

Humanistically Speaking

September 2022

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

Cerebral Context

The human brain

Professor Norman Maclean on the brain
Douglas Murray “The War on the West”
Muslim reactions to Rushdie stabbing
Humanists in Profile: Raymond Tallis
Psychopathology explained
Suicidal feelings explored

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In this Issue

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

by 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.

September's edition of *Humanistically Speaking* is about the human mind and the brain which gives rise to it. Researching this topic has proved not only informative, but fascinating. Our team of writers deal with the construct of the human brain and with aspects of mental health including loneliness. Lynda Tilley explores what is meant by 'loneliness' in an African context. We also investigate whether there is such a thing as a criminal mind, a religious mind, a suicidal mind, or even a humanist mind! And if you would like to learn what your personality type is, check out Anthony Lewis's article on cognitive diversity and take the online Myers-Briggs test. Some of our articles are personal and brave reflections that may inspire you to reflect on your own mental health and wellbeing. Above all, we hope to inspire you to reflect on who and what we all are as members of the human species.

But before we move on, *Humanistically Speaking* has something to say about the attempted murder of Sir Salman Rushdie (a Patron of Humanists UK). Who better to comment on this than the ex-director of the Islamic Society of Great Britain, Julie Siddiqui? (See page 3.) However, being 'very disturbed' by the fact that some people (presumably, some members of the Muslim community) actually *celebrated* the stabbing of Rushdie is simply not enough. Of course, we know that most Muslims are law-abiding citizens, but there has to be recognition that violent extremism within the Muslim community worldwide remains a problem, and it needs to be urgently addressed because some elements, inspired by Iran and other countries, seem to tolerate barbaric behaviour.

Liberal democracy protects the rights of Muslims to practise their religion. But this cannot be a one-way street. Religious freedom in the West means freedom for *everyone* to follow their own beliefs or lack of belief, and to express themselves freely even when this means criticising or offending each other. We welcome Julie Siddiqui's stance but we call for her and others to be more unequivocal in condemning violence and intimidation. Meanwhile, we wish Sir Salman as full a recovery as possible.



Julie Siddiqui ‘stands with those who want to protect freedom of speech’ whilst reporting that ‘some people are celebrating’ the stabbing of Sir Salman Rushdie

In her *Thought for the Day* on BBC’s Radio 4 Today programme, in the aftermath of the stabbing of Sir Salman Rushdie in New York, Julie Siddiqui MBE said, “I stand with those who are calling for calm, who want to protect freedom of speech, to work with allies from all backgrounds, to remind ourselves that however upset we may feel about what someone has said, done, or written, violence or the threat of violence, will never be the right way to react.” She added that “...authors, musicians, actors, activists, should never be made to feel unsafe or intimidated into silence”.

She continued, “For many Muslims, especially women I have spoken to over the weekend, there is a concern about the predictable backlash, the possible damage to community cohesion, the stereotypes and assumptions that will once again be aimed at Muslims as we are put under the spotlight again for the actions of one man. But some people also fear speaking out and showing empathy towards the author and what he is going through. We have already seen death threats in response to those doing that... Over the weekend, I’ve



seen some people celebrating what happened, saying that the perpetrator should be congratulated. I found this to be very disturbing.”

■ Julie Siddiqui MBE was the executive director of the Islamic Society of Britain from 2010-2014 and is co-chair of the Jewish and Muslim women’s network, Nisa-Nashim. She is a regular contributor to Radio 4’s *Thought For The Day*.





Humanist News



Photo by Jason

Dorset Humanists and LGBT Humanists at Bournemouth Pride

Bournemouth hosted its annual LGBT Pride festival on July 9th and Dorset Humanists, with supplementary materials from LGBT Humanists, set up in prime position in the town square. The main event was held in a fenced-off zone in the nearby park, but Dorset Humanists felt that Pride should be accessible to everyone, and so they pitched up in a more open and central location. During the day they engaged with hundreds of locals, visitors, and holiday makers, handing out leaflets and information to anyone welcoming it. With three shifts of eight volunteers, it was quite a logistical challenge to ensure that people were able to endure the blistering heat. But everyone enjoyed themselves. It was a hot, tiring and uplifting day.



Have you had a stand at your local Pride? Do you pitch up in your local town centre for other events? Do share your stories and a picture or three.





Dear David...

Emails to the Editor

In defence of Humanists UK

Although I'm sure Andrew Copson is perfectly able on behalf of Humanists UK to defend the organisation against some of the criticisms in the August edition of *Humanistically Speaking*, here is my short four pennyworth. Remember these are MY words not those of Humanists UK!

Although people DID mention Trump and Johnson critically during the convention (Richard Wiseman certainly did, and he mentioned Margaret Thatcher as well), never was this criticism implied as official Humanists UK policy. I have always found that Humanists UK staff follow their rules to the book. I have many times tried to get them to support officially, if you like, my view that Trump and Johnson are not much better than vermin, but to no avail. As far as I remember Putin and Johnson and Trump and Biden were never officially criticised, only as jokes by attendees as asides.

The Rwanda issue was brought up because what the present government is doing is counter to at least one of the tenets of Humanism, as defined by Humanists UK. The motion was proposed before the AGM and distributed beforehand to attendees for their perusal. This was a motion that could be accepted or denied. At previous AGMs, I have seen motions distributed before the AGM that were voted down. Sometimes I have seen that when a motion is proposed by a member or by the organisation itself, the Chair has allowed the proposer to explain her or his reason for proposing the motion. But this is not debated.

I like your magazine very much. I look forward to receiving the next issue. You and the rest of the team should be congratulated on its excellence!

Neil Camp

In defence of eugenics

The August edition of *Humanistically Speaking* about the recent Humanists UK conference in Belfast left a mixed impression. The following comments are necessarily third hand, as I was not present.

The lectures and discussions were clearly of a very high standard, as one would expect from a cast of intellectual stars. However, the observation of a 'democratic deficit' at the conference in Guy Otten's introduction to the edition was a warning sign. A.C. Grayling's talk was summarised as 'extremely pessimistic' and seemed to enumerate all the well-rehearsed ills currently facing the world. Did any in the hall need reminding of the obvious? He seemed to present a plea for less 'me' and more 'we' and kindness. Nothing novel there, other than the possibility that it sounded a little like a sermon being preached to the converted.

Adam Rutherford's reported polemic against historical eugenics seemed rather one-sided. As open-minded, rational humanists, should the case for managed population improvement not at least be aired? We seem to have escaped the selective influence of evolution, but it is doubtful that this escape will be to our survival advantage in a globally deteriorating environment. The way eugenics was historically co-opted for racist and ▷



political goals, and its execution was unequivocally immoral, but should we reject the concept outright for this reason? Surely as open-minded humanists we ought to consider a rational approach to the challenge of improving the human race for the purposes of survival, just as we ought to objectively consider future nuclear power despite its past manifestation being bombs and accidents in obsolete technologies.

David Warden's and Anthony Lewis's interesting contributions did not paint the conference in a very positive light. The overall tone of their assessments was that Humanists UK is not particularly open to a range of ideas and is adopting a distinctly liberal left-leaning set of positions which could so easily morph into a humanist dogma, particularly as the organisation seems to be relatively undemocratic. I became a humanist because I was attracted to the dogma of no dogma other than that of open-minded, rational and sceptical enquiry, and tolerance.

As a consequence of the reports on the convention, a question worth considering is whether humanism is necessarily a liberal doctrine, given that liberalism as an ideology generally places the value and interests of the individual above those of society. A liberal society serves the rights, needs and wants of the individual to a greater extent than the reverse and as such may be seen as nurturing psychological egoism. Is liberalism and the humanist creed of "acting for everyone" possibly a contradiction worth exploring?

