



Humanistically Speaking

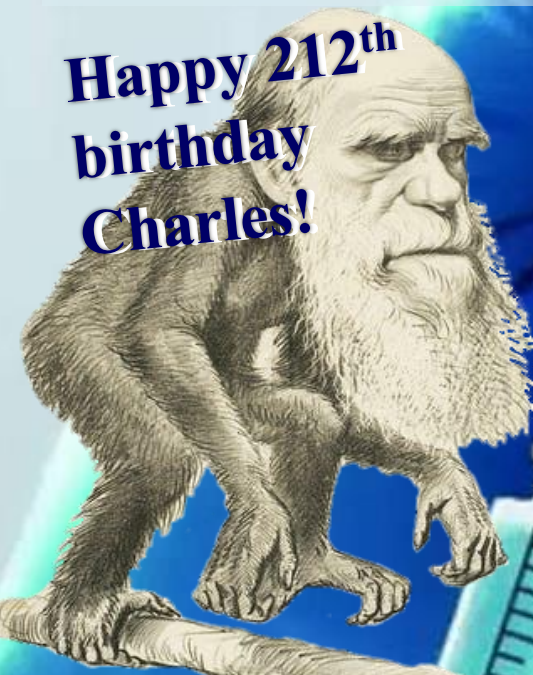
February 2021

A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

SCIENCE SAVES THE DAY

By the time this edition of *Humanistically Speaking* hits your inbox, we expect that at least 7,000,000 people in England will have received their first dose of coronavirus vaccine. We hope you will join us in celebrating this remarkable scientific achievement as we continue our fightback against a deadly virus.

**Happy 212th
birthday
Charles!**



Features this month:

- Interviewing Simon Bligh
- Anti-Vaxxers
- When Evolution Goes Bad
- Theistic Evolution
- In the Navy...
- LGBT+ History Month
- Nature, Nurture, Neither?

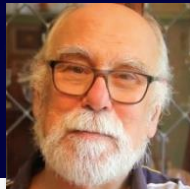
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Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com

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.

If you are reading this on the 12th February you are likely to be aware that this is the 212th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday, and this issue of *Humanistically Speaking* is a celebration of that happy event!

Charles Darwin himself continues with his popular Q&A column despite his advanced age (what an amazing chap he is!) whilst **Robert Stovold** from Brighton Humanists takes a critical look at **Theistic Evolution**, explaining how this is promoted by some Christians as an attempt to reconcile theism and evolution by natural selection. Continuing this month's theme of evolution, I delve into the life of Darwin's half-cousin **Francis Galton** who took evolution theory in the dark direction of eugenics, and our talented young writer **Amelie Forbes** offers an original and personal reflection on the perennial 'Nature vs Nurture' debate.

In this month's interview we put the spotlight on **Simon Bligh** who is Chair of Isle of Wight Humanists, and we include two personal reflections on the 60s singer **Gerry Marsden** who has recently died.

Young Humanists Ambassador **Ronnie Barr** reveals some shocking details of what it was like to grow up different from his peers, and he brings us up to date with the latest terminology to describe gender and sexuality. **Maggie's Musings** warns about the dangers presented to us all by those who indulge in irrational beliefs about viruses and vaccines and **Aaron Darkwood** explains why we as humanists should appreciate the work done by the Royal Navy.

Last but not least, **David Warden** reviews a new book by **Michael Lind** which analyses why some Western democracies may be decaying into banana republics. Next month, my interview with **Professor A. C. Grayling** will continue to explore the problems afflicting democracy.

That's it from me! Happy reading!

David Brittain

BREAKING NEWS



Lockdown Happiness Boosters

Did you know that the 'Happy Human' is the international symbol of Humanism? Since the 'Age of Enlightenment', humanistic thinkers have recognised the importance of

seeking or cultivating happiness in *this life*, rather than pinning your hopes on an imaginary life after death.

The 'science of happiness' (sometimes referred to as wellbeing or flourishing) is now a well-established field of study. One of the core techniques for boosting your sense of wellbeing is **cultivating a sense of optimism**. Happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky writes that "Cultivating optimism is an excellent happiness-enhancing strategy... If you have something to look forward to you will feel energised, motivated and enthusiastic."

Lockdown is an excellent opportunity to practise thinking optimistically rather than pessimistically. Be aware of pessimistic thoughts coming into your mind and try *intentionally* replacing them with more optimistic thoughts. Optimistic thoughts can be self-fulfilling and increase your persistence in the face of obstacles.

For more hints and tips on cultivating optimism visit the [Action for Happiness](#) calendar.

Darwin Day celebrated around the world

The great naturalist Charles Darwin was born on 12th February 1809 in Shrewsbury. In 1909, on the centenary of his birth, four hundred scientists from 167 countries gathered in Cambridge to commemorate his life and work. The event was also celebrated by the New York Academy of Sciences and by the Royal Society of New Zealand.

In 1959, the University of Chicago celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Darwin's seminal work *On the Origin of Species*. From the 1970s onwards, scientists have sometimes celebrated Darwin Day with 'primordial soups' and 'phylum feasts' using as many different phyla as possible (plants, fruits, fish, fungi, molluscs and so on).

Our modern understanding of 'Darwin Day' seems to have originated around 1995 when the Humanist Community of Palo Alto, California, started having an annual celebration.

In 2009, the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, Prince Philip unveiled a life-sized bronze statue in Cambridge of Darwin as a young man.

Today, Darwin Day is celebrated by hundreds of humanist groups around the world as a celebration of science.

<https://darwinday.org/events/>

BREAKING NEWS



Chasing Nuts...



Having read the bit about the squirrel climbing up David Brittain's leg in the last issue of *Humanistically Speaking*, I was reminded of a similar experience. In my case, I stopped in St James's Park during a bike ride and spotted a squirrel on the grass nearby. As it was relatively close, I thought I'd try to take a photo.

I slowly reached for my pocket to retrieve my phone, trying not to scare it, and it must have thought that I had some food because it jumped up onto my bike just as I had the camera ready. It jumped off pretty smartly when it realised there was no food in the offing, so it was incredibly good timing and I still consider it to be my favourite photo.

Take care and keep up the good work.

Regards

Mitul Shah, Croydon

President of Nigerian Humanists update

A judge at the High Court in Abuja, Nigeria, ruled in December that Mubarak Bala, President of Nigerian Humanists, should be immediately released from detention.

Humanists International is continuing to support Bala's legal team in Nigeria.

Read more [here](#)



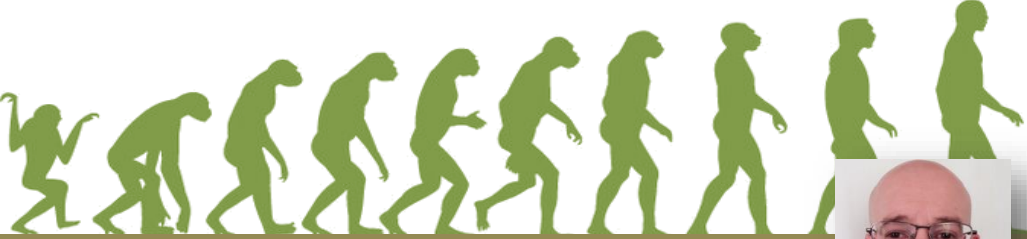
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- Running Costs
- Technology upgrades
- Leaflet printing
- Travel expenses





Why “Theistic Evolution” should go extinct

Dr. Robert Stovold, Brighton Humanists

Many Christians attempt to harmonise science and religion by reference to an idea called ‘Theistic Evolution’. Faced with overwhelming scientific evidence for Charles Darwin's theory, such Christians acknowledge that evolution occurs, but claim it to be the tool God used to create living things. The first problem with Theistic Evolution is that it contradicts what Genesis says about how living things were created. According to the New Testament, Jesus took Genesis as literal history (Mark 10:6–9; Luke 17:27), so the idea of Theistic Evolution runs contrary not only to the Genesis account, but to the New Testament as well. That's not a problem for humanists, who don't regard such sources as inspired, but it ought to be a problem for Christians proposing Theistic Evolution.

The second problem with the idea of Theistic Evolution is that of suffering. Evolution necessarily entails suffering, at least amongst complex animals, making it the last mechanism that a loving god would be expected to use. As Darwin himself put it, “What a book a Devil's Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horribly cruel works of nature!” In the Bible, Jesus is described as telling his followers not to plan ahead on the grounds that God provides for both people and animals: “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will



Jesus was wrong about the ravens...

wear... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matthew 6:25-6). Likewise, Psalm 145:16 says of God, “You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing”. Natural Selection, however, occurs as a result of competition, which arises because there *aren't enough resources to go around* - meaning the “desires of every living thing” can't possibly be satisfied. How can God satisfy the predator's desire to get a meal (Job 38:39-40) whilst also satisfying the prey's desire to escape? Many birds (rooks, woodpeckers, the Western Scrub Jay) do hoard resources for later; they'd hardly need to do so if God provided for them in the present. Ravens devote much of their time to storing food. They loot the stores of other ravens, and will try to hide food out of the line of another raven's sight if they realise they are being watched. Why, then, does the Bible say “Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; ▶

Do you agree with our values, why not check them out here:

[Humanist Values Booklet](#)

yet God feeds them” (Luke 12:24)? Because whoever penned that verse was, to put it bluntly, ignorant. And humanists ought to be politely exposing such ignorance, not sitting idly by while Theistic Evolution is legitimised in society.

A third problem with Theistic Evolution is that it is overly complex. Natural Selection certainly occurs - but the idea that it occurs *because it is God's tool* goes beyond the scientific evidence, and should not, therefore, be legitimised as a scientific option. For an example of how Theistic Evolution is promoted (albeit in R.E. rather than a science class), see here [Click image:](#)

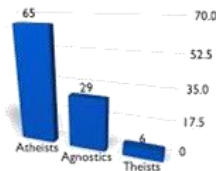


If Theistic Evolution is so flawed, why even present it to impressionable young minds? Well, Theistic Evolution, so its backers claim, allows evolution to be taught to children who would not otherwise be comfortable with evolutionary ideas. That may be so – but it raises the question of why some children are uncomfortable with evolutionary ideas. Most of the opposition to Darwin's theory comes from religion. So whilst Theistic Evolution gets offered as a religious solution to a problem, its backers overlook two key facts:

- 1) The problem was caused by religion in the first place!
- 2) Theistic Evolution doesn't really square faith with science. It's too horrific a tool for a loving god to use, too contrived as an idea to

be given credence from a scientific standpoint, and it contradicts aspects of the religion that it is meant to be legitimising.

Religious Beliefs of Biologists in the National Academy of Sciences



Discovery Institute 2009

Some biologists are religious - but pointing to them as evidence for the compatibility of science and religion assumes that which needs to be proved, namely that these religious people are consistent in their thinking. It's also appealing to a biased sample, for although some biologists are religious, most are not, and biologists tend to be less religious than the population from which they are drawn. As Evolutionary Biologist Jerry Coyne put it:

"Pretending that faith and science are equally valid ways of finding truth not only weakens our concept of truth, it also gives religion an undeserved authority that does the world no good. For it is faith's certainty that it has a grasp on truth, combined with its inability to actually find it, that produces things such as the oppression of women and gays, opposition to stem cell research and euthanasia, attacks on science, denial of contraception for birth control and AIDS prevention, sexual repression, and of course all those wars, suicide bombings and religious persecutions".



Dr. Robert Stovold
Brighton Humanists

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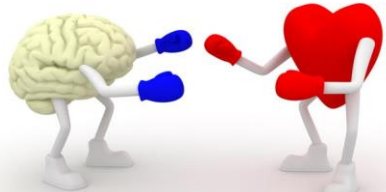


Nature, Nurture, Neither?

By Amelie Forbes

I often question what causes me to act in the way that I do. Let's go with a scenario. Picture a woman trying to choose whether to eat an apple or a cupcake. On the one hand, she has societal pressures telling her she 'should' eat the apple because it's 'healthier'... or maybe she'll eat the cupcake just to say 'screw you' to society. On the other hand, her biology may mean that she chooses not to eat the cupcake due to gluten intolerance, or maybe there are factors such as hormones or energy levels causing her to crave one snack over the other. Maybe she just knows what she wants to eat and uses her freewill to decide. So, let's ask ourselves: 'nature, nurture, or neither?'

Biological psychologists would be in 'team nature'. One element of our biology is that we inherit traits and behaviours within our genetic material. In McGuffin and Gottesman's study of aggression and antisocial behaviour in identical twins (published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Modern Approaches*, 1985) there was an 87% concordance rate with both twins showing aggression and/or antisocial behaviour. While this high percentage does suggest there is a genetic basis to behaviour, we would expect a 100% concordance rate if behaviour was *purely* genetic. Another element of our biology has been shaped by evolutionary adaptations. For example, traits such as intelligence and aggression have been passed down via natural selection because they would have



'Team nurture' or 'team nature'?

helped our ancestors survive – hence why these traits are commonly seen among humans today. A third element of our biology is hormones and neurotransmitters. Oxytocin is known as the 'cuddle hormone' because it is produced by, and may cause someone to crave, cuddles. An excess of the hormone testosterone can cause increased levels of aggression and (most likely) an outright rejection of cuddles! There are two types of neurotransmitters that cause very different processes. Excitatory neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, cause neurons in the brain to 'fire', meaning activity is increased. An excess of dopamine can cause competitiveness, aggression and poor impulse control. Inhibitory neurotransmitters *inhibit* or slow the 'firing' of neurons, thus creating the opposite effect to their excitable companions. Surely, biology plays an undeniable role in our behaviour.

Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth would be in 'team nurture'. In her 'Strange Situation' study (*Attachment, Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation*, 1970) she established three attachment types:

secure, insecure avoidant and insecure resistant. These attachment types refer to the primary attachment between infant and mother. According to Ainsworth, attachment type is entirely reliant on the behaviour of the mother. If a mother is consistent with her support and affection, her child will have a secure attachment to her. If a mother is cold and rejecting, her child will have an insecure avoidant attachment to her. If a mother is inconsistent with her support and affection (e.g. loving one moment and cold the next), her child will have an insecure resistant attachment to her. A lot of importance has been attributed to this primary attachment. It has been suggested that it informs all other attachments in a person's life. This puts a little too much pressure on mothers if you ask me...

Psychologist Albert Bandura would also be in 'team nurture'. His Social Learning Theory (*Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis*, 1973) posits that a person observes a role model's behaviour and the potential consequences which follow: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment. Positