



# Humanistically Speaking

May 2021

**A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview**

## ‘OUT OF AFRICA’ Our human story



This month, *Humanistically Speaking* had the great pleasure of interviewing distinguished

anthropologist Professor Chris Stringer who is Research Leader in Human Origins at the Natural History Museum in London. He is one of the leading proponents of the “Out of Africa” theory, which hypothesizes that modern humans originated in Africa over 100,000 years ago and replaced archaic humans such as *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis*. Subscribers have the chance to win a copy of his beautiful new book ‘Our Human Story.’ Step inside for the journey..!



**Features this month:**

- Chris Stringer Interview
- Dawkins Loses Award
- Dying Matters Week
  - Dear Darwin
- Thought for the Day
- Maggie’s Musings
- Evolution book review
- Your letters and emails

Humanistically Speaking



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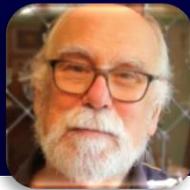
Humanistically Speaking

A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

# 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 entirely 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 the South Central England Humanists Network or Humanists UK.

We've got a proper bumper bundle for you this month and we are very proud to announce that we have, thanks to your generous donations, been able to publish our first booklet entitled ***From Atheism to Humanism*** which we will aim to send free of charge to any subscriber who asks. That's right. Just [email us](#) to ask for your own copy!

*Breaking News* covers the Richard Dawkins story with Ronnie presenting an impassioned plea for humanists to include the transgender community whenever we discuss trans issues.

10<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> May is Dying Matters Week. Annette Earle offers her thoughts about end of life planning – and she invites you to contact her if you would like to discuss these matters further. Chair of Windsor Humanists, Dr Anthony Lewis, raises the question about why suffering is a necessary part of life and Aaron asks if 21<sup>st</sup> Century Humans really *are* at the top of the evolutionary tree. And the eternally-popular Charles Darwin continues to answer your questions.

Ronnie also peers into the possibilities of a future tech utopia, before my recorded chat with Chris Stringer who talks about his search for early Humans in this delightful recorded interview. David Warden writes a fascinating *Thought for the Day* and shares his view that we Humanists should have a permanent leader who has the gravitas of a major religious figure – an issue that is sure to encourage some response.

And that is followed by more Musings from Maggie who remains perplexed at the persistence of creationism in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. David Warden then comes back to our main theme this month with his book review of Robin Dunbar's *Human Evolution*.

Now ... What have I missed? Oh, yes. For the first time we have so many readers' messages that we didn't have room for them all! Thank you all so much for your communications. If yours didn't get published this month, we will consider it for the next issue. No promises mind!

David Brittain

# BREAKING NEWS



## Groups Ambassador

VACANCY

We are seeking a talented and communicative Humanist to join our team with the aim of contacting all the Humanist groups in the UK and inviting them on board.

As *Humanistically Speaking* grows, we want to be a central communications hub for groups everywhere, reaching out to people old and new, establishing our [Groups page](#) as a central portal that will lead you to contact points with all groups out there.

Your role would be to establish initial contact with groups on our behalf, explain what we're about, send them a link to our website, tease them into reading a couple of issues and ask them to send our magazine to their subscriber list. In return we will add them to our groups directory and go from there.

Are you interested?

**Additionally**, we are still seeking both a general Administrator to manage various functions within *Humanistically Speaking* as well as a Social Media Influencer who would operate and manage the Social Media streams, promote *Humanistically Speaking*, and reply to questions and queries as they crop up. Could this be you?

## What if your Humanist Group closed?



Well let's hope it doesn't happen but for next month's letters page, this is what we are asking you.

Think about that for a moment, what would the implications be if your group closed? How would you feel? What would you do? How hard would you fight to prevent it?

We invite **YOU** to tell us. There are some groups out there who are struggling and may not be aware how you feel, so tell them. In either a paragraph or no more than 200 words, let us know your thoughts, and we will aim to publish as many as we can. In all cases please tell us your area, you can give us your name, part name or alias.

## Group leaders

We will soon be sending our [Values Booklet](#) to print, and would like to send a sample copy to each group so you can view it, and see how many places locally you can distribute it to after lockdown. We are prioritising Prisons and Hospitals as these are limited Internet access points, followed by Universities and Colleges.

Please send your address with GROUP POSTAL CONTACT in the subject, and letting us know which group you are representing.



## Our FIRST publication in print!



We are delighted and proud to announce that our previous e-download **From Atheism to Humanism: A Compact Guide to 8 Humanist Values** is now in print format and a sample batch has been delivered for preview. As life returns to normality over the coming months we hope that groups will be able to place copies on display in hospitals and prisons in the first instance, as these are places with limited or no internet, likely via a celebrant path, and then onto universities, colleges, libraries and other public venues plus of course your own group libraries and information desks.

These currently cost well over a £1 a copy, so we want to place a bulk order to get this vastly reduced, so we are inviting groups leaders and celebrants to contact us and we will send you a sample copy, and then let us know how many we can send you in the next batch. Numbers will be likely dependent upon donations.

*If we could raise £700 off the back of this request we could hit our target, so we invite readers and groups to consider donating so that we can help expand the humanist message beyond just being anti-religion. For a reminder, click on the [image](#) above to download the latest version.*

**Account:** Humanistically Speaking  
**Sort code:** 30 98 97  
**Account:** 33444562

*We especially invite regular payments via either direct debit or standing order to help fund us in the future - can be just a few pounds so that we can keep this magazine free and available to as many as possible.*

- Running Costs
- Technology upgrades
- Leaflet printing
- Travel expenses





## American Humanist Association withdraws ‘Humanist of the Year’ Award from Richard Dawkins

**APRIL 19, 2021:** The American Humanist Association, founded in 1941, voted to withdraw the 1996 Humanist of the Year Award to Richard Dawkins, stating that he has ‘over the past several years accumulated a history of making statements that use the guise of scientific discourse to demean marginalized groups, an approach antithetical to humanist values’.

***Our columnist Ronnie Barr has written this impassioned plea for humanists to actually include the transgender community when discussing trans issues...***

It’s the same old story. An ill-informed comment here, a seemingly over the top response there, eventually everyone descends into shouting and hurling slurs and the whole cycle repeats again. Frankly, this is a cycle I am absolutely sick of and I certainly hope those of you reading are too. But where do we keep going wrong? I, along with many others, know the answer. Hopefully, this time around, we can put it across in a way everyone will understand.

As I’ve mentioned before, I’m transgender. I’m also the Diversity Representative for Dorset Humanists and I discovered them through attending Bournemouth LGBT Pride before I was fully out as trans. I’ve always felt welcome

amongst the Humanist community. Some of our main beliefs involve compassion and human rights after all, but throughout this past year I’ve found myself growing more concerned about the direction in which we’re heading and, being perfectly honest, scared and excluded by the community I’d thought had accepted me.

The Richard Dawkins scandal has become international news and has led to an outpouring of backlash online from both Humanists and the general public. I’ve spent days reading over the seemingly endless comments about the subject and crying into my housemate’s shoulder about how people have dreadfully misinterpreted the situation. Perhaps it’s my unique position as both a trans person and a stickler for researching my news before passing judgement, perhaps it’s the lack of detail from the AHA on their reaction, but the cisgender\* people arguing about the decision have entirely missed the point on why it was made in the first place.

\* The term **cisgender** means those people whose gender identity matches their biological sex. Opposite of transgender.

This was not a 'one comment and now he's cancelled' situation. Time and time again Dawkins has tried talking about various minority groups on inappropriate forums like Twitter and using offensive language and every time it's been pointed out that the way he's seemingly going about his 'research' is wrong. It's his refusal to change his approach or even acknowledge that what he's doing is wrong that's led to his award being revoked. His latest tweet about transgender people is merely the final nail in the coffin. His 'apology' online is merely a statement trying to justify his behaviour instead of owning up to his previous mistakes and trying to learn how to actually have a dialogue with the groups he supposedly wants to study. The lack of accountability and willingness to change is why his award was revoked.

### **Humanists divided on the AHA action**

The assumption that saying anything about the trans community online will lead to backlash has caused massive repercussions as I'm sure many of you will have already seen. Mainstream media coverage has caused the entire Humanist community to be accused of being too 'woke', Humanists themselves are divided on whether the AHA made the correct choice, and so far every comment I've read surrounding the news has totally missed the mark. The lack of awareness on why the award was revoked and what was wrong about the situation in the first place has caused the Humanist community to lose focus of what the real problems here are.

Having looked at the many different discussions online as well as private conversations surrounding the situation, I'm not sure I can fully express in words how distressing, saddening, and frustrating it's been for me as a trans person to see the abysmal behaviour of Humanists across the

globe since the news broke. I am completely appalled! Humanists consider ourselves fair and compassionate but the reactions to this news have been anything but.

### **Trans community excluded from the conversation**

I've seen people treat the trans community in a way comparable to test subjects, grown adults hurling insults and slurs back and forth solely due to disagreeing with one another, and the trans community completely excluded from the conversation while cisgender people either talk over us or supposedly for us. Hundreds of Humanists have taken part in these conversations. Only one has bothered to check on how I'm feeling during these so-called rational discussions and attempted to include me despite it being my community being analysed. Meanwhile the fight goes on with cis people accusing each other of transphobia or over-sensitivity and then wondering why no trans people are getting involved.

It baffles me that Humanists are expecting to be able to have dialogues around biological sex versus gender identity and validity of trans and cis experiences when they aren't approaching these conversations correctly in the first place. Before you can get into the nitty gritty you need to prove to us that we are indeed safe and included in these dialogues. We need to know that we'll be listened to and accepted before we get involved instead of having others assume they know what it is we want or need and speaking on our behalf and potentially hindering these conversations instead of helping them. The subjects of these discussions should be taking the lead for much-needed dialogues to take place. Only then can we move forward and stop this vicious cycle.

# Are you in a good place to die?

Guest article by Annette Earl

## 10-16<sup>th</sup> May is Dying Matters Week and the focus for 2021 is on the importance of being 'in a good place to die'.

The Dying Matters website states that:

*"Where people die is changing. More people than ever are dying at home, and the pandemic has accelerated this trend. In 2020, 28% of people in the UK died at home. With gaps in support structures for people when they die, and for those that are left behind, people are dying without being in the right place. Often, people don't feel prepared and they haven't fulfilled their wishes or communicated them to loved ones."*

I think the key to this is in the last sentence. Why is it that humans are comfortable talking about all manner of subjects but when it comes to death and dying, conversation stops...well, dead?!

I should 'fess up' at this point and declare my interest – in the last year I've made the transition to self-employment and I now create and share tools and resources related to End of Life Planning. Planning for the end of your life and what you do (or don't) want – is not most people's 'thing'. But that doesn't mean it's not important. One approach is to think of End of Life Planning as a way of being comfortable with answering the question: "If I had died yesterday, what have I put in place to make things easier for those around me today?".



## What is an End of Life Plan?

An End of Life Plan is generally a set of documents that capture and record all the details about you and your life. I'm not just talking about wills or funeral wishes although those are absolutely key.

But what about if you're ill and your caregiver gives you milky tea and you drink black coffee? And what would happen to your awesome Lego collection? And that's before we get to your online life – sprawling metropolis that it is – where do you even start?

There are two fundamental beliefs I hold when it comes to death. The first is that I believe everyone has the right to a 'good death', whatever that looks like for them. And part of a good death is the 'where' you'll die. When asked, most people will tell you that they want to die at home but this isn't what ends up happening for most people.



**“How we deal with death is at least as important as how we deal with life, wouldn't you say?” James T Kirk**

Yet, with the right support and planning, this wish could be realised for so many more of us. The problem is, most people aren't aware of the options available to them. There is so much choice available to us at the end of our lives but because we don't have those conversations in advance, the words go unsaid and what we want is all too often not what happens.

## **Opening up the conversation**

So what can we do about it? Well, I invite you to consider the question asked by Dying Matters: Where, for you, is a good place to die? Perhaps the answer is obvious, perhaps it isn't. And it's ok if the answer is 'Don't know' or 'Not sure'.

The important thing is to ask the question. Of yourself. Of those around you. To open up the conversation and be willing to enter into, what may sometimes be, an uncomfortable dialogue.

I said there are two things I believe about death. The second is that if we can start to normalise the conversation around death and dying, then society as a whole will benefit. As

humanists, we strive to live good and meaningful lives underpinned by compassion and kindness. But...

**“Why strive to live a good, full, and meaningful life unless we extend the same courtesy to seeking a good and meaningful death?”**

If you're not sure where to start, then numerous events for Dying Matters Week are posted on their website – perhaps I'll see you at one of them?

*Dying Matters Week is held each year in May. This year it is 10-16<sup>th</sup> May and the theme is 'Are you in a good Place to die?' You can find details at:*

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/AwarenessWeek>

In order to encourage conversation, and help start putting together your own plan, Annette is hosting a number of free events to coincide with Dying Matters Week. You can find the full programme at:

<https://www.annetteearl.com/events>

# Why Do Humans Suffer?

***Chairman of Windsor Humanists  
Dr Anthony Lewis gave a  
humanist perspective on this  
question as part of a multi-faith  
webinar hosted by the Windsor  
and Maidenhead Community  
Forum...***

The humanist view of suffering is informed by our common humanity, by our evolved sense of empathy and shared experience of life, and also by the huge advances in medicine and science in the last 200 years which have led to marked improvements in our physical, mental and social well-being.

Suffering is an unavoidable consequence of being alive. When we look at the natural world, we wonder at the beauty of existence, but we also observe the brutal struggle to survive.

We know that the life of humans in the Stone Age was harsh. Our ancestors had impoverished lives with an average lifespan of just thirty-five years. Recent discoveries have revealed that nearly 50 per cent of adult males in hunter gatherer societies died at the hands of other men. *Homo sapiens* is violent to its own members, adding further to our suffering. A child born today in the UK, however, can now expect to live to the age of ninety-five with a quality of life and health which even billionaires could not enjoy in 1900. This miracle has been achieved through advances in agriculture, technology and co-operation.



Our ingenuity has helped humankind to escape from many causes of suffering. We still have much to do but as a humanist I am optimistic for the future and about our abilities to further reduce our suffering through continued scientific endeavours and social progress.

Despite these incredible advances we will all suffer at some stage in our lives. All of us, as embodied living creatures, will suffer to a lesser or greater extent during our lives in three main ways: physical, mental, and existential. These different kinds of suffering overlap and interact in complex ways.

## **Physical suffering**

Many diseases such as tuberculosis and smallpox have been vanquished, or are now manageable, but there is still much suffering from poor pain control, cancers, neurological

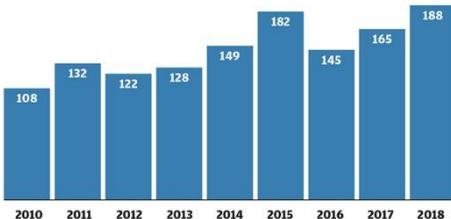
conditions such as multiple sclerosis and infectious diseases such as malaria which still kill millions and cause enormous suffering in the world. Genetic-based medicine promises further improvements over the next few decades. The rapid development of Covid vaccines in less than a year is just the start of this coming revolution. However, modern medicine means that many of us are likely to face the awful decision of when to stop treatment, or when to switch off life-support machines. The UK has one of the best palliative care sectors in the world but technology now allows us to prolong life indefinitely which has the perverse effect of increasing suffering, especially at the end of life. This is why many humanists believe that all of us have a right to a good death and we actively support campaigns to legalise assisted dying with appropriate safeguards.

## Mental health suffering

Thankfully we are more enlightened about mental health issues today. However, the persistent high rates of suicide, especially in younger age groups, demonstrate that difficult problems remain. All of us will experience times when we struggle to cope and we may feel we have nowhere to turn for help. I volunteer as a Samaritan listener and have experienced first-hand how just listening to someone who is going through a difficult

### SUICIDE RATES AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Annual rates of suicides among 10- to 19-year-olds



Source: Quarterly suicide data for England, ONS, September 2019

time, without judgment and in complete confidence, can really help. The power of authentic connection can be transformative.



## Existential fear and suffering

Humans are probably the first organisms to have evolved both a direct awareness of our own mortality and the means to talk about the absurdity of our inevitable non-existence.

*“We are a unique, pivotal cognitive singularity in the evolution of life on earth.”*

Existential fear has driven our attempts to explain our existence and to assuage our fears. Some of us seek solace in religion but as a humanist I choose to focus on this one precious life that I experience directly and know. I face squarely the mystery of existence and the suffering we will all experience from just being alive. I strive to live authentically and with good grace and humour.

As a humanist I believe in the unlimited power of human love, kindness and compassion to carry us through times of distress. I believe our innate altruism and evolved sense of empathy will always endure over our more violent primitive instincts, otherwise we would not have survived as a species.

Listen to Anthony's full talk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTy3bnMKhLM&t=188s>



Charles Darwin.

# Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.  
Darwin's family home.

Dear Darwin

In a Humanist world of freedom and fairness, how can a society meet the full demands of the majority, whilst respecting minority concerns? As Spock once said, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

James Querque, Poole

Dear James

I know nothing of anyone called 'Spock' but he appears to know Percy Shelley's 1832 poem:

*Rise like lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep have fallen on you –  
Ye are many, they are few.*

This poem, I am reliably informed by my time-travelling advisers, was recited by a certain Labour Party leader in 2017. But you are a perspicacious fellow and you have hit upon the essential contradiction between freedom and fairness. If people are to be completely free then life is unlikely to be fair. A few will rise to the top. But if society strives for complete fairness, or 'equity' as Amelie Forbes expressed it so eloquently last month, then freedom will have to be curtailed. The only solution known to humanity is a compromise between freedom and fairness. America and England have lurched too far in the direction of freedom and inequality. A correction in favour of fairness is long overdue.

Dear Darwin

Do humanists believe in capital punishment? With no god to offend, and the bottom line in justice stopping with man, if someone is really bad they don't deserve the gift of life surely?

Joan Dark, Portsmouth

Dear Joan

I must first gently upbraid you for your shocking lapse into un-PC language. The gender-privileging term 'man' has, in your century, been superseded by the neutral term 'humanity'. Do keep up to date. Goodness me, I've had to in order to get a column in this illustrious magazine so you have no excuse.

Now let me deal with the substance of your enquiry. You imply that the 'gift of life' is contingent on goodness. Of course, we know that evolution bestows life on those individuals who have had the good fortune to be descended from successful ancestors without regard to goodness or badness in any social or criminal sense. It has taken literally millions of years to produce a representative specimen of *Homo sapiens* and you are proposing to terminate its existence for stealing a loaf of bread or some other trifle. I beg you, Madam, to think again.

# Aaron Explores

Trying to see the wood for the trees: Evolution



## Is 21<sup>st</sup> century humankind at the top of the evolutionary tree?

Are we it, the pinnacle of evolutionary splendour, the top of the tree, the twenty first century Humanist? Aaron Darkwood would like to think so as he reflects on where *Homo sapiens* is today as the last remaining representative of the genus *Homo*.

Look around you, on this planet of ours today, and you will see a huge variety of human development and civilization. The Middle East is still fighting wars of religious tribalism, Africa is still fighting over resources and land, China appears to be the embodiment of order and the United States of chaos. The US's fragile alliance of conflicting views puts gun ownership over children's lives. Closer to home we have Europe, 20+ countries all pulling the bed-sheets in different directions whilst someone tries to make out it's big enough for all. And Scandinavia, a corner of the globe which seems to top all sorts of polls and charts from happiness to rehabilitation, yet whose population is so low their global impact seems minimal.

My thinking here is if we were visited from space by our famed little green men, who would we want to represent the people of planet Earth? Who is closest to the humanist ideal of educated, intelligent, compassionate and loving, who could proudly say on behalf of all of us "I am from Earth, and I speak for our planet"?



Image: Simple Psychology

### Is Humanism at the top of the pyramid?

Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow would have us think that we are all here on Earth to meet our existential needs by climbing to the peak of his famous pyramid until we are 'self-actualised'. But how many of us get anywhere close? Humanism is certainly populated with more than its fair share of retired persons, those who have learnt, lived, created and crafted, contributed, observed and looked back. Have these people with all the wisdom gained in a lifetime of living reached self-actualisation? Perhaps you the reader are exactly that person? What is the combination of wisdom you would pass onto humanity at your stage in life? Are you "there" yet?

Have you 'Self-Actualised'? Tell us...



Our nation states choose people to represent us in government. If we are lucky, our combined constituency areas of seventy thousand human beings will have just five brave volunteers who stick their hands up to try and represent us, and if successful make the world a better place. We then look at these (typically) five, totally ignore them as human beings, and select the colour we always vote for in a hope that collectively they will do the right thing.



Do we want a Humanist representing us? As we know, we are independent thinkers and there are Humanists and there are Humanists, demonstrated by the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group made up of ministers of all persuasions. Does Humanism have a collective voice? Does Humanism embody human achievements? Does it take a lifetime to become a Humanist, and where does that leave the rest of the population?

Of course, being the freethinkers that we are, our views vary. We all probably agree nuclear weapons are bad but some would get rid of them, some are happy not firing them, and some wish to retain them just in case. We may equally agree that green energy is the way forwards with some demanding all green energy now at any cost, while others advise a more gradual and affordable path which maintains the economy whilst having grand targets in view. Could Humanists ever agree on a mutual manifesto of policies, and as such could this be global or just here in the UK? But imagine, a global Humanist party!

Thinking further out, if we are not the embodiment of where human beings are striving for, then are we going in the wrong direction? Surely every culture, every belief system, every country and community all feel they have got it right, and are moving forwards in the very best hope of achieving humankind's biggest goals?

## Does it really matter?

Evolution doesn't just happen by chance anymore. We have reached the point where we are actually shaping our future. People alive today will without doubt be part of a new race of humans that will live and evolve on neighbouring planets like Mars. If we are truly to spread our wings to other worlds, we surely want to be doing so knowing that we are as evolved as we possible can be, and continuing to go in the right direction.

Would we take disease, faulty DNA, bad practice and other human flaws into space, or fix them beforehand? I'll let my other colleagues cover those areas, but as a *Star Trek* fan myself, I hope we get it right as we finally go where no one has gone before.



**Vision of a sustainable city on Mars for one million humans by one of the winners of HP Mars Home Planet rendering challenge by Swedish architect and CG artist Max Rymsha.**  
Pinterest/humanMars.net - [Mars One](#)

# Young Humanists



*Ronnie Barr peers into our evolutionary future and asks whether tech utopia is still within reach...*

I've never been good at science. That isn't to say I haven't tried; I attempted to take an astronomy class in secondary school and later bought a book that claims to explain various scientific concepts using superheroes. I'm sure I'll find it very helpful as soon as I figure out which drawer it's been haphazardly thrown into.

But when it comes down to it I really struggle to wrap my head around the different scientific topics my Humanist friends love to discuss, which is strange considering my adoration of science fiction. Ever since I was a child I have adored the fantastical and strange world of sci-fi, my bedroom walls were plastered with alien posters and I could finish an entire game of *Doctor Who Scene It?* in just one turn after memorising all the facts. I may not understand how certain scientific concepts work and how likely they are to really happen, but I still find them absolutely fascinating. I've found that as an adult one area in particular I'm drawn to more and more is the impact on humanity and how our lives may change as time goes on.

Possibly the most obvious trope I can start with here is the technological utopian future. If you watch any children's cartoon I'm sure you'll find at least one episode where the characters somehow end up thousands of years into the future where everything is

made of metal and full of Googie futurist architecture, humans wear clothing that's both impractical to wear and looks like it's been stolen from Ziggy Stardust's wardrobe in the 70s, and robots are practically everywhere. It's almost sickening how "perfect" this future is; technology is shown to be the solution to every possible problem, but it's never explained how this has happened and the over-reliance on robotics and machinery is presented as something positive.



**60s TV show *The Jetsons* portrayed our future selves in a positive and light-hearted way**

In recent years however I've noticed that as our relationship with technology has changed so has the depiction of humanity in shows, films, and games. In the 60s as we made considerable tech advancements TV shows such as *The Jetsons* portrayed our future selves in a positive and light-hearted way, suggesting that a world built around robots and tech could only be a great step forward for humans, whereas modern day media ▶

like the 2008 film *WALL-E* makes a point of showing us that this is most definitely not the case. In *WALL-E* there's a clear message that humans are becoming over-reliant on technology and that our misuse of resources is going to cause the species as a whole to deteriorate; the distant future is not a pleasant one with humans being portrayed as morbidly obese and glued to their screens. The premise that as technology improves our own intelligence will decrease is one that seems to pop up quite often.



2008 film *WALL-E* portrays future humans as morbidly obese and glued to their screens

In the 2019 series *Years and Years*, which only takes place later this decade, transhuman character Bethany is portrayed as being addicted to technology to the point it hinders her decision-making abilities, hiding behind a filter emoji mask in her teen years and almost getting mutilated after attempting to get black-market surgery to turn her eye into a camera. There's also a short scene wherein a group of schoolgirls laugh at paper, not understanding how it works due to only using computers.

While the way we're depicted as growing less intelligent is disheartening there are still many pieces of media in which our integration with technology is portrayed as being less black and white. Robots and sentient AI make appearances in almost every piece of science fiction work and as our own efforts to create true artificial intelligence grow more successful the way our relationship with robots and AI in fiction has evolved too. It's becoming increasingly common to analyse the relationship between humans and AI and question how important it is compared to their primary purpose serving us.

The 2015 series *Humans* revolves around a group of AI synth robots that are completely sentient, exploring the various relationships between the synths and the humans. The

reaction to the synths is a thoroughly mixed bag with characters like teenager Mattie growing resentful of their increasing role in society making humans obsolete, retired scientist George having an almost familial bond with caregiver robot Odi, and Astrid who enters a romantic relationship with one of the main synths, Niska.

Although long running BBC series *Doctor Who* also portrays our relationships with technology the series takes it one step further and delves into many possible futures for how the human race could evolve with tech, from the human race at the end of the world who cannibalize themselves into Toclafane spheres to avoid becoming like the dreaded devolved humans the Futurekind, to the Cybermen and Lady Cassandra who attempt to "purify" themselves and strip away what it means to be human.

**Humanity is changing and it's changing fast. Whereas we used to look optimistically towards the future we now cast a critical eye over how we're evolving. We control our future, our evolution, but is our technological utopia still in reach?**

# Brittain Interviews...

Our video conference with notable Humanists, interviewed by David Brittain

## Chris Stringer

Chris Stringer is Research Leader in Human Origins at the Natural History Museum in London. He is one of the leading proponents of the "Out of Africa" theory, which hypothesizes that modern humans originated in Africa over 100,000 years ago and replaced archaic humans such as *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis*. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society and a Member of the American Philosophical Society.

*"Were the Neanderthals our direct ancestors or a different lineage, a parallel line of humans?"*

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# Thought for the Day

By David Warden

## *Dead men don't rise – but should the President of Humanists UK tweet this on Good Friday?*

**“Just a little reminder today. Dead people – don't come back to life”.** Professor Alice Roberts, President of Humanists UK tweeting on her personal Twitter account on Good Friday. In a follow-up tweet she wrote **“It's terrible to push such damaging myths onto children. And yet we seem to tolerate it as a society”.**



Professors Alice Roberts and Gordon Lynch  
– a humanist disagreement on Twitter

**“Dear Alice, I'm a senior scholar of religion and a humanist. Tweets like these don't do anything to help humanism or build mature and constructive relationships with people with different beliefs. Given your role with Humanists UK please think again before tweeting more like this.”**

**Professor Gordon Lynch, Michael Ramsey Professor of Modern Theology at the University of Kent.**

What's going on here is a clash of 'registers'. In linguistics, a 'register' is defined as the way in which people use language differently in different circumstances. Alice Roberts is engaging in atheist polemics which is fine – but was it a good idea for her to do this on Good Friday? Many of our readers will no doubt see this as entirely appropriate and unproblematic. Christians have this crazy belief that Jesus rose from the dead, and they

foist this belief onto schoolchildren, including, apparently, Alice Roberts's own children. So why not hit out at such absurdities during Easter when the resurrection is being 'celebrated'?

Gordon Lynch begs to differ. He thinks that tweets like this do nothing to help humanism or to build mature and constructive relationships. So what's his problem? Presumably, Lynch would see nothing wrong in engaging in philosophical and historical debate about the possibility, and alleged reports, of dead men rising. But it looks like he wants the President of Humanists UK to offer a more dignified and pacific message to Christians on the occasion of their sacred festival and leave the polemics at the door.

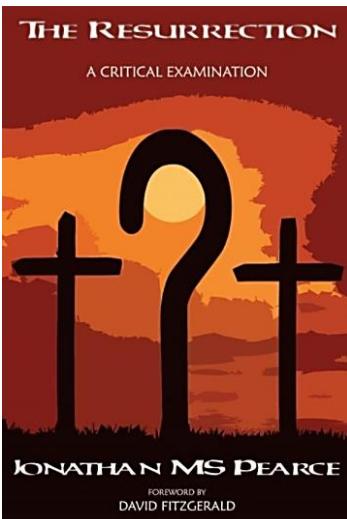
Deciding who's right in this humanist disagreement depends on what kind of role you imagine for the national leader of ▶

Humanism – or indeed whether you see the President of Humanists UK as the national leader of Humanism or merely the temporary head of a campaigning organisation.

I have thought for some time that we need a national humanist leader who has the dignity and gravitas to stand alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi in the national conversation around religion, ethics, and values. Humanism is a major worldview followed, at least implicitly, by millions of people. We should be represented at the national level by a ‘major hitter’. Humanists UK does a great job in appointing distinguished scientists and popular celebrities to the role. But they are only appointed for three-year terms and their presidency of Humanists UK inevitably takes second fiddle to their primary professional role. I’d like to see this change. I’d like to see the national leader of Humanism in post for around a decade so that they become a recognised and respected figure.

***“I have thought for some time that we need a national humanist leader who has the dignity and gravitas to stand alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi in the national conversation around religion, ethics, and values.”***

Such a leader would not be above critical intervention in national debates but they would try to build bridges of dialogue. They would be knowledgeable about both religion and Humanism and they would advocate for Humanism as a positive force for good in our national life, not merely a protest against religious privilege – important as that is. They would be non-partisan politically. Perhaps the role would suit a retired philosopher of ethics and theology. Maybe Professor Lynch should apply in due course?



## New book on the resurrection released



Jonathan MS Pearce, known online as a ‘tippling philosopher’, has just released his new book on the resurrection - a major *tour de force*. The breadth and depth of Jonathan’s scholarship is impressive. Pearce deals decisively with the oft-repeated claim that ‘the resurrection is the best attested fact in history’. If you study this book you will be armed with every conceivable argument thrown at you by Christian evangelists about the biggest non-event in history.

Jonathan MS Pearce *The Resurrection: A Critical Examination* (2021). Available to order from all bookstores and online retailers.

Do you have a *Thought for the Day* worth sharing?

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# Musings by Maggie

## Darwin's Devious Detractors

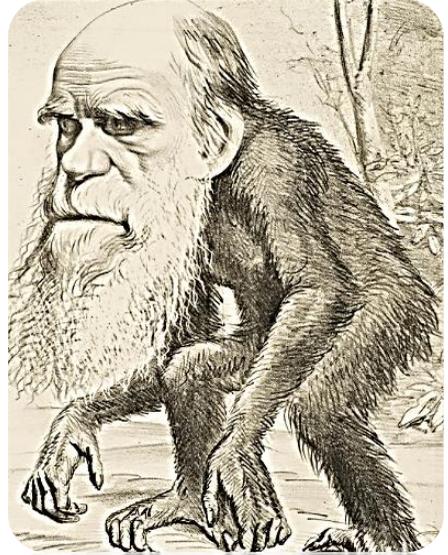
**“Well, you may have been descended from a monkey. I certainly wasn’t!”**

Such was the rebuke from a Christian friend when I myself was a ‘born again’ Christian in the fundamentalist Baptist church to which she had introduced me when I was sixteen years of age. Curiously, it hadn’t, until then, occurred to me that the biblical literalist beliefs I had readily accepted after my ‘conversion’ clashed with what I had been taught about evolution in school. I never did go as far in my faith as to dismiss Darwin’s Theory entirely, managing to reconcile it nicely in my own mind with the Genesis account by viewing God as the instigator and guide of the evolutionary process (see Robert Stovold’s article on Theistic Evolution in the February 2021 edition of *Humanistically Speaking*).

Eventually I ditched the whole God thing in my late twenties but retained a keen interest in what people believe and why they believe it. One of the biggest puzzles to me is why creationism continues to be strenuously propagated even against the overwhelming body of evidence that is vastly accepted by the mainstream scientific community. It will doubtless not come as a surprise that the major opposition to Darwin’s Theory emanates from the US, mainly in three forms of creationism.

### Creation Science

‘Creation science’ re-interprets scientific results in an attempt to validate the Genesis myths,



Cartoon depicting Charles Darwin as an ape  
(1871) Wikimedia Commons

not only with regard to evolution but also geology, cosmology, archaeology, history and linguistics. None of these hypotheses are testable or supported by empirical data and are therefore not regarded as science by the scientific community.

### Neo-Creationism

In 1987 the Supreme Court found that creationism is a religious concept and therefore teaching it as accurate science in state schools violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make ▶

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no law respecting an establishment of religion ...". This resulted in an attempt by the proponents of creationism to divorce religion from their 'scientific' arguments. Two leading organisations of this movement are the Discovery Institute and its sister organisation, the Center for Science and Culture, from which originates the notorious 1998 'Wedge Strategy': "...we are convinced that in order to defeat materialism, we must cut it off at its source. That source is scientific materialism. If we view the predominant materialistic science as a giant tree, our strategy is intended to function as a 'wedge' that, while relatively small, can split the trunk when applied at its weakest points." There's little sign of the 'tree' of scientific materialism being split by creationists.

## Intelligent Design

Intelligent Design, or ID for short, is a form of neo-creationism based on the notion that natural objects, particularly living organisms, show too much complexity not to have been purposely designed by a supreme being. Another form is the 'abrupt appearance' theory (everything appeared abruptly in complex form).

## Creationism in the UK

According to a 2009 US survey<sup>1</sup>, 31 per cent of the public believed in young-earth creationism, 22 per cent in evolution guided by a supreme being, 32 per cent in evolution due to natural processes and 15 per cent didn't know. In the same year in the UK a poll found that *half* of the 2,060 people questioned were either strongly opposed to the theory of evolution or confused about it (*Guardian* 2009)<sup>2</sup>. Although the US is certainly a hotbed of anti-evolution activism, there is also a creationist movement here in the UK. The Creation Science Movement, founded in 1932, is a British creationist organisation and

*Truth in Science* is a UK-based organisation which promotes the Discovery Institute's 'Teach the Controversy' campaign in an attempt to get pseudo-scientific ID creationism taught alongside evolution in school science lessons<sup>3</sup>. The Noah's Ark Zoo Farm near Bristol appears at first sight to be a fairly typical tourist attraction, until you look at their website's 'About Us' page<sup>4</sup> and find that its owner 'has devoted much of his spare time to researching how belief in God can reconcile with our scientific understanding of the Earth and its origins'. Creationists may seek to wrap their 'theory' up in pseudo-scientific terms, but their motives are theistic rather than scientific.

I'll leave the last word to Jerry Coyne, who, in his excellent book *Why Evolution is True* (2010) writes this:

**"...many people require more than just evidence before they'll accept evolution.**

**To these folks, evolution raises such profound questions of purpose, morality, and meaning that they just can't accept it no matter how much evidence they see. It's not that we evolved from apes that bothers them so much; it's the emotional consequences of facing that fact. And unless we address those concerns, we won't progress in making evolution a universally acknowledged truth."**

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2. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2009/feb/01/evolution-darwin-survey-creationism>
3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnfarrell/2015/01/27/new-survey-finds-creationism-in-britain-has-been-overstated/?sh=cbc35492685d>
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# Letters & Emails

## Pious drivel from religious leaders

The latest Easter Sunday message from Archbishop Justin Welby asks us to “Choose a better future after the Covid threat has passed”, and the Pontiff’s message is for “The wealthiest countries to give Covid vaccines to the poorest”. These pleas from such ostentatiously wealthy organisations for other people to save the world are treated as profound advice by the BBC and other media. To my mind they are annoying and trite verbal expulsions. They carry on with this repetitive drivel with zero effect other than taking advantage of the media to promulgate a message about their piety. The media then move on to reporting on the terrible conflicts that religious dogma actually causes. Is this just me getting old and cynical, or do other readers feel the same?

Brian Turvey

## Grayling ‘unfit’ to be a humanist Patron

Whilst I agree with A C Grayling that the first-past-the-post electoral system can barely be described as democratic, I think it’s a bit rich coming from someone who did everything in his power to reverse the democratic decision of the British people to leave the EU.

I have even seen footage of him encouraging Guy Verhofstadt and the EU to give the UK such a bad deal that we will want to rejoin.

Given his denial of the democratic EU referendum result does this make him unfit to be a patron of Humanists UK? I think it does.

Charlie Yianoullou

## Allow prisoners to vote

I agreed with everything A C Grayling said in your interview with him last month *except* for the prisoners’ voting rights. I think there’s a strong argument, in the interests of preparing for the home straight of rehabilitation, for allowing prisoners to vote if their scheduled release date falls within the term of the next parliament, i.e. they will be back in society during the term of office of the government elected.

Charles Bailey

## True meaning of Brexit

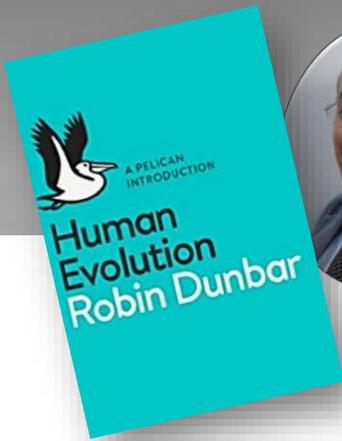
In his review of A C Grayling’s *The Good State* David Warden appears to argue that the Brexit Leave vote was motivated by the undemocratic nature of the EU. However, a more plausible view, and one supported by the evidence, is that ‘left behind’ voters were taking the rare opportunity of directly registering their unhappiness with a political system that had neglected them for so many years, and of which the EU was only a small part.

One of the reasons for this neglect is the fact that, in a first-past-the-post system it is much easier for majoritarian parties to ignore significant minorities such as these. This is perhaps the best argument for some form of proportional representation. In the interests of democracy it is one that we ignore at our peril.

Roger Brown, Professor Emeritus and former Vice Chancellor of Southampton Solent University

'Human Evolution' (2014)  
by Robin Dunbar

Author image credit: Wikimedia Commons



**Robin Dunbar is an anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist and a specialist in primate behaviour. He is currently head of the Social and Evolutionary Neuroscience Research Group in the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford.**

This book is not an easy read. It's detailed and quite theoretical. But I believe that humanists should make an effort to learn about our fascinating evolutionary history and how human beings came to be what we are today.

I was introduced to the distinction between 'hominids' and 'hominins' back in 2015 when Dorset Humanists had a talk on human evolution. Dunbar informs us that 'taxonomists now refer to the great ape family (including humans, gorillas, and chimps) as *hominids*, while all members of the lineage leading to modern humans that arose after the split with the Last Common Ancestor are referred to as *hominins*.'

So we're both hominid and hominin. The *hominid* family tree goes back 18 million years and includes all the apes, oranges and gibbons. The *hominin* branch line, which includes us and earlier species such as *Australopithecus*,

goes back 6 million years – the point at which hominins share a common ancestor with chimps. Archaic humans appeared on the line about 2 million years ago and we are the most recent (200,000 years) and the last surviving representative. Human species have included *Homo ergaster*, *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, *Homo floresiensis*, *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens*.

All human species originated in Africa. Europe was populated by the Neanderthals long before we arrived. Neanderthals had big brains like us but it seems that their brain power was concentrated in visual processing rather than the large prefrontal cortex of *Homo sapiens*. The evolutionary advantage of our large PFC seems to have been the maintenance of large social groups and networks. This seems to have given us a critical advantage in surviving the last Ice Age which started 100,000 years ago and ended about 12,000 years ago.

Imagine being a human without supermarkets, houses, agriculture, clothes, music, or even language. All of these things have emerged slowly over hundreds of thousands of years. Organised religion seems to have evolved for the purposes of community cohesion when human settlements grew beyond about 500 inhabitants. Rampant individualism wouldn't have worked too well for survival purposes.

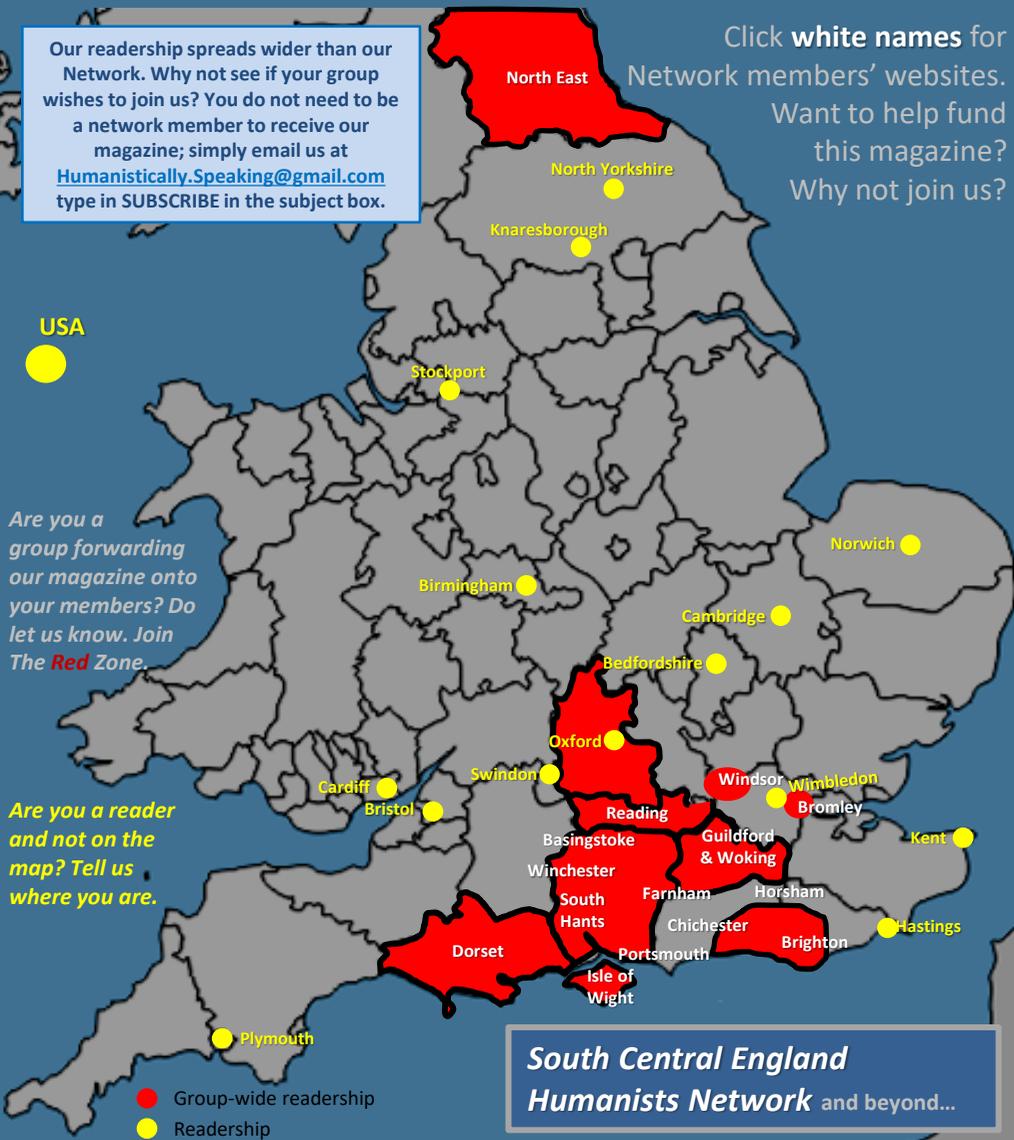
We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. We regularly hear that we have messed up the planet and that the sooner we go extinct the better. We are a humble ape doing our best. Extinction is inevitable but not imminent.

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