It would be a tragedy if humanism were to succumb to the identity politics, tribalism and associated dogmas sweeping the West. The Belfast conference did not seem to offer an experience of debate, dissent and tolerance, and I would not be tempted to attend one if the assessments in the August edition are reasonably accurate.

Barry Newman, Dorset Humanists

The religion of gender identity

Lynda Tilley's heading "The Introduction of religion to Africa" presupposes there were no religions in Africa before Christians and Muslims arrived on the continent. But Africans had their own religions dating back probably to the earliest days of *homo sapiens*. And Judaists seem to have moved to Africa well before the founding of either Christianity or Islam.

Yes, at the heart of all organised religions is making not just children but even week-old babies members – patently years before they have any idea what they have been indoctrinated into. This is perhaps the most prolific form of child abuse in existence. Yet it never gets condemned; nor does the removal of male body parts to conform with the diktats of certain religions.

One of the 21st century's new religions concerns what gets called 'gender identity'. Taking the word 'gender' – a grammatical term defining whether a word is masculine, feminine or neuter – and using it to replace the word 'sex' when describing an animal (humans are but a species of animal), has been a deliberate obfuscation by those wishing to impose their own opinions and views on the masses. The easiest way to stop people thinking something is to delete a word from the lexicon and replace it with another.

This was made easy because of how 'sex' has come to mean so many different things. The most absurd being calling things totally unconnected with sex 'sexy'. I found this online: "For most people, grammar isn't a very sexy subject".

As with shying away from using so many direct, accurate words and replacing them with supposedly gentler ones ('inappropriate' instead of 'wrong', for example), the ▷



replacement of 'sex' with 'gender' has resulted in claims that there are tens of 'genders'. *The Guardian* on 15 May 2019 reported: "The BBC has dramatically increased the number of women who appear on its programmes in the space of just one year, by challenging staff to monitor the gender balance of guests". It meant the balance of the sexes, between men and women, but it used the words "gender balance".

From the above, asking "Can gender identity be changed?" is close to meaningless. Humans have sexes, and Humanism should not be using 'gender' in this context. There should be a straightforward acceptance in Humanism that people's sexes (not 'genders') are defined at birth: male, female or very occasionally intersex. What happens afterwards – in the mind or with surgery and/or hormones – is an entirely separate matter.

I have known one person whose sex was considered indeterminate at birth and as a child, and who – when dressed in women's clothing – has all the outwards appearances of being a woman. Yet that person has a penis. There are countless people born male who have had surgery and/or hormone treatment to make them look as if they are women; but they are not and never will be. A much smaller number of women have had surgery, etc. to make them look like men; but they will never be men. These facts should be faced. But considering that facts relating to religion have been denied for millennia, the gender game should run and run.

Eric Hayman

A response by David Warden

I agree with much of what Eric Hayman writes. Sadly, the debate on sex and gender is bedevilled by a great deal of confusion, shouting, and lack of listening. The best thing we can do as a humanist magazine is try to



Stephen Whittle, Professor of Equalities Law at Manchester Metropolitan University, is biologically female but legally and socially he is a man, as is obvious.

shed light on a confusing subject and allow freedom of thought and expression. Eric writes that, 'A much smaller number of women have had surgery etc. to make them look like men; but they will never be men.' We could save ourselves a lot of trouble if we acknowledge that the words 'man' and 'woman' do not only apply at the biological level. Professor Steven Whittle, in the photo above, is obviously a man (the result of successful transition) but at the level of chromosomes and gametes he remains female. His status as a man, for social and legal purposes, should of course be recognised and acknowledged, without denying the underlying biological realities.

I gave a talk on this subject to Dorset Humanists earlier this year and the video link is available [here](#).



Lost and Lonely in Africa

by Lynda Tilley



Africa is a vast continent, covering about thirty million square kilometres. You could travel for days in its remote areas without seeing a single person.

America, China, the United Kingdom, Europe and more could all fit inside our borders with room to spare and we have large national parks and game reserves, such as Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, of up to 54,000km². In remote areas our villages are days apart and our nomadic tribes often trek for months alone with their cattle in search of grazing. One would think that we were, perhaps, a lonely continent in many ways, with many lonely or isolated people, yet we don't feel that way.

Earlier this week, I asked several friends in various African countries "Do you ever feel lonely in Africa?" and all replied along the lines of "Lonely? No, because there's always someone to talk to!" I remembered a friend who lives in New York City telling me several years ago "I live in a busy, densely populated city with so much to see and do, people around me all the time - yet I've never felt more lonely in all my life." That comment really made me pause for thought. I felt sadness and pity for her too, because it's something that was not only foreign to me



Lonely? Namibian Desert, Southern Africa
Image credit : Dan Grinwis - [Unsplash](#)

but something I'd never thought possible.

How do we each define 'loneliness' and can loneliness mean different things to different people? Is your definition of loneliness my definition of peace? Is your idea of a perfect Saturday night a night on the town eating, drinking and dancing away until sunrise with a group of friends or is it, rather, a night curled up at home on the couch watching movies, surrounded by your pets? I think it's down to the circumstances, the individual, and how our brains function and process things. The way each of us do this is unique to us. ▷



Judging by the responses of my friends and my own concept of loneliness, I'd take a guess and say that loneliness relates more to a person's mental state and outlook on life than it does to physical location.

Nick Wignall, an American clinical psychologist, who has studied both behavioural and cognitive therapies, talks about 'emotional fitness' and how better daily habits lead to better mental health. He says that while everybody basically knows what it is to be lonely, it's hard to define exactly what loneliness is. "Loneliness is one of the most powerful experiences in human psychology. It's also one of the most misunderstood", he says. He goes on to explain that the reason we find it so hard to define loneliness is because our experience of loneliness is varied and individual-specific. He defines loneliness as "...an emotion characterised by the feeling of pain caused by a perceived lack of intimacy with other people or ourselves."

As a vast continent with huge physical spaces between our countries and within countries themselves, I asked my friends "Do you feel that we are lonely as individual countries and are we lonely as a collective continent?" Each responded with a "No" and all went on to say that they wished we connected more with each other across our borders, especially with our closest neighbours. It was interesting to note that, despite some of my friends not knowing or having any contact with a neighbouring country or the people living in it, they still didn't feel isolated or cut off from that country but just had a sense of sadness or frustration that there was a distance between them – a sense, almost, of "We can see you there, but you're so quiet, we hope you're OK - come and talk to us!" The best way to summarise this I think would be to say that we don't feel lonely but rather isolated as individual countries, not because of a

Signs of deep loneliness:

@heybobbibanks

- 1 Oversharing when there's someone to listen
- 2 Feeling like the "disposable" person in a group
- 3 Putting people's needs before your own
- 4 Feeling the need to be overly helpful or nice
- 5 Feeling isolated and like no one really sees you
- 6 Feeling like you don't belong anywhere
- 7 Becoming obsessive with friendships

[Image: Bobbibanks.com picture link](https://www.bobbibanks.com)

physical distance between us, but rather because of an emotion or feeling. This ties in with Nick Wignall's definition of loneliness as being a painful emotion caused by a lack of contact, in this instance, with another country.

In the past couple of decades, there's something that has done more to counteract loneliness in Africa than anything else in hundreds of years – that double edged sword, the internet and social media. Thanks to the internet, places like Zimbabwe and Antarctica are now just a simple click and merely a split second away. We can connect as individuals, countries and continents in this way, bridging the gaps of loneliness and drawing us closer to the companionship of people around the globe.





The Human Brain

The most complex object in the universe

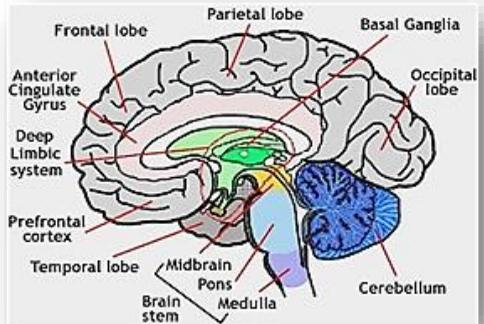
By Emeritus Professor Norman Maclean

The importance of the brain has not always been recognised. In ancient Egypt, for example, embalmers removed all internal organs from the body and placed them in separate jars (except for the heart, which was thought to be needed by the deceased in the Hall of Judgment). They also removed the brain by sucking it out through the nose before discarding it.

The human brain has 100 billion neurons and between 1,000 and 10,000 synapses per neuron. The brain also has a similar number of glial cells which supply nutrients and oxygen to neurons and destroy pathogens and remove dead neurons. About half of all glial cells are star-shaped 'astrocytes' which help to support the blood/brain barrier. The 'blood/brain barrier' refers to the exclusion of large objects like bacteria and many large molecules from the blood vessels that supply the brain. Blood-borne infections of the brain are therefore rare. Tumours of glial cells are called 'gliomas'. They make up 30% of all brain tumours and 80% of the malignant ones.

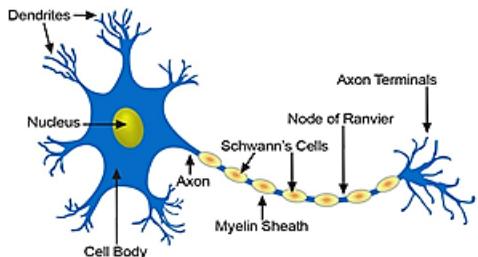
Functions and locations of different parts of the brain

The cerebrum is located in the front area of the skull, and it is divided into the two cerebral hemispheres. It's responsible for the integration of complex sensory and neural



functions. The frontal lobes of the brain control our reasoning, decision making, and long-term memory. Parietal lobes control our spatial sense, and they receive sensory information from the body. Temporal lobes control our auditory perception and occipital lobes control vision. The cerebellum is mainly involved with balance and muscular coordination. The pineal gland secretes melatonin which controls our day and night rhythms, and the pituitary gland secretes oxytocin and other hormones. ▷

Structure of a Typical Neuron



The physical basis of memory is not well understood, but a memory is presumed to consist of a small set of neurons with interconnecting synapses. Long term memory is stored in the frontal lobes of the cerebral hemispheres while medium- and short-term memory is stored in the amygdala and the hippocampus. The hippocampus (so-called because it is shaped like a seahorse) stores factual memories while the amygdala stores memories related to emotions and skills.

Each hemisphere of the brain is associated with different abilities. The left hemisphere controls analytical thought, logic and language while the right hemisphere controls creativity and imagination.

The human cerebral cortex, the outer layer of neural tissue of the cerebrum, is much more densely folded than the brain of a chimp, but the cerebral cortex of a dolphin is much more densely folded than the brain of a human.

Diseases or abnormalities of the brain include stroke, autism, epilepsy, motor neuron disease, migraine, bipolar depressive illness, Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy), encephalopathy and brain tumours.

Epilepsy is a common condition that affects the brain and causes frequent seizures. Seizures are bursts of electrical activity in the brain that temporarily affect how it works. They can cause a wide range of symptoms. Epilepsy can start at any age, but usually starts either in childhood or in people over 60. It's often lifelong but can sometimes get slowly better over time. Seizures can affect people in different ways, depending on which part of the brain is involved.

The symptoms of Parkinson's disease include shaking, rigidity, slowness of movement, and difficulty walking. The cause is unknown but it

can be treated with L-Dopa (dopamine), although the effectiveness of this medication wears off over time.

A migraine is usually a moderate or severe headache felt as a throbbing pain on one side of the head. Many people also have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and increased sensitivity to light or sound. Migraine is a common health condition, affecting around one in every five women and around one in every fifteen men. Migraines usually begin in early adulthood.

Autistic savants, as discussed in the book *Islands of Genius* by Darold A. Treffert, are people with some mental impairment such as autism, but who also display some quite exceptional talent. Examples include the artist Stephen Wiltshire who, immediately after a short helicopter trip over London, drew a map of the city that encompassed four square miles and over 200 major buildings. It was correct down to the smallest detail. Another famous savant is the 'memory man' Kim Peek who has memorised more than 12,000 books and who featured in the film *Rain Man* starring Dustin Hoffman. A third example is Ellen Boudreaux, who was born blind but has an amazing memory for music. She plays piano and guitar and can play numerous arias from memory as well as popular jazz and rock music.

Norman Maclean is a former Chair of South Hants Humanists, a Patron of Humanists UK, and Emeritus Professor of Genetics at the University of Southampton. He has worked in wildlife conservation and river management and been a panel member of the European Food Safety Authority. He is an elected Fellow of the Institute of Biology and the Linnaean Society. His next book, *The State of the World's Wildlife*, is expected to be published this year.



Cognitive Diversity

How to make it work for us, rather than against us



by Anthony Lewis

Are we letting our emotions rule our lives? Nowadays, displaying strong emotions about controversial issues appears to override rational challenge. But emotions are our most basic and primitive instincts, which evolved before we had language to keep us safe and out of harm. Yet untamed, they can hijack our very being and ruin our lives and the lives of those around us. Stamped out of control, our emotions can collectively lead us to war and genocide, and individually to the courts or even to jail.

The herds of wild emotional stallions inside us can be tamed, corralled, and harnessed to energe us into action. They can be used to steer us to what matters to us as individuals and as a community. But once they have guided us they should be put aside whilst we use our rational evidence-based higher selves to evaluate and make sound, well-judged decisions. A wise person uses their head for making reasoned choices and decisions, and their heart to empathise and understand themselves and others.

What is clear is that our emotions evolved to help us survive in a hostile natural world as hunter gatherers before the development of language. However, the march of civilisation since the emergence of language about one

hundred thousand years ago has been a story of getting our more violent emotions, mainly those of males, under control through culture, social pressure and, of course, through the rule of law.

Recently, neuroscientists such as Dr [Paul Ekman](#) have identified around eight fundamental emotions (anger, fear, disgust, shame, sadness, surprise and pleasure) through studying global facial expressions which appear to be hard-wired into our physiology. These primeval emotions are viscerally tied to our autonomic fight, flight or freeze responses that can easily bypass our higher, more rational cognitive selves located in the neocortex – a fact which many social media platforms, and despots throughout the ages, have exploited by stoking these darker instincts.

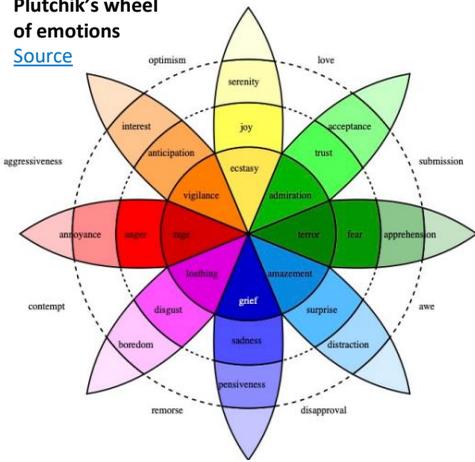
Our global languages now have over 150 words to describe many more emotions than just these eight, hard-wired primary emotions. They are wittily explored by Tiffany Watt Smith in [The Book of Human Emotions](#). Psychiatrists and others have built numerous and increasingly complex therapeutic and scientific frameworks to help us understand our emotions, including the [Plutchik Wheel](#). But as yet there is no accepted universal model for human emotions, despite them being such an important part of all our lives and an active area of prolonged research.

It's likely that every one of our numerous overlapping emotions has evolved to help us survive in an increasingly complex world. ▷



Plutchik's wheel of emotions

[Source](#)



Some neuroscientists have estimated that eighty per cent of our brain is used to manage and control our emotions. Our emotions help us to navigate through the morass of our internal subjective feelings and help us to identify appropriate and effective responses to the external world using our higher cognitive abilities.

Carl Jung postulated that this constant interplay of the internal world of perceptions with the brutal reality of the external world is a fundamental aspect of how our consciousness operates. He argued that how we learn to deal with this constant interplay, and feedback between the internal and external worlds, during our development towards adulthood, is a fundamental part of what defines each of us as a unique individual.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is based on this Jungian model, and it can be used to identify our personality type and find out how we operate as an individual. It can help us to understand ourselves and others, including our partners and fiercest antagonists. It's a simple but effective model that can be used to improve both our own self-awareness and

also to appreciate the importance and primacy of cognitive diversity.

As I look at the anger, hate and polarisation of our world at present, driven by social media, I can't help feeling that everyone needs to realise that we all perceive reality in different ways. This often means that others come to different conclusions about the world despite having access to the same data, not because they are idiots, stupid, extreme or misguided but because they are cognitively different to us and perceive the world in fundamentally different but equally valid ways.

I used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator in my career to help me and my staff understand ourselves and appreciate the importance of different perspectives and viewpoints to our performance as a team. I am an 'ENFJ' in case you wanted to know! (Extraverted, Intuitive, Feeling, and Judging.) It can be fun to do, and it can be a revelation when you first engage with it. Although simple, Myers Briggs is a proven tool for improving self-awareness and helping us to understand others. It provides a language to help us talk about our emotions and interactions without falling out with each other. It's always a good first step towards being more effective at influencing others.

In conclusion, it's clear to me that our cognitive diversity has evolved to improve our chances of survival as a species. I just wish we celebrated and appreciated this diversity a lot more than we are doing at present.



Take the test?



Is there a Humanist brain?

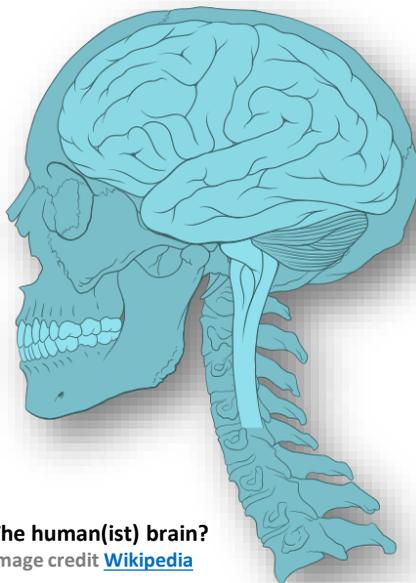
by David Warden



I was raised as a Christian and assumed to be heterosexual. Neither of these assumptions about my identity turned out to be correct and it was a bit of a struggle, in my late teens and early twenties, to break free from them. Something in my brain was directing me towards same-sex relationships. And something in my brain was telling me that I was a humanist. So is there a 'humanist brain' that might be detectable under the microscope?

Is there some feature of my frontal lobes – which control reasoning and decision-making – which predisposed me to break free from Christian indoctrination? Or is the left hemisphere of my brain, the side which controls analytical thought, logic and language, dominant, with the right hemisphere, which controls creativity and imagination, subordinate? I'm afraid I have no idea, and so you may want to skip to another page if you are looking for definitive answers to these speculative questions. I do, however, think that there are some interesting questions to be explored about what is going on in the brain of a humanist as contrasted with the brain of a Christian.

The Christian brain, I suggest, is one which is relatively comfortable taking directions from an authority figure or from his representatives on Earth. The ultimate and omnipresent auth-



The human(ist) brain?

Image credit [Wikipedia](#)

ority figure in Christianity is a module installed in the brain by early programming. This module is referred to as 'God' and it is claimed to exist as a timeless, spaceless, eternal spirit with he/him pronouns. No evidence for the literal existence of God has ever been presented but this has not greatly impeded the success of a variety of mass-programming operations on his behalf and which have, of course, suited the ruling elites. In previous centuries, when people with humanist brains resisted taking directions from God or his representatives, or even doubted that God ▷



actually existed, it was a relatively straightforward matter to have them arrested and burnt as a lesson to others. But as the centuries rolled by, and more and more humanists came to the fore, it was eventually conceded that they might be permitted to live as long as there was no doubt, in the minds of everyone else, that they would spend eternity being punished for their wilful error.

What is going on in the brain of a humanist?

So what is actually going on in the brain of a humanist? When I was eighteen or nineteen, I came across a school motto in a self-help manual given to me by my uncle. The motto went like this: “Believing in myself, what is there I cannot accomplish?” At this moment in time, I was introduced to a new module which could be activated in the brain: the ‘self’ or the ‘I’. The Christian religion had taught me to hate this module and to crucify it. Well, that hadn’t worked out too well for my mental health and so I thought I would give this other module a shot. It would be many years before I realised that this ‘self’ also has no literal existence. But the idea of a ‘self’ refers to real desires, impulses and thoughts which arise in the human brain through some mechanism as yet barely understood. Activating and nurturing this ‘organismic self’ (as it’s referred to by humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers) has proved to be far more beneficial for my mental health and relative success in life than the Christian alternative.

The humanist brain is not infallible

But one of the common pitfalls of activating the ‘self’ module is believing that it is rational and infallible. I’m sure you will have come across people with this belief. They are intolerably stupid and opinionated. No, the

“The humanist ‘self’ is a learning module rather than an infallible module”

correct way to activate the ‘self’ module is to understand that it’s a learning module rather than an infallible module. All of its ideas are suspect, and they must be open to correction at all times through challenge and real-world evidence. You will know when you have met someone with this kind of mature humanist understanding. They are relatively wise, mature, non-dogmatic, and always interested in what you have to say (unless it’s obvious tripe). They have what’s called ‘epistemic humility’ in the trendy philosophical jargon. They know that knowledge is fallible.

Unfortunately, this kind of humanist consciousness is being assaulted on a daily basis by an increasingly polarised media and by an epidemic of self-righteous infallibilism. You may have noticed that there are lots of people out there who think they are right, and not only right but *virtuous* for holding the opinions they do, and not only virtuous but that people who dissent from their opinions are *scum*, or worse. Well, if we are going to build or rebuild a humanist world, we’re going to have to patiently reprogramme people to use their humanist brains correctly. The humanist brain is a learning brain, and its owners need to practice humility and be open to challenge. This is the way to Enlightenment and human progress.

So is there a humanist brain? I think there is, and it’s probably a potentiality inside every human brain. But there’s no guarantee that it will flourish when religion dies. We have to keep explaining to the world how it works and how best to nurture it.



Aaron Explores *Suicidal feelings...*



"On the good days I feel like a fraud, on the bad days I feel like a liar"



The 'shrink' was once a term for a psychiatrist, and if you were referred to one you were thought to be seriously broken and beyond repair. These days, counselling is far more accessible and socially acceptable as an early intervention to support better mental health – rather than fixing it after a total collapse. Like many people, I've been there, and I still am.

Most people who access the NHS Counselling services are signposted via their GP. You typically go through a telephone screening service, and then you are added to a waiting list to receive your six sessions of therapy.

The NHS is mostly organised to patch up a temporary trauma, a bereavement, perhaps a relationship breakdown, and aid recovery after a car crash or something similar. These are often considered to be 'light' areas in the mental health world, where six sessions are seen as enough to explore some of the issues and patch you up.

Working in a local authority, I was lucky enough to have access to a work-based counsellor, from whom I received an initial four sessions, a repeat set, and then later on another counsellor. Over the years, I've seen six counsellors, and a psychodynamic therapist. All have a different approach. Some use talking therapy, some use CBT, others use writing tasks, diagrams and even hypnosis.

Although the shame of seeing a counsellor

has lifted in society, being off work with a mental health disorder has not, and when people don't see a physical illness like a broken leg, you are often asked: 'What's wrong with you then?' Clearly, everyone's situation is different, and it's quite often the case that you don't want, need or choose to divulge your deepest traumas to just anyone who asks. Quite often, the judgement and prejudice isn't directly spoken. Either it's a glance or something said indirectly or, more often than not, an assumption in your own mind that you are being judged, whether or not the other person has actually said anything.

When you're not functioning at peak performance, it's easy to get confused, distracted, or have your perceptions of things tainted by your own past treatment by others. The oft-repeated question, "What do you do then?" is anticipated with dread and never concluded satisfactorily. These days I say, "I'm a volunteer" and leave it at that. ▷



WHAT are YOU thankful for?



An attitude of gratitude is good for mental health, well being and general mood.

So, does counselling fix the brain? Well, no, of course not. When mental health issues arise, it is often because thought processes are being badly managed by you. The counsellor tries to see your situation from an outside perspective and help you to see a more logical approach to your problems.

During a deep episode, it's entirely possible not to be able to see the most logical path to take. I have a good basket of coping mechanisms such as: mindfulness, thinking strategies, gratitude diaries, positive affirmations, and breathing techniques, plus writing exercises like cost-benefit analyses. But during times of deep psychological distress, it's entirely possible not to think of any of them. Ways out can be obscured entirely by the fog of mental distress and quite often the only thing you seek is an exit from it all. I've been hospitalised due to overdose on three occasions, been there several other times, and wanted to be there hundreds more. The desire to not live with 'the issues' is more compelling than trying to fix them and continue living with them. People often judge such actions as stupid, but at the time, in the moment, it feels entirely logical, and the only way to escape.

**"Don't do anything stupid..."
To me, it was the most logical
way out.**

Counsellors have in the past said, "Why didn't you call me?" during those darkest moments. On some occasions, during floods of tears, panic and upset, the thought of reaching out simply isn't there. At other times, after experiencing distress over a prolonged period, there is a calm acceptance of release as you do what you do to escape. Going to a counsellor or calling someone would prolong the distress. It's not desired. It's dreaded.

During a breakdown, one of the key things you are feeling is a total lack of worth. Fixing this, addressing this, is a direct route to feeling better, but it can be a very challenging road. Volunteering is a good way to get there, but this has to be very finely balanced. In the midst of an episode, having commitments, responsibilities and pressures can make things a lot worse. Trying to regain self-worth and trying to build self-esteem, especially when you can't see any way out, is not an easy task.



Typically, counsellors are not on call. If you're in a place of despair, you can phone for an appointment, but it can take several weeks to see anyone. On many occasions, by the time I got my appointment, I was feeling better, and the crisis had passed. There are helplines, there's the Samaritans, but often you need someone who knows you, rather than starting from scratch with a new person.

Since my time using the NHS, things have improved, and mental health has been made much more accessible and well-publicised. It's also prominent across social media. Inspirational memes and comments are constantly in my stream of things to see each day. This helps. There are also many self-help books which all have their own take on mental health issues. If one doesn't work you can read another – or listen to audio-books whilst jogging. Even on a relatively good day, it never hurts to remind yourself of all the things you need to stay positive and on top of things.

“Maintaining good mental health can be a full-time job...”

As good as counsellors are, they are not always there, and for most people will just provide a short course of therapy which then expires. You really need to build up your own support network of close friends who, during times of distress, are approachable when needed.

More tips to support good mental health

- Adjust your social media streams to include mental health groups/people. There are loads out there.
- Read books, watch videos, explore YouTube and learn all about the area of mental health you struggle with. Knowledge is power.
- Your local humanist group can help too. Mine has had courses on the psychology of happiness and the philosophy of friendship, amongst others, and these can help to build coping mechanisms, a network of allies, and understanding in your group.
- Exercise – the endorphins are a great fix. Be outside and enjoy greenery, blue skies, water and nature. Build up a regular pattern of enjoying time, by yourself, and being okay with that. Sometimes there just isn't anyone but you, and you know yourself best.
- And remember, you are appreciated, of value, liked and cared for. It's often so easy to look for the negatives but look for positives too. Write down three good things that happened today and keep a journal. That really does help.



Mental Health Protection

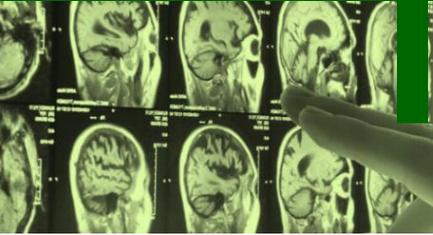
What do you do on a weekly/monthly/regular basis to help protect your mental health?

Regular fitness with outdoor stimulus
Write a weekly journal which is open about life challenges
Exercise regular self help methods and share on Instagram
Make time for relaxing, me time, moments for recharge
Being able to say “No, I don't want to” when I need to
Making sleep a priority and looking after the sleep pattern
Staying on top of life tasks, not letting things build up
Volunteering, helping, assisting: feeling useful, worthwhile

My self-help first aid kit



Do you have a coping mechanism you wish to share?



Criminal Minds

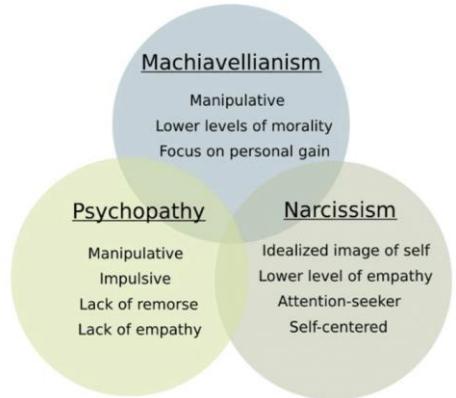


by Penny Morgan

The most intriguing of all mental disorders is psychopathy. At once compelling and repulsive, it generates impassioned debates as to the nature of evil, raising the spectre of serial killers. Are we born evil or does our environment make us commit evil?

Robert Hare, who devised the Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R) as a measure for diagnosis, claimed that 'Psychopaths are social predators who charm, manipulate and ruthlessly plough their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts and shattered expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or regret' (Hare, 1993). He believed that psychopathy was a measure for evil. Psychopaths make up about one percent of the population according to the checklist.

It's common for people to assume, naïvely and incorrectly, that all psychopaths commit crime. But according to one study there are at least three times as many psychopaths among senior management of organisations as in the general population. Within the criminal population, however, the prevalence of psychopathy increases considerably to fifteen percent of male and ten percent of female offenders. There are more male than female psychopaths.



The Dark Triad

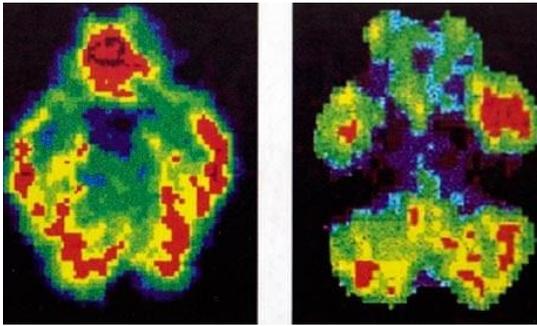
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Defining characteristics

But what is psychopathy? It's not included in the DSM-5* but sometimes it's referred to as part of the 'Dark Triad' – a collection of three malevolent personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, featuring a lack of empathy and lack of guilt. To this, we could add antisocial behaviour and impulsivity. But psychopaths can also be charming as well as exploitative, like the American serial killer Ted Bundy.

The PCL-R consists of about twenty symptoms which are used to diagnose psychopathy including pathological lying, proneness to boredom and sexual promiscuity. Out of a constellation of about twenty traits you have to possess fifteen to qualify. ▷





Scan of a normal brain, left, and that of a murderer, right, who was spared the death penalty after a jury was shown these pictures.

Photograph: Public domain

Therapy is not easy, as psychopaths don't recognise that what they have done is morally unacceptable, so punishment doesn't work. A reward-based system for positive social behaviour may be an alternative route.

The Criminal Brain

Is there such a thing as a criminal brain? Are some people born with an innate criminal predisposition, or is it acquired? To try and answer this we can look at the possible origins of psychopathy. Is it innate or learned?

Biological causes

Research suggests that the areas of the brain involved in emotional processing, empathising and decision-making (for example, the amygdala which regulates the fight/flight response, the insula for emotional processing and arousal and the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, damage to which can result in impaired moral judgement) show dysfunctional activity in people with psychopathic characteristics when they see others in distress or try to learn the consequences of their actions. This affects the ability of psychopaths to form associations between stimuli and consequences, such as hurting others and the fear and distress others display as a consequence, or making a poor

choice and receiving a punishment. Altogether, the reduced activity within these areas of the brain impairs responses to emotional stimuli and decision-making.

A brain enzyme, monoamine oxidase (MOA), linked to increased aggression and antisocial behaviour, has attracted attention for over a decade. A deficiency of MOA causes an excess of certain neurotransmitters in the brain, such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine (noradrenaline) which may impair ability to control aggression. MOA seems to be controlled by the gene MOA-A. There may, therefore, be a genetic predisposition for psychopathy, and perhaps several genes involved. But is that the whole story?

Experiential causes

The life histories of psychopaths are often characterized by a chaotic family life, lack of parental attention and guidance, parental substance abuse and antisocial behaviour, poor relationships, divorce, and adverse neighbourhoods. The FBI sees childhood animal abuse as a sign of psychopathy, but such animal abuse could also be a sign of abuse of the child by parents or guardians. So abuse of animals is not a foolproof sign of future psychopathy. ▷



These people may feel that they are prisoners of their own etiological determination and believe that they had fewer opportunities or advantages in life in comparison with normal people. 'Hurt people hurt people' so the saying goes.

The key question is this: do differences in the brain make someone into a psychopath, or does their behaviour change the brain? Because two things are associated doesn't mean one caused the other.

Conclusions

The nature/nurture disagreement is not just over the science itself, but even more so about the therapeutic, societal and legal implications, including sentencing ('my genes made me do it').

However, nowadays it's more usual to consider genetics/environment as working together so that a person with, say, a predisposition (nature) towards aggressiveness may experience more negative reactions from others (nurture). Epigenesis is where genes and the environment constantly interact to produce characteristics throughout a lifetime.

Yet while many studies suggest moderate to high heritability for psychopathic traits, genes do what they do because of the contexts they're in.

'You get a combination of factors, environmental and intrinsic, that create a very violent person,' Lewis said. 'I don't think anyone is born evil' (Lewis, 2020).^{*} Evil, as she pointed out, is a religious concept, not a medical or scientific one.

Perhaps we're all on a psychopathic spectrum, like a cloth made of black and white threads, where there are more than 50 shades of grey.

Hare Psychopathy Checklist 20 traits measured

- Glib and superficial charm
- Grandiose (exaggeratedly high) estimation of self
- Need for stimulation
- Pathological lying
- Cunning and manipulativeness
- Lack of remorse or guilt
- Shallow affect (superficial emotional responsiveness)
- Callousness and lack of empathy
- Parasitic lifestyle
- Poor behavioral controls
- Sexual promiscuity
- Early behavior problems
- Lack of realistic long-term goals
- Impulsivity
- Irresponsibility
- Failure to accept responsibility for own actions
- Many short-term marital relationships
- Juvenile delinquency
- Revocation of conditional release
- Criminal versatility

Image: [Link](#)

How well did you make out on this list? Let us know if we need to keep a closer eye on you!





Musings by Maggie

Holy Spirit or Mass Hysteria?

In Salem, Massachusetts, in February 1692, Betty Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams, aged nine and eleven respectively, began to have fits. They were described by John Hale, minister of the nearby town of Beverly, as “beyond the power of epileptic fits or natural disease to effect”. According to eyewitness accounts, the girls screamed, threw things about the room, uttered strange sounds, crawled under furniture, and contorted themselves into peculiar positions, thus triggering a train of events which eventually led to the notorious Salem Witch Trials, one of the best-known cases of mass hysteria in history, resulting in the deaths of more than 200 people.

Many other cases of mass hysteria have been recorded over time, ranging from nuns suddenly going into a biting frenzy or making cat-like miaowing noises to dancing plagues, where the entire population of a village or town danced for days for no apparent reason, laughing epidemics, and large numbers of people insisting they had witnessed events that couldn't possibly have happened.

An example of this is the event known as the ‘miracle of the sun’, which occurred on 13th October 1917 in Fátima, Portugal. Three shepherd children, who claimed to have witnessed numerous apparitions of the Virgin Mary, had prophesied that the Virgin would appear at this time and perform miracles. A



‘Speaking in tongues’ at an Assemblies of God church in Cancún, Mexico.

[Public Domain](#)

large crowd had gathered and, according to newspaper reports of the time, witnessed the sun appearing to ‘dance’ or zig-zag in the sky, careen towards the Earth or emit multi-coloured light and radiant colours. According to these reports, the event lasted approximately ten minutes and was witnessed by anything from 30,000 to 100,000 people.

Various explanations have been put forward for these occurrences, including optical illusions induced by looking at the sun, but the most likely cause would seem to be mass hysteria. People seeing what they were expecting to see and convincing others that they were seeing it too.

It may be noted that by far the most common denominator in such events is belief in the supernatural, particularly religious beliefs, and the story of the apparitions in Fátima reminds me of the account of the ▷



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Salem Witch

Lithograph by Joseph E. Baker [Public Domain](#)

crucifixion related in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 7, verses 51-53: 'And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.' This is a passage frequently used by Christian apologists as evidence that these events really happened. Leaving aside the obvious objection that there is sparse evidence that anything related in the Bible really happened, even if many people did claim to witness the same thing this does not mean that it actually happened as it could easily have been the effect of mass hysteria.

According to the *Medical Dictionary for the Health Professions and Nursing* (2012), the medical definition of mass hysteria, also known as mass psychogenic illness, is as follows: 1. Simultaneous identical physical or emotional symptoms among a group of people. 2. A socially contagious frenzy of irrational behaviour in a group of people as a reaction to an event.

Examples of mass hysteria in the form of religious fervour are by no means a thing of the past. A quick search on YouTube will

result in numerous videos of 'charismatic' worship in which people throw themselves around, having been 'slain in the spirit, dancing, shouting, 'speaking in tongues' ([glossolalia](#)) laughing and otherwise exhibiting the very same behaviours described in the historical reports. These behaviours are believed to be evidence of 'the outpouring of the Holy Spirit', but are quite clearly the result of the emotions of the congregation being manipulated by the preacher.

This kind of religious euphoria seems to have arisen first during the religious revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries. I came across a very interesting article from the *British Medical Journal* dated 1st January 1860 which tries to explain it. Sadly, the author is not named.

"... an unusual interest has been stirred up with regard to the things which concern eternal life; it may next be observed that this interest has been made a means of attracting large numbers of individuals to crowded places of worship, where they have been excited by the most energetic denunciations of their own lost and fallen state, as well as by threats of the Divine vengeance impending over them."

The author then goes on to describe how it only takes one person "...whose power of emotional self-consciousness has reached its limit" to respond hysterically and for that person to be pointed out by the preacher "as one by whom saving grace has at that moment been received" for others to be overcome with the terror that awaits them should they not also be thus 'saved', and to set in train an incident very closely resembling those which I have already described. The [full text](#) is well worth a read, and here is a [truly hysterical example](#) on YouTube for you to watch. But please – don't get too carried away!





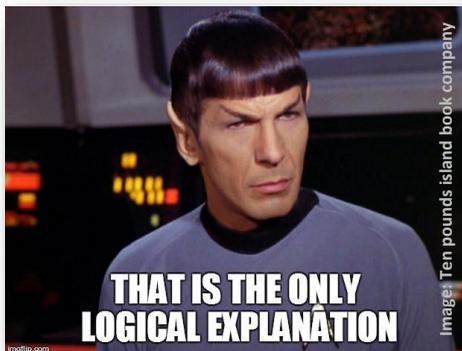
Are we logical?

Paul Ewans investigates common thinking errors...

Recent psychological research suggests that our behaviour is not always as logical as we might like to think. But if our decisions are sometimes illogical, how do we manage to survive and prosper in an ordered world?

Cognitive dissonance is the perception of contradictory information, a psychologically stressful situation which can be resolved in a variety of ways, some logical and some not. Suppose a certain person is putting on weight because they eat too many biscuits. Their stress can be relieved by eating fewer biscuits or by resolving to take more exercise. But it can also be relieved by adhering to a false or illogical belief – that biscuits contain no calories, for example.

The term ‘cognitive dissonance’ was coined by the American social psychologist Leon Festinger. In the 1950s he and other researchers joined a doomsday cult led by Dorothy Martin, a resident of Chicago, who had predicted that the world would end on 21st December 1954. When the prediction failed to come true, Festinger observed that some cult members accepted that they had been wrong to believe Martin’s prophesy. But most members retained their faith in Martin and looked for ways to explain what had happened (or rather what had not happened). They eventually agreed that God had spared the earth because of their prayers.



Common logical errors

Psychologists expanding on Festinger’s work have identified a surprisingly large number of common logical errors, including the following: *Confirmation bias* is the tendency to select information that supports one’s beliefs or values while ignoring contrary information; the *irrational primacy effect* describes our tendency to rely more on information we acquire early in an enquiry than on information we acquire later; and the *illusory truth effect* is the tendency we have to believe things that have been repeated frequently, an effect which politicians and advertisers often exploit.

Illogical behaviour

Many types of illogical behaviour have also been identified. *Groupthink* occurs when a group of people care more about agreeing with each other than they do about reaching the right decision. Groupthink typically ▷



allows groups to reach decisions quickly, but only if they abandon the critical thinking which would otherwise guard against a bad outcome. The *sunk cost fallacy* is where people continue to invest in a project despite evidence that the original decision to invest was wrong. The *gambler's fallacy* is the belief that future probabilities are altered by past events when in fact they are unchanged, and the *hot hand* or *lucky streak* fallacy is the gambler's belief that a run of good luck will be followed by yet more good luck.

Heuristics

At much the same time that Festinger was publishing his results, the psychologist Herbert A. Simon introduced the concept of heuristics – the process of taking decisions by using mental short cuts or rules of thumb. Simon was particularly interested in how we take decisions under conditions of uncertainty when our information is incomplete or the problem we face is especially complicated. In the 1970s other psychologists expanded on this work, showing in detail how our decisions often step outside the rules of logic and probability.

For example, the *recognition heuristic* can be used to predict the winners of tennis tournaments because a player whose name is well-known to the general public is more likely to win than a less well-known player. Relying on this heuristic produces more accurate predictions than those made by expert tennis commentators. Another example is the *availability heuristic* posited by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. The suggestion here is that we are unduly influenced by things which come readily to mind. So we buy lottery tickets because we remember the lucky winners while the millions of losers made no impression on us at all. Similarly, we overestimate the likelihood of dying in a terrorist attack because we have



People buy lottery tickets because of the *availability heuristic*

Image: The Independent

vivid memories of these very newsworthy events.

To give one last example, the *contagion heuristic* causes people to avoid contact with people who, or objects which, are considered to have been contaminated by an earlier contact with something perceived to be bad. So people are reluctant to eat food which has fallen to the ground. Some psychologists have argued that there is nothing illogical in using heuristics as a basis for decision-making, because they are quick and easy to use, and they give results that are much better than chance. Indeed, logical errors such as the *irrational primacy effect* may turn out to be useful and reasonably reliable heuristics. Even the *gambler's fallacy* may have had evolutionary value in the past, however unreliable it may be as a guide for roulette players today. Perhaps, strictly speaking, we are not quite as illogical as we sometimes appear.





Thought for the Day

Maggie rants against the irritations of modern customer service...

At the moment of writing, I am in the throes of selling my house and buying a new one. As anyone who has experienced this exhausting process will know, it involves a lot of communication with estate agents, conveyancers, surveyors' offices, etc. Much of it is now online, which brings its own irritations, but there is still a need for a number of telephone conversations, a typical example of which might go like this:

Caller: *Hello, is that Maggie?*

Me: *Yes, it is.*

Caller: *Hello Maggie, how are you today?*

Me: *I'm fine, how are you?*

Caller: *Oh I'm not too bad, you know.*

Pause...

Caller: *I'm just ringing about ...*

Now I hope I'm not being churlish, but although I appreciate enquiries after my wellbeing from friends and family, particularly if they're people I don't hear from often, I'm a busy woman and I get supremely irritated by having to waste time during a business call with people I don't know intimately on an examination of each other's health. I just want them to get on with it and tell me what they've phoned for, especially when I've only spoken to them earlier in the day, since when my condition is hardly likely to have deteriorated. Is there some training course which they are all sent on, I wonder, where they're taught to do this stuff?

I notice similar irritations when being served in shops, cafés and restaurants. You place your order for, say, a cup of coffee and are told "No problem", which puzzles me since, being in a coffee shop, one would not have expected it to be a problem. I'm clearly not in step with my fellow customers who, I notice, all seem to use the term "Can I get ...", where once it would have been "May I have ...". Additional annoyance is caused by being informed that something is "cool", where once it would have been "fine" or "satisfactory" and I'm afraid I cannot help but cringe when out for a meal with friends when the very nice young waiter, (sorry, 'server') addresses us as "You guys" – even at Fortnum's!

Why am I so irritated by these new-fangled usages? I don't know. Perhaps I just have to face up to what might well be an unpalatable truth – that I've become a grumpy old woman, but I think it also might be the intimation of insincerity that accompanies them. I'm happy that my 'server', or the person on the phone, values my custom and wishes to be polite and respectful, but that doesn't mean they have to pretend an overwhelming concern for my health, assure me that they will overcome all "problems" in order to fulfil my request, that they really feel what I have just told them is "cool", or that they feel sufficiently intimately involved with perfect strangers as to address them as "You guys". Does it?





By John Coss

Humanists in profile Raymond Tallis

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.

“I am a humanist and see my work as a doctor and as a philosopher as respectively an expression of, and as setting out the case for, my humanist convictions.”

Raymond Tallis (1945-) is a philosopher, author and poet. He was a physician and clinical scientist in geriatric medicine until he retired in 2006 so that he could write full time. He remains a professor emeritus at Manchester University. He is a Patron of Humanists UK and gave the 2011 [Holyoake Lecture](#) on *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity*, based on his book of the same title, in which he challenges the claims made for the ability of neuroscience and evolutionary theory to explain human consciousness, behaviour, culture and society. He is a polymath and widely regarded as one of our leading public intellectuals.

Tallis had a distinguished medical career, as a practising physician, in medical education, and in improving neurosciences services and health care for the elderly. He made many contributions to NHS organisation. He was chairman of the Royal College of Physicians Ethics Committee when it was considering its response to the 2007 Joffe bill on assisted dying. Previously opposed, this led him to change his mind, especially on account of experience in Oregon, and he became a patron of *Dignity in Dying*. He is the author of around 200 papers, articles and book reviews on medical matters, mostly relating to neurology and treatment of the elderly.



Image: www.raymondallis.co.uk

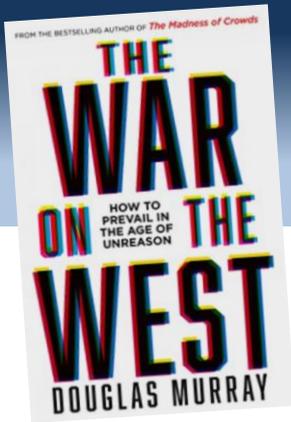
In February 2007, in a contribution to a discussion on key challenges facing the next generation, Tallis wrote:

“The great intellectual and spiritual challenge of the 21st century is to develop a clear idea of what we human beings are. It is a mistake to imagine that the only alternative to a supernatural account of what we are is a naturalistic one in which we are seen as rather clever chimps.”

Tallis has written 37 books (with more in prospect). His non-medical oeuvre includes a great number of essays, articles and reviews in a wide range of publications. Many of these, including *Aping Mankind*, are a response to this challenge.

His [website](#) provides an extensive record of his medical work and other writings. For an account of his approach to writing, see [My writing day](#). And on [Desert Island Discs](#) in 2007, he provided entertaining and informative perspectives on his life and work.





Book Review by David Warden



Douglas Murray is a British author and associate editor of *The Spectator*. He is considered to be a conservative commentator and his books include *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (2017) and *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity* (2019).

At the Humanists UK Convention in Belfast, the new President of Humanists UK Adam Rutherford described Douglas Murray's latest book *The War on the West* as 'an obvious version of Great Replacement Theory'. This is the theory that 'white European populations are being demographically and culturally replaced with non-white peoples – especially from Muslim-majority countries – through mass migration, demographic growth and a drop in the birth rate of white Europeans' (Wikipedia). It could be argued that this was the theme of Murray's previous book *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (2017) but I found no evidence of it in *The War on the West*. In this book, Murray is complaining about a far-left revolutionary assault on Western civilisation. This is the view that capitalism is evil and that it has been produced by a racist, white supremacist, sexist, colonialist and patriarchal culture. This revolutionary project, initiated

principally by the French philosopher Michel Foucault and also by the Palestinian-American philosopher Edward Said, seeks to deconstruct, dismantle and discredit the whole of Western culture, including Enlightenment values such as rationality which underpin humanism. It attacks as racist key cultural figures including Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and John Stuart Mill. It denigrates statesmen such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson as slave owners, and national heroes such as Winston Churchill as racists. It even goes so far as to attack composers like Handel for investing in slave-owning companies and mathematics for being 'too white' (hard to believe, but true apparently). The only figure spared is Karl Marx, even though he was notoriously racist and a Jewish anti-Semite. The psychology of this revolutionary project has a lot in common with religion: slavery and colonialism are the original sins, white people have benefited from this system of oppression and they must educate themselves, repent, decolonise their cultures and pay reparations.

Adam Rutherford, in *How to Argue with a Racist* (2021 p57), claims not to know what Western culture is, which is quite an admission for a humanist, and so he does not fear its demise. Perhaps we need to have a fundamental debate in the humanist movement about this controversy. It seems clear to me that humanism is largely a product of the European and American Enlightenment and that a revolutionary attack on this heritage is an attack on humanism. If leading humanists deny this, what is going on?



Poet's Corner

By Alex Williams



Survival

We are primed,
Evolved to see agency all around us.

Our forebears who, hearing the snap of a twig,
Assumed a malevolent agent
Ran away and lived.
They may have been right
They may have been wrong
But they passed on their skittish genes and survived.

Our forebears who, hearing the snap of a twig,
Assumed it was just the wind
Stayed munching their nuts and berries.
They may have been right
But if they were wrong
They became dinner.

Two types of error:
One harmless,
One deadly.
That is until
We no longer eat berries on the forest floor
And now find agency in magic socks
In creaks and shadows
In lucky underwear.

We are animals with purpose on the brain
Seeking it, attributing it, inventing it
So that the skies thunder with Thor's rage
The trees shed leaves with Persephone's grief
And the sun gives light out of Ra's benevolent love.

Evolution has a lot to answer for.



Humanistically Speaking Coverage

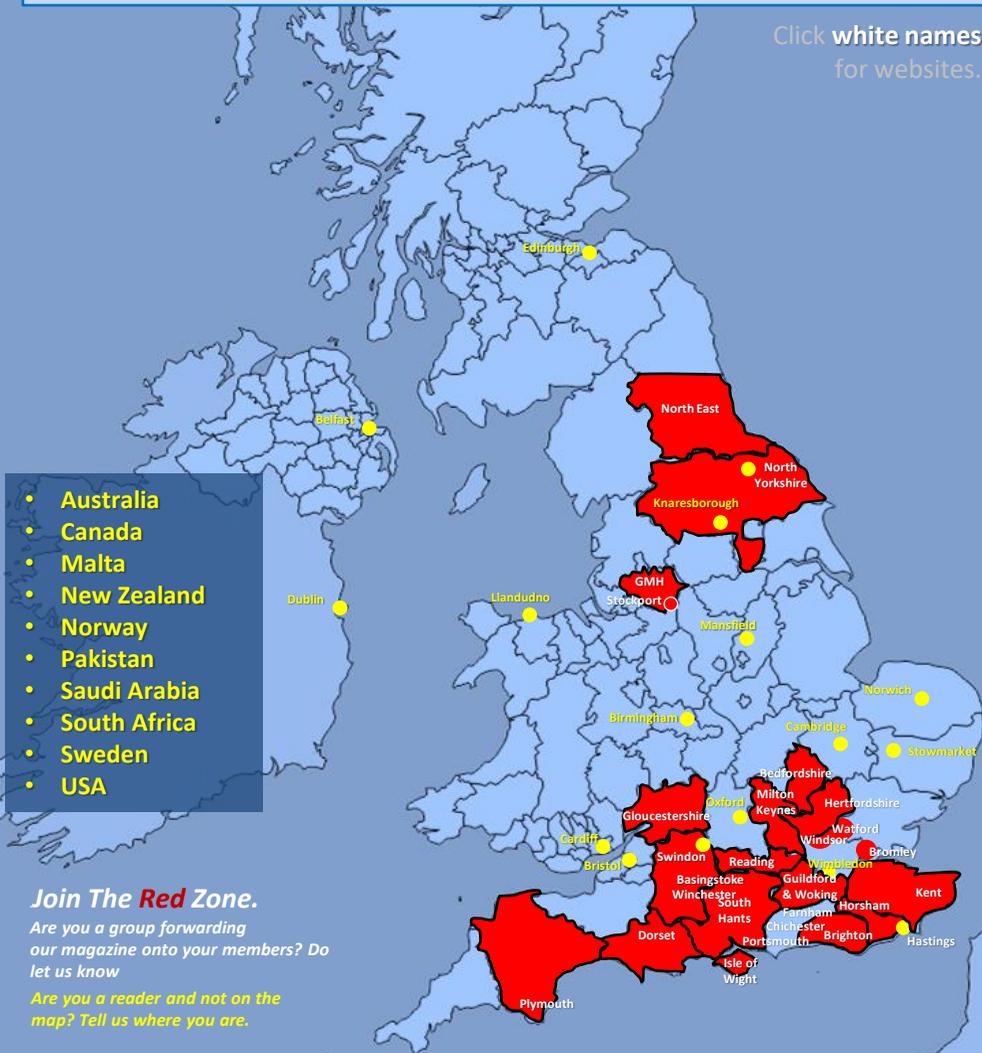
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Humanistically Speaking

A free magazine created for and by Humanists

Humanism is an ethical non-religious worldview. It's about tolerance, kindness, knowledge, and friendship. Although Humanistically Speaking is for Humanists, everyone is welcome to read and contribute, regardless of faith or belief.



Click the 'Happy Human' symbol above to learn more about Humanist values

***Humanistically Speaking* is brought to you by a volunteer team of editors**



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In addition, we have our vital back-office support team of:
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