I look okay for the picture?” Results showed that 89% of children between 3 and 7 years of age stated that the experimenter looked okay. However, when the experimenter left, children told another adult that the experimenter actually did not look okay. As children develop mentally and emotionally, their ability to use these types of lies expand. When you have told an obvious lie in front of them (such as telling a relative you love the jumper you were given as a present and then giving it to a charity shop) it is helpful, for children over the age of five or so, to discuss with them why you felt it was the right thing to do. The emphasis has to be that lying to make someone feel better can be a good thing. However, lying to make ▷

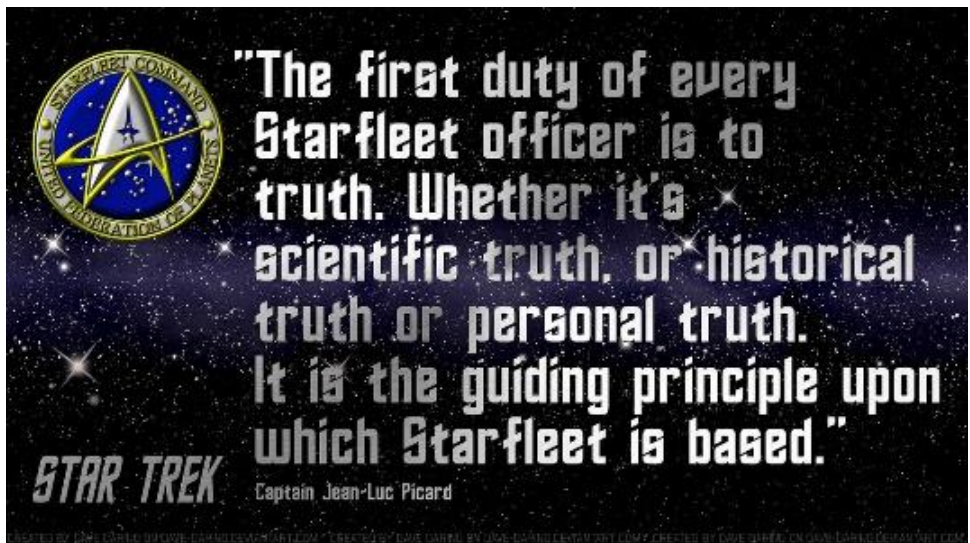


yourself feel better is usually not. Be prepared for some challenging questions!

So is lying about Father Christmas a prosocial lie? Children enjoy the excitement, snatching glimpses of him, having someone to order toys from, the fun of believing that magic really happens, and so on. So what's not to like? Same with the Tooth Fairy. Fun, the wonder of magic, and a pound coin under the pillow. But how about granny floating happily on a sun-kissed cloud where we will join her in future? Lovely magic, sad feelings abated. Whether or not, as a humanist, you agree with the first two, I'm sure you don't agree with the last. As for myself, as a humanist, I am not prepared to just see Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy as prosocial lies. I was brought up by a humanist mother who faced the same dilemma. As a family, we lived in a small flat with no chimney. She told the Father Christmas story to us, only for my sister to point out that it would be impossible for anyone to come down a chimney in our

house and it was a silly story. So her problem was solved. No Father Christmas for us although we did have presents and the other non-religious trappings. When I became a parent I wasn't as lucky because we did have a chimney and many friends treated the Father Christmas performance as fact. I felt far too uncomfortable lying to my children so I told them it was a story and a game just like so many others we told and acted out. When we went on a bear hunt they knew we weren't going to actually find one and the same applied to Father Christmas. All that mattered was the shared fun. After all, they had evolved to live in a society.

In summary, try to demonstrate through your actions your commitment to ethics and reason whilst trying to enhance the happiness of all. This usually means not lying – but it may sometimes mean a little social lying.



Africa's Lies

by Lynda Tilley



It was yet another unbelievable claim. That the rains had finally come, thanks to a deaf, mute, invisible being, housed in the sky. No one thought to question the impeccable timing of this supernatural being which, coincidentally, aligned exactly with the dates on the ten day weather forecast app that everyone was now using.

Not that the majority of people in this particular congregation would know. They could barely afford food, let alone a mobile phone or data. What little extra they could scrape together was for Sunday's collection box. 'Give and thou shalt receive', and the rain had come. God was good. He answered their prayers. More people flocked to the new 'miracle' church as everyone was grateful for the rain. But more was still needed. Much more. As the congregation slowly grew, so, too, did the Church bank account balance. It was a win-win situation all round.

You could insert any African country into this paragraph, any year from around the year 2000, and any town name and you'd still have a fairly accurate story. That's how commonplace this sort of 'miracle' has become here now. It's almost expected. The Church you attend these days should have at least three noteworthy miracles to its name, an articulate, good-looking, impeccably dressed pastor, and special lighting, a video-grapher, live band and backing singers. At the very least!



PUBLIC NOTICE

CALL TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC TO PRAY FOR A GOOD AND SAFE 2018/2019 RAINFALL SEASON

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Malawi, Professor Arthur Peter Mutharika, is calling on all Malawians and people of goodwill living in Malawi to dedicate prayers for good rains and a disaster-free 2018/2019 rainy season in respective Mosques, Churches and Prayer Houses from 26th to 28th October, 2018.

In view of the three days of prayer, His Excellency Professor Arthur Peter Mutharika has directed that all Cabinet Ministers and senior Government officials should join congregations at their nearest places of worship.


Lloyd A. Muhara

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE GOVERNMENT
24th October, 2018

Government by magic: official Malawian Government call to pray for rain

Over the past year or so we've had various religious money-making scams around Africa, including: all-day events for prayers for protection from terrorist groups; joining God on an 'intimacy walk'; attending the church of a pastor who has God on speed-dial during his sermons; prayer days for attracting piles of US dollars; a pastor who heals the sick by spraying them with insecticide called 'Doom'; and spiritual weekend getaways to game reserves 'where you can tell your friends that God showed up', with an afternoon trip to a nearby casino (included in the package price); and all sorts of baptisms, revivals, and blessings 'by the fire of the Holy Spirit'.

Africa today is a continent built on lies. What were once considered 'small lies' have evolved at such a rapid rate that the ▷





'miracle' lie you heard last week is today's full-blown 'Tithe For Rain' scam. Once these lies take hold they take on a life of their own and, much like a deadly cancer, they cause more damage as they spread. The cycle repeats as we watch congregations grow poorer, hungrier, and more desperate as the church coffers swell. If the sane people amongst us dare question the church or try to at least warn our family members in the congregation this will result in us being targeted, provoked, shunned, or, if you live in a country like Nigeria today, possibly even killed. It's we who are seen as the distorters of the truth, the dishonest characters, the liars.

Like any good business, the churches must ensure that they keep up with trends, know their target market, and spend sufficient money on clever marketing and advertising campaigns – preferably ones that outshine their closest competitors and tug at the heart strings a little. Because more tears means more people to tithe next Sunday!

As we watch the world becoming more

secular, as yet more people happily turn their backs on organised religion, as we hear of empty churches with 'For Sale' signs displayed in their once well-visited and award-winning gardens being purchased and used for everything from offices to private homes to student accommodation, we turn and we see our own continent on its knees, eyes closed, faces lifted to the skies, begging for wishes to come true and asking forgiveness and making promises to nothing more than a 'lie in the sky'. We are deeply saddened to see a once great and intelligent people reduced to this. The scam, the lie, known as 'religion' has been dragging Africa backwards as the world moves forward and soon, we fear, the gap will become too big to close. The saddest part of it is that our people think they're free, but they're not. Their freedom, too, is a lie, an illusion. Their shackles have been replaced by God and the chains around their necks by an ancient set of man-made rules, and they are still slaves, worshipping at the feet of a slave master named religion.





Our brains love stories. Before we invented writing we relied on oral traditions of parables and legends to guide us on how to survive in a hostile world. Many of these ancient tales were written down in the first religious texts, which comprise a glorious mix of wisdom about reality and how to live a good life in addition to myths, supernatural gods, and fearful superstitions.

Our subjective inner world of feelings, emotions, and 'religious revelations' took primacy over human affairs for most of human history, owing to the power of these stories to hold our attention and define the world around us.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment disrupted this reliance on the subjective in favour of what could be observed, measured, and tested in the real world. The existence of an objective reality outside the realm of human affairs or fantasy was proven beyond doubt by evidence-based science. It was an enormous cognitive rupture, with Darwin's later theory of evolution by natural selection perhaps the biggest shock of all for those who clung, and still cling, to human exceptionalism.

The battle between objective and subjective perceptions rages ferociously in our contemporary world, fueled in no small part by social media. We can all fall for a good yarn,

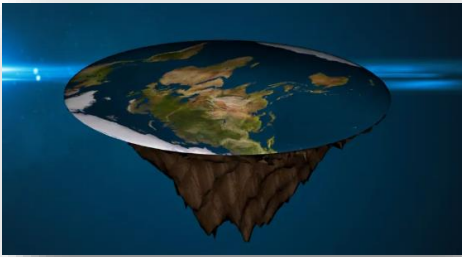


QAnon conspiracies believed by millions

especially if it feeds into our own prejudices. It's hard for even the most educated and wise of humanists to resist being ensnared in the trap of confirmation bias, lending unthinking credit to what a neutral observer can easily see are blatant untruths. It's so easy, unthinkingly, to 'like', 'share' and 'forward' online posts which may be seen as obviously absurd on greater reflection. Many well-meaning but careless people continue to lose their jobs, credibility, sanity and careers for less.

The stories, absurd tales, and untruths we tell ourselves can wield even greater power today, quickly finding a global audience and spreading like a contagion. How else to explain the emergence of 'Flat Earthers' and the QAnon conspiracies that are believed, 'enhanced', and spread by millions. But before we despair, we should remember that none of this is a recent phenomenon. I'm old enough to remember Erich von Daniken's best-selling nonsense *Chariots of the Gods* and Uri Geller's psychic spoon-bending ▷





Flat-earthers held their first 'global' conference in North Carolina in 2017. Click image for story.

abilities, which were never replicable under laboratory conditions. All we are seeing today is a similar process of story-telling on steroids – boosted by the internet. The best antidote to this tidal wave of absurd nonsense is ridicule, humour and satire. Free speech and the comedic eye has never been more important than right now, especially against the permanently offended.

The educated among us are no less prone to belief in fantastical stories untethered from reality. Postmodernism and its modern variants, including Critical Theory, Gender Ideology, Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, and identitarianism are all based on an underlying assertion that there is no objective reality and that much of our reality is a social construct. This smörgåsbord of anti-Enlightenment 'woke' ideologies assert that 'the universalist ideas of objective reality, morality, truth, ... reason, and even language' are all subjective. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay in their book *Cynical Theories* explain how these pervasive ideas reject evidence-based reasoning in favour of putting our subjective perceptions at the centre of human affairs – a hugely regressive step that takes us right back to pre-Enlightenment times. Andrew Doyle argues in his new book *The New Puritans* that what we are witnessing is the emergence of a new secular religion that is just as pernicious, divisive and misguided as any of its predecessors.

We tell ourselves stories because they help us live useful lives. Our fictions can help us navigate and cope with life's vicissitudes. But how do we separate the stories that are true from those that are fantasy, untruths, delusions (unconscious untruths) and lies (intentional untruths)? To me, as a scientist and a humanist, the answer is pretty much self-evident. Central to the task of separating out stories that are tethered to objective reality from those which are untethered is *critical thinking*, as explored by Even Gran from the Norwegian Humanist Association in this issue. This means using reason, open dialogue, and evidence to test stories against the observable real world. In short, it's the freedom to ask questions, to debate, to dissent, and even to offend. There's a reason that QAnon and woke zealots often assert that 'there is no debate'. It's because they are very aware that their untethered stories and ideologies would not withstand even a modicum of challenge using evidence and gentle criticism.

As Oscar Wilde pointed out, 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple', but we do have a word for those stories which have been proven to be rooted in and tethered to reality through evidence and science. The word is facts.

Further reading

Postmodernism and modern philosophy – article in [Britannica](#)

Book review of Helen Pluckrose's and James Lindsay's *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender and Identity – And Why This Harms Everybody* (2020) in [Philosophy Now](#)

Andrew Doyle *The New Puritans* – article in [Spiked](#) magazine.





Why Does Swearing on Something Matter?

by Simon Whipple

One of the small bounties enjoyed by newly qualified solicitors (who will have spent years working for very poor wages while undergoing their legal training) is that when they have at last been admitted as solicitors, they are entitled to witness 'Swears'.

A 'Swear' is the process by which any person who must sign an important document executes that document in the presence of a solicitor. At the same time, he or she must state, using a precise form of words, that the document is true. The benefit to the solicitor is that there is a fee, of an amount dictated by the Lord Chancellor's Office, which must be paid direct to the solicitor as opposed to going to his employer. At a charge of five pounds, paid in cash, it does not help the struggling young solicitor far, but it will at least pay for the occasional beer after work.

All solicitors' offices hold a copy of the Bible, and when a client wishes to swear a document, the solicitor administering his oath requires the client to hold the Bible in one hand, place his other hand on his signature, and then state the words, *'I solemnly and sincerely declare that this is my name and handwriting and that the contents of this my declaration are true.'*

The solicitor who trained me explained that the importance of going through the ritual of swearing a document is that it places the person signing the document "on moral



The atmosphere of a court usually makes witnesses take their duties seriously

alert". He is made conscious that it is important that the contents of the document must be honest, and that severe consequences will follow if he breaks his word. In legal terms, if a document has been sworn before a solicitor, then the consequences of making a false statement are as severe as if a witness in court proceedings had lied – he is guilty of perjury and contempt of court, for which the penalty could include imprisonment.

Society relies upon truth-telling, and so when people are making important statements, it is sensible to have a means of impressing on people that they must tell the truth. We do not have the resources to punish everyone who might be dishonest, and so the legal system uses a psychological trick to encourage people to be honest.

Among the documents which were sworn before me were applications for a Grant of Probate to administer the estate of a deceased person. When a government agency called the Probate Registry gives a person the legal authority to control the financial ▷





When you're the President, size matters!

Image: Washington Post

affairs of someone who has died, they grant him enormous responsibility. He has access to all the funds of the person who has died, and there is no check that he has given those assets to the people named in the will of the deceased. But the moral force of the Swear he made in a solicitor's office before he was granted Probate will remind him to refrain from keeping all the dead person's funds for himself.

The most powerful means of stopping people telling lies or breaking promises is the fear of being found out. Anyone who has stood in a witness box and felt cold sweat running down their back when they are being cross-examined will understand that fear.

The atmosphere of a courthouse, with advocates and judges in their gowns and wigs, and the awe-inspiring architecture, usually make witnesses take their duties seriously.

And those who do believe in God will be reminded, when they swear on the Bible, that God is always watching and noting our misdemeanours. Even if you can get a lie past

a human audience, it will not get past God.

The legal system has acknowledged that most people are not active Christians. A person swearing a document can elect to swear upon another religious book such as the Quran although it is unlikely that a copy of the Quran would be kept handy in most solicitors' offices! And it is acceptable, when swearing documents, to state '*I do solemnly and sincerely affirm that this is my name and handwriting and that this my oath is true*'. When I used to witness Swears, I always offered clients the option of making a non-religious Swear, and usually that option was preferred.

I feel that we have lost something with the reduction in the use of the Bible when swearing the truth of a document. We have certainly lost a colourful piece of harmless pageantry. But more important, we no longer have one of the most effective psychological means to encourage truth-telling.



Note: Male pronouns have been used throughout this article to avoid repetition of 'he or she' etc.

Do Primates Lie?

*'Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive'*

Sir Walter Scott

By Penny Morgan



Is deception a uniquely human capacity? Are non-human animals blessedly free from such torments? No and no.

Intentional deceit (lying) is not restricted to humans. Some monkeys use simple forms of deceit and, some researchers claim, the ability depends not on how closely related they are to humans, but on their social structure and brain size.

A comparative survey of primate behaviour in 2004 by Richard Byrne and Nadia Corp* found a direct relationship between sneakiness and brain size. The larger the average volume of a primate species' neocortex, the newest and 'highest' region of the brain, the greater the chance that the monkey or ape would pull a stunt like the following: a young baboon being chased by an enraged mother intent on punishment suddenly stopped in mid-pursuit, stood up and began scanning the horizon intently, an act that conveniently distracted the entire baboon troop into preparing for non-existent intruders.

But it is thought that where communication signals in animal societies are stable, they are always vulnerable to manipulation because when something is taken at face value, it is always open to misuse. Bluff and deceit are rife in the animal world, as in the human.



Image: Daily Mail

Tactical deception

Tactical deception occurs when an individual is able to use an 'honest' act from its normal repertoire, like an alarm call, in a different context in order to mislead others. It requires considerable behavioural sophistication, which is why it's most often observed in the 'brainiest' animals.

Vervet monkeys have different alarm calls for different predators and take action accordingly. If a leopard call is given, troop members scoot up trees; for snake calls, they stand and look down; and for martial eagle calls they look up to the skies. Could this be a protolanguage?

It turns out that individuals can also sneakily use alarm calls in the absence of a predator to distract receivers and take advantage of the momentary diversion of attention to grab food.

Why lie?

A 'dishonest' signal is when the sender is sending out false information to a receiver. ▷



The benefit to the deceiving caller may be food, territory, or mates. If the potential cost to the receiver of not responding is too high, like being taken by a predator, then the deception works. You can't take the risk of being fooled. But still, if you 'cry wolf' (or leopard) too often, as an unreliable individual you may be ignored. So, deception has to be subtle and infrequent.

And other species...?

Drongos, an African bird, can imitate the alarm calls of meerkats causing the duped mammals to scatter, and leaving the drongos to scoop up their food. They get almost a quarter of their food this way. Not only do jays (from the corvid family) store food such as nuts for later retrieval when food is less plentiful – they also employ counter-strategies to avoid others pilfering their cache, such as moving the cache to another location after the putative thief has left. They may also pretend to cache food if being observed. These instances raise the intriguing possibility that re-caching is based on a form of mental attribution, namely the understanding of another bird's viewpoint. This brings us to 'theory of mind' – awareness of another's state of mind, without which lying wouldn't work.

Theory of mind

At some point in our development, around four to five years of age, we begin to understand that another may hold beliefs that differ from our own. A milestone.

So, do you have to be human to understand what another is thinking, an ability thought to be exclusively ours? The Sally-Anne test devised by clinical psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen is used to measure the ability to attribute false beliefs to another. It employs a puppet play in which children must explicitly

predict a mistaken puppet's future actions; a modified video version is used to investigate this ability with chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans using direction of gaze and an actor in a King Kong suit. A video features King Kong hitting a man holding a long pole before darting under one of two haystacks while the human looks on.



Click image / [link](#) for larger version

Or watch the Sally Anne video [here link](#)

In some scenarios, the King Kong character switches haystacks while the human disappears out of view behind a door. The man then reappears and smacks the haystack he thinks his assailant is hidden under, presumably to get his own back. By using eye-tracking technology, the scientists showed that seventeen out of twenty-two apes tested switched their direction of gaze to show they had correctly anticipated when the man would target the wrong haystack.

Conclusions

Deception is widespread in the non-human world, as it is in the human world. The correlation between deception and social co-operation across non-human primates suggests that co-operation was also an important factor selecting for deception during human evolution. One theory suggests that co-operation probably evolved before deception, but deception followed hot on its heels. It's easier to get ahead if you can correctly anticipate the behaviour of others.



Aaron Explores

“I did not have sexual relations with that woman...”



Do we deserve, or have the right, to know everything about our politicians? At what point is lying about minutiae, or just not telling the full story, acceptable?

In recent times, we have enjoyed no shortage of deception in the global political sphere, as integrity is tested to the limits during sex scandals, pandemic parties, cash for questions and expenses, and so on. But as we delve into whether truth matters, we certainly need to open a few doors and explore our elected leaders' closets.

Superheroes?

Politicians are just human beings. So are we, from the outset, setting ourselves up for a fall by electing people we expect to be perfect? Speeding tickets, parking fines, flirty behaviour and adultery are rife among our leaders, including our previous prime minister. If we expect perfection, are we at fault for that expectation? Or are they, for being imperfect? Some politicians may have secrets they can't divulge, policies under development that should remain under wraps, cabinet discussions that are secret, and other matters that shouldn't be leaked. Is withholding this information from the public a lie, an act of deception, or just a guy doing a job? Does 'partygate' fall within this arena, or is that stretching the boundaries?



Image: history.com

Sex Scandals

Does the public have the right to know who is having sex with whom, just because they are public figures? If Boris Johnson has children he doesn't see, or Bill Clinton didn't have sexual relationships with that woman, do we care, or do we have the right to know?

I would argue 'no' in this case, we don't care in most instances, and why should we need to know? When the media then asks the question, and probes into the private life of a public figure, and they either avoid or deny the allegation, is this crossing a line?

Chris Pincher MP, Deputy Chief Whip in Boris Johnson's administration, admitted that he had groped men at an event and probably knew that this would come out. He did the honourable thing and told the truth. This cost him his job and arguably, because Johnson defended him, cost Johnson his job as well. If these are instances when telling the truth costs you your career, is that right? ▷





Boris Johnson – more important things on his mind? *Image: Guardian*

It could be argued that Boris knew Pincher's background and that, like any fair-minded employer, was giving a human being a second chance. If a person is good at their job, then maybe some things are okay to be left in the past? Did he know, did he forget, was he blasé with the truth, or did he lie outright in order to avoid another scandal for the party? What should he have done?

Defending the cause

We are all too familiar with individuals lying to defend the greater good. No matter how well an organisation is doing, a sex scandal can destroy it in seconds. How many people knew about Jimmy Saville, but said nothing because of the good work he was doing? How many church leaders have covered up things they knew were happening, because it would bring down the church, or reflect badly on themselves as members? Countless people in history have lied for the greater good, maybe in their own minds balancing the good against the bad and perhaps deciding for themselves they should say nothing. What crime, or how big an action, does it take for you to say something, even if it means costing you, or the organisation you work in, or your job?

Partygate

I'm of the belief that Boris had more important things on his mind, and simply didn't give parties a second thought. The first was socially-distanced, the next was on Zoom, the garden party was in a garden, the birthday party lasted for just a few minutes. I think he probably excused every event with a 'there are simply more important things happening to worry about this' kind of attitude. But ultimately, no party brought him down, no cake, no three people or twenty people in a room. It was the repeated denials of wrongdoing. The more he dismissed them, waved them off, claimed he wasn't there or was there but didn't see anything, didn't organise anything, didn't know anything... the more he said, the more it damaged him.

What would you have done? Said something? Just not attended? Leaked to the press? Told the leader of the country which was losing a thousand lives a day on his watch, that parties were a massive issue? At the time it probably wasn't. There were other things keeping him awake at night than worrying about the internal goings on in Downing Street.

Conclusion

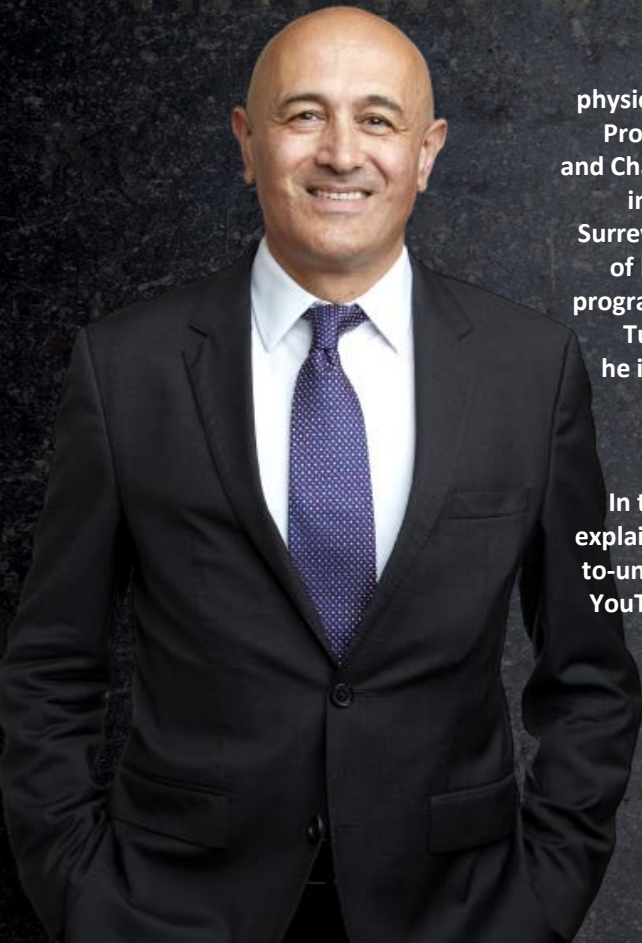
There are some things a government worker simply cannot talk about, but how do you answer questions without leaving a gaping hole for the press to jump into? 'I am not at liberty to talk about that' would sound like a juicy topic that the press simply would dig and dig into. 'Are there special forces currently entering China?' – how would you answer that? 'The Government does not respond to hypothetical questions on military actions' sounds like 'Yes, they are there right now, but I'm not allowed to talk about it.' I think there are some thing in politics where a simple 'no' is required. But is this honest? Who knows?



The Brittain Interview

Our video conference with notable people, interviewed by David Brittain

Jim Al-Khalili

A portrait of Jim Al-Khalili, a bald man with a friendly smile, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is standing with his hands in his pockets against a dark, textured background.

Jim Al-Khalili is a theoretical physicist, author, broadcaster and Professor of Theoretical Physics and Chair in the Public Engagement in Science at the University of Surrey. He is also a Vice-President of Humanists UK. In his Radio 4 programme *The Life Scientific* – on Tuesday mornings at 9.00am – he interviews leading scientists. His latest book is *The Joy of Science*.

In this fascinating interview, he explains difficult concepts in easy-to-understand language. Click the YouTube button below to watch.



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Musings by Maggie

Believe it - or not?

I can clearly remember when I sussed out that Santa was a myth. I was about six years old, walking to school with my mother, just before Christmas, when I suddenly turned to her and said, 'There isn't really a Father Christmas, is there, Mum?' She smiled and said, 'No, dear, there isn't'. And that was that.

Children are more capable of critical thinking and analysis than we give them credit for. As a child in South London, I had noticed that every Christmas Santa would appear in several different locations on the same day, collecting money for charity. The fact that he could pop up in East Lane market minutes after we saw him whilst getting on the bus in Peckham High Street was very suspicious, to say the least. He also seemed to be capable of sitting children on his knee and handing out presents in Jones & Higgins department store on the corner of Rye Lane at the same time as doing the very same thing in the Arcade along the road.

The reason children believe the Santa Claus myth in the first place is that adults support it, even providing false 'evidence'. When my own children were small, we used to leave out the traditional mince pie and glass of sherry for Santa and a carrot for Rudolph. On Christmas morning the children would discover the sherry glass empty, a few



Image: Free SVG

remaining mince pie crumbs and the carrot with a large chunk bitten out of it. I can't remember how old they were when they saw through the subterfuge. I suspect they feigned belief for some years in case the presents stopped.

Believing something because the belief seems to bring benefits is one reason that we are sometimes so ready to accept something as true without even bothering to look for evidence that it is. How often do we hear religious believers give, as reasons for their belief, feelings of comfort, of being loved, guided and 'saved', rather than any testable evidence that what they believe is true?

One of the reasons that *Homo sapiens* has been so successful as a species is our ability to co-operate, but that means being ready to trust information imparted by others, which brings with it certain hazards.

Whether or not we believe something may depend upon whom the information comes ▷



from. If told a new planet has been discovered, are you more likely to believe it coming from an astronomer or from Steve down the pub who frequently tells stories about UFOs and alien abductions? Usually, believing the expert would seem the sensible thing to do, but there are times when this strategy can let us down.

In 1998, Andrew Wakefield and twelve colleagues published a research paper titled 'Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children', claiming links between the MMR vaccine, colitis and autism. This was later exposed by a Sunday Times investigation



Andrew Wakefield speaking during an anti-vaccine march organised by STOP NOP in Warsaw, 2019 ([Creative Commons](#))

as fraudulent – the fraud being committed by Wakefield. The paper was withdrawn and Wakefield struck off the Medical Register. However, the understandable concern triggered by the paper had already gained considerable momentum and despite numerous studies finding no link between the MMR vaccine, colitis, and autism, the resulting anti-vaccine movement persists to this day. Experts, it seems, can sometimes be mistaken, misled or just downright dishonest.

Other reasons to be too ready to accept something as true include the 'bandwagon effect' (e.g., millions of people all over the world believe the Bible, so it must be true), an overwhelming emotional need for it to be true ('I know he really loves me'), using intuition rather than analysis (drawing on feelings rather than facts), and realising that giving up the belief may mean that our whole

worldview will have to change, which is very frightening.

Having an emotional need to believe something is a human tendency that is exploited by romance fraud. This particularly cruel scam occurs when someone thinks they've met their perfect partner online, only to find this person has been using a false identity to extract large amounts of money for various reasons. So desperate is the victim to believe in the fidelity of the beloved that it is often not until the payments have mounted to eye-watering proportions that they are ready to abandon their trust in them.

Another reason is cognitive overload – just having too much on your mind to be able to analyse the situation. This was evident in the first days of the Covid pandemic when, despite repeated assurances to the contrary, people were convinced that there were going to be shortages of essential supplies and they denuded supermarket shelves of toilet rolls.

We are predisposed to trust someone in authority, or at least someone who has an air of authority, and what organisation exudes authority more than the much-revered BBC? I leave you with a link to the now infamous [spaghetti-harvest hoax](#), first broadcast on 1st April 1957. What's the betting there are still some people out there who believe spaghetti grows on trees?



The BBC spaghetti harvest hoax of 1957



What is a Lie?

By Mike Flood



Lying – providing information to someone while believing it to be untrue – would appear to be an unavoidable part of human nature. And yet, according to St Augustine, it's a sin. It's easy to see why: lying misleads or deceives people and diminishes trust; if people don't tell the truth, social life becomes difficult if not impossible.

But Augustine was also a realist: he accepted that in truth people needed a get-out clause and he [categorised](#) lies depending on how difficult they would be to pardon. His examples ranged from 'lies told in teaching religion' (the most serious kind of lie), to 'lies which hurt nobody and protect a person from physical defilement' (the 8th and most pardonable). Moreover, the venerable saint didn't consider it a lie if the teller believed the untruth or told it in jest.

There's clearly more to lying than meets the eye. Indeed, some stretch the definition of lying to include those situations where someone behaves in a way that misleads others as to their true character or intention, or does nothing in response to a question, knowing that this will deceive the person asking. And what about presenting a false picture of ourselves and our lives on social media because we want to look good? Surely, that's a kind of lie...

One ruse, which seems outrageous today, but



which was apparently much used some centuries ago, is 'mental reservation'. This is where a person, who has sworn on oath to tell the truth, tells only *half* the truth. If they'd stolen some sheep on Wednesday, they could safely stand in the dock and tell the court 'I did not steal those sheep' adding *in their mind* 'on Monday'. God would hear the mental reservation alongside the public statement and therefore would not have been lied to by the defendant!

Muslim scholars teach that Muslims should generally be truthful to each other unless they are trying to 'smooth over differences' or 'gain the upper-hand over an enemy'. [Apparently](#) lying to non-believers is permitted in some circumstances, for example 'taqiyya', 'gaining the trust of non-believers in order to draw out their vulnerability and defeat them'.

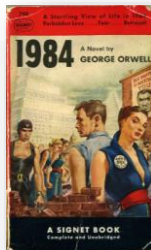
Perhaps the main treatise on lies and deception is by Robert Trivers, one of the most influential evolutionary theorists alive today. In his 2014 book *Deceit and Self-Deception*, 'Trivers argues that "We are thoroughgoing liars, even to ourselves... We can lie about events distant in space and time, the details and meaning of the behaviour of others, our innermost thoughts and ▷



desires...". Indeed, he argues that 'natural selection favours self-deception' – we deceive ourselves 'the better to deceive others, and thereby reap advantage, including charming mates and tricking rivals'. Self-deception also helps us cope with life and forget or minimise uncomfortable or painful memories – and perhaps embellish the 'good old times'. 'Nothing', Wittgenstein observed, 'is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.'

Most of the time lies hurt the person who is lied to, but they can also hurt the liar, who needs to have a good memory and may have to tell more lies to avoid being rumbled, and this can get complicated. As Sir Walter Scott famously put it: 'O what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive.' And society is hurt by lying because it becomes harder for people to trust each other, and trust is the glue that holds everything together.

Of course, the liar may not care what people think. The Soviets pioneered a special form of lying known as 'vranyo' [враньё], which broadly translates as telling a barefaced lie which you do not expect anyone to believe. Basically, 'You know I'm lying, and I know you know, but I go ahead with a straight face, and you nod seriously and take notes'. But lies, deception and disinformation have become the hallmark of Russia under Putin, reminiscent of George Orwell's 'Ministry of Truth' in his dystopian novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', where the Ministry was responsible *inter alia* for manufacturing lies and falsifying historical events so that they agreed with 'Big Brother'. Sadly, there isn't a government on earth that isn't sometimes 'economical with



Lies, deception and disinformation have become the hallmark of Russia under Putin, reminiscent of George Orwell's 'Ministry of Truth' in his dystopian novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four'.

the truth', especially where some gesture, event or development does not square with the official narrative. As Napoleon once remarked, 'History is a set of lies agreed upon'. Of course, the obligation to tell the truth gives way to higher concerns when countries are at war and deception becomes a matter of life and death...

On a lighter note, we sometimes lie to protect others from the truth or from being hurt, so-called 'white lies'. If my host at a dinner party asks how I found the dish they'd prepared I'm likely to say 'It's delicious' regardless of what I *actually* think. As Quentin Crisp observed lies are 'the basic building block of good manners'. But this tactic may not be without consequences: the person may feel encouraged to make the dish again – or serve it to someone else!

To conclude, here are some factors that you should consider if you ever contemplate telling a lie. They are taken from Sissela Bok's ground-breaking 1978 book *Lying: Moral choice in public and private life*: 'are there some truthful alternatives to using a lie to deal with the particular problem?' and 'what moral justifications are there for telling this lie, and what counter-arguments can be raised against those justifications?' You should think carefully how *you* would feel if you were on the receiving end of the lie. You might also want to consult your conscience, but do bear in mind that your conscience is hardly likely to be an impartial judge of the situation.

'The truth may hurt for a little while but a lie hurts forever.'

Anon





Ethical Encounters

Paul Ewans explores moral questions



Lies and white lies

Most of us believe that there are times when it is not wrong to lie and also that there are times when we positively ought to lie. How can we distinguish these situations from those in which lying is clearly wrong?

A lie is a false statement which is intended to deceive or mislead someone when they are reasonably expecting to be told the truth. It is morally wrong to deceive or mislead people in such circumstances because to do so is harmful to them. We should always tell the truth except on those occasions when we have very good reason to lie or when no real harm will be done by lying.

Lies are harmful precisely because they misinform or misdirect people. Someone who believes a lie may miss out on valuable opportunities, suffer disadvantages, experience distressing setbacks or waste resources. Consider the likely consequences of these malicious lies: an adopted child is told that her birth mother has died, a woman is told that her partner has been unfaithful, an employee is told that they will certainly be promoted if they stay with the company. Great harm is likely to result in each of these cases if the lie is believed.

People often justify a lie by saying that they had good intentions – that they lied to spare someone's feelings or to avoid harming them in some other way. And most of us accept

that it is usually not wrong to lie in self-defence or to prevent someone from suffering serious harm. In addition, we generally agree that there is nothing wrong with writing fiction or telling stories to children. This is because in these cases there is no intention to deceive or mislead.

Many people believe that there is nothing much wrong with 'white' lies either. These are typically lies told in social situations where the lie will not do anyone any real harm and the intention is simply to help social relationships go smoothly. So if someone has received a disappointing birthday present, they may say that it is in fact just what they wanted. But lies which some people might call 'white' can result in significant harm. If a friend asks for your opinion about some project of theirs, it may be better to give an honest reply rather than see them waste time and effort on something which you believe will fail. But there really is no good reason to tell a small child the truth about Santa Claus.

Lies are morally wrong when they cause harm, but should not be considered to be wrong when the intention is to prevent some greater harm or to achieve some good result.





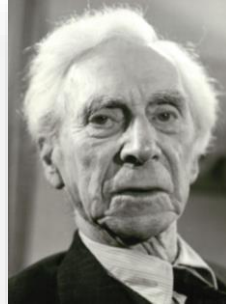
PAUL PONDERES...

How sceptical should we be?

As Bertrand Russell once remarked, 'The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts'. So where is the right balance between credulity and scepticism to be found?

Much depends on making a clear distinction between facts and beliefs. Facts are components of the world while beliefs are claims about the world which may or may not be true. Of course, we are often mistaken about the facts – our beliefs are often untrue – but the facts are what they are. So when the credulous fall into error it is often because they accept beliefs which are not supported by facts. And when sceptics fall into error it is often because they reject beliefs which do have such support.

Statements may be intended as expressions of fact or as expressions of belief, but the language we use does not always make this distinction clear. If someone reports that 'The tomb was empty when the women arrived', they may be asserting that it was in fact empty or that they believe it was empty. Both interpretations are possible given the imprecisions of language. This is one reason why it can be difficult to reason with religious people – they often slide around the crucial distinction between matters of fact and questions of belief.



'Russell insisted that we should generally trust the evidence of our own senses, our memories and our belief in the regularity of the world.'

Philosophical scepticism

In their quest for certainty, some philosophers have challenged the common-sense view that we live in a world of material facts, asserting that nothing exists outside our minds, or that all the material things which we believe exist are merely ideas in the mind of God. And some excessively egotistical philosophers have even claimed that the only thing which exists is their own particular mind. But as Cicero remarked, 'There is nothing so absurd that it has not been said by some philosopher.'

A more reasonable philosophical scepticism claims that all our beliefs about the world are unreliable to some extent and that we have no certain knowledge at all. We can make progress towards the truth, but we can never actually reach it. We should thus be sceptical about everything. In classical times the Pyrrhonian sceptics took this to an extreme, arguing that equally plausible arguments can be made for and against any doubtful proposition. Some of them consequently ▷



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refused to offer an opinion about anything at all, not even as to whether you should try to rescue your teacher when he was stuck head-down in a ditch.

Moderate scepticism

A degree of scepticism concerning our beliefs is of course essential if scientific knowledge is to increase. Clearly, advances in scientific knowledge require that scientists remain open to the possibility of new information and new discoveries. The current state of scientific knowledge should therefore always be seen as provisional and not as a final state beyond which no further improvement is possible. This suggests that we should be at least somewhat sceptical about the pronouncements of all authorities, whether they are scientific, religious or political.

Science is of course concerned with the natural world, the world of facts. Most scientists assume either that there is no other world or, if there is such a world, that there is nothing scientists can say about it. And many philosophers have been equally sceptical about the existence of the supernatural. Wittgenstein, for example, famously remarked that 'The world is everything that is the case', while David Hume argued that we should always be sceptical about reports of supernatural events. This is because we have, presumably, never seen such an event ourselves but know that people are often mistaken and that they sometimes lie.

Common sense

Russell insisted that we should generally trust the evidence of our own senses, our memories and our belief in the regularity of the world. It is indeed reasonable to believe that the sun will rise tomorrow and that the food we ate yesterday will not poison us today. We should not be sceptical about 'the

"We should be at least somewhat sceptical about the pronouncements of all authorities whether they are scientific, religious or political"

ordinary beliefs of common sense' because experience shows that they enable us to navigate our way through life successfully. Moreover, most of our beliefs about mundane matters can be easily verified by our own factual enquiries. It is not difficult to check whether we have noted down someone's address correctly, for example.

Excessive scepticism is incoherent

In the practical world of everyday living, excessive scepticism is incoherent because decisions have to be taken and, if they are to be good ones, they have to be based on the facts. It is of course true that the facts are often uncertain, that many of the situations that confront us are complicated, and that we often have to decide on the basis of probability rather than certainty. Even so, it is much better that our decisions should be grounded in a rational consideration of the facts rather than the alternatives – superstition or an irrational scepticism. Relying on the facts not only leads to our having true beliefs about the world, it also enables us to make our way through it.

Suggested reading

The Skeptics' Guide to the Universe: How To Know What's Really Real in a World Increasingly Full of Fake (2018) by Steven Novella, Bob Novella, Cara Santa Maria, Jay Novella and Evan Bernstein.





By John Coss

Humanists in profile Steven Weinberg

Continuing our series of profiles of Humanists who are not as widely known as they should be, including distinguished men and women not generally known to be Humanists.

‘With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.’

Steven Weinberg (1933-2021) was an eminent theoretical physicist, arguably the greatest since Einstein, and one of the foremost intellectuals of his time. He shared the 1979 Nobel Prize in Physics for his contributions to the unification of the weak force and electromagnetic interaction between elementary particles and was the American Humanist Association *Humanist of the Year* in 2002.*

After spells at Columbia, Berkeley, MIT and Harvard, Weinberg became Josey Regental Professor of Science in the physics and astronomy departments at the University of Texas at Austin in 1982, where he continued working for the rest of his life. A prolific author, he wrote many professional papers and books on various aspects of physics, some of the latter based on his lecture notes.

Weinberg was passionate about the history of science, and about communicating science to the public. His books for the general public include: *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origin of the Universe* (1993); *To Explain the World: The Discovery of Modern Science* (2016); and *Third Thoughts: The Universe We Still Don't Know* (2018).



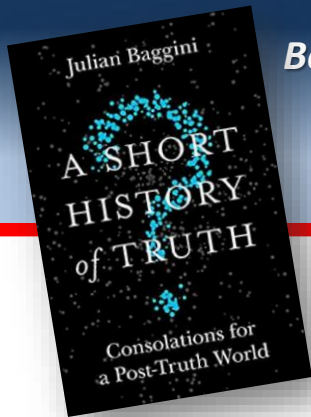
‘Science doesn't make it impossible to believe in God, it just makes it possible not to believe in God.’

[Image: Amazon](#)

The quotations in bold on this page are taken from his article [A Designer Universe?](#) based on a talk to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1999, and well worth a read. Many of these [Weinberg quotes](#) also relate to various aspects of religion. For a more comprehensive exposition of his views, see this [Q&A session](#) from the Counterbalance Foundation.

Some perspectives on his working life, and the kind of man he was, are provided [here](#), where a number of his colleagues share their memories of him. This is a typical comment: ‘Steve was funny, friendly, and genuinely interested in what the graduate students were up to. Most of us were a bit awestruck at first, and perhaps did not expect that this towering figure of our field would be so approachable.’

For further insights into Weinberg's life and work, see this [blogpost](#) by Scott Aaronson.



Book Review by David Warden

*A Short History of Truth: Consolations
for a Post-Truth World (2017)
by Julian Baggini*



Dr Julian Baggini is a writer, philosopher, and patron of Humanists UK. In this book, he identifies ten types of truth, or pseudo-truth, and explains how each one can generate falsehood. They are:

1. Eternal truths (the supposed truths of religion)
2. Truth which derives from authority and expertise in a given field (which may involve great expertise in, say, homeopathy)
3. Secret and esoteric truths revealed to an inner circle, including conspiracy theories
4. Rationalism, including the idea that truth can be derived from the exercise of pure reason alone
5. Empirical truths based on experiment and experience
6. Creative truths – embellished and exaggerated – such as Donald Trump’s ‘truthful hyperbole’
7. Relative truth (‘my truth’, ‘your truth’)
8. Versions of truth controlled by powerful agents; Foucault’s ‘regimes of truth’
9. The idea of ‘moral truths’
10. Holistic truths – the worrying possibility that we might all be trapped in the version of truth we have spun for ourselves

Needless to say, Baggini is highly critical of most of these accounts of how humans have approached the question of truth, but he is gentle and never dogmatic. For example, he understands why a ‘holistic truth’ such as Young Earth Creationism has to be all of a piece. If just *one* piece of the network is destroyed, then the whole network will fall apart, which is why adherents of a particular belief system will fight hard to protect the entire structure. But this way of thinking could apply just as easily to supposedly rational people if we believe passionately in a particular way of seeing things. Baggini outlines ten epistemic virtues to help us in our quest to cultivate our ‘garden’ of truth and to avoid it becoming overgrown with the weeds of myth, distortions, and lies. They include the following:

- We should think *for* ourselves, but not *by* ourselves – alternative perspectives should be sought in a spirit of collective enquiry
- We should be appropriately sceptical but not indiscriminately cynical
- Reason demands modesty, not certainty
- To become smarter, we must understand the ways we are dumb (such as believing things because they fit our favourite narrative about the world)

Baggini writes that ‘talk of a “post-truth” society is premature and misguided... We wouldn’t even be talking about post-truth if we didn’t think truth mattered’. He offers one of David Hume’s simple maxims: ‘A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence’.





Thought for the Day

by David Warden

Tories 'crashed the economy': True or false?

I hope you will read my book review on the previous page before you answer this question. We shouldn't believe things just because they fit our preferred tribal narrative. I remember being outraged in the 2015 election campaign when the Tories and the Liberal Democrats were claiming that Labour had 'crashed the economy' in 2008. This was an outrageous lie. There may have been a grain of truth in it but everyone knows that it was the banks that 'crashed the economy' in the great financial crash of 2008. But now Keir Starmer, Ed Davey, and Nicola Sturgeon are all at it, claiming that the Truss government has 'crashed' or 'trashed' the economy. Let's take David Hume's maxim to heart and proportion our belief to the evidence.

Inflation has been going up worldwide because of the damage to the economy caused by the pandemic and the fact that central banks printed huge amounts of money to keep people afloat during lockdown. This is a classic cause of inflation – easy money and fewer goods. Added to this, Putin's war has pushed up the prices of energy and food. One of the tools in the central bank toolkit to curb inflation is to raise interest rates, and this is a global response. The US has been raising



Kwasi Kwarteng – former Chancellor of the Exchequer

interest rates faster than other countries, which has strengthened the dollar and weakened the euro and the pound. A weakening pound tends to increase inflation because imported goods become more expensive. And so the Bank of England is forced to raise interest rates even more. The Bank was also trying to end the era of easy money (Quantitative Easing) by selling government bonds (gilts) rather than buying them off the government (money printing). The yield on gilts was having to go up in order to entice investors to buy more of them, which pushed up the cost of government borrowing. All of this preceded Kwasi Kwarteng's 'mini-budget' on 23rd September. He announced a gigantic energy welfare programme and tax cuts to help stimulate the economy and avoid recession. The obsessive claim that this 'crashed' the economy is nonsense which feeds lies and distortions into democratic debate. It temporarily damaged market confidence in the government's financial competence, which has now been restored by new PM Rishi Sunak. Economic reality is complex and dynamic. We should dismiss false narratives peddled by politicians and journalists.



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Poet's Corner

By Alex Williams



Is Granny in Heaven?

'Is granny in heaven?' the smiling girl asked,
Wide-eyed, and strangely excited,
As she to her mother's dress trembling clasped
In the hope that their loss had been righted.

'Daddy said granny now lives up above
With the clouds and the stars so bright
And that soon we will all be together again
Singing with angels of light.'

'Daddy's a fool and a flake,' mother said,
'Granny's dead. We must face it and grieve.
This heaven of angels and harps on a cloud
Is a baffling thing to believe.
Would granny enjoy it, this chorus of hymns
When you know how she loved a rude joke?
Can you see her reclining on clouds having seen
How she danced on her fourth rum and coke?
She would find it a bore and what's more quite a chore
Doing just what the good lord intends.
If hell were an option (it's not, it's not real)
Then she'd rather be there with her friends.'

The girl took a breath, and considered if death
Could be really so simple and plain?
Then she smiled with content, knowing this answer meant
Granny would never more be in pain.
She'd never more suffer, she'd never more cry,
She'd never more struggle or weep
And she'd live on in memories of laughter and love
That the girl and the mother could keep.



Secular Verses (2021) by Alex Williams is a collection of original poems inspired by secularism, atheism, and humanism. Available [here](https://www.thedialup.blogspot.com)

More info:

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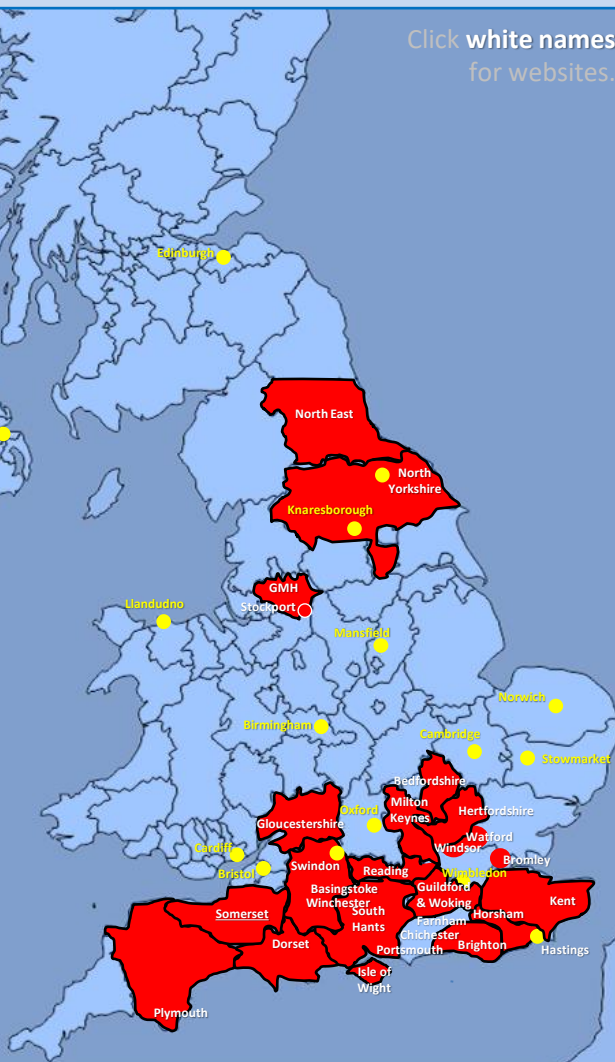
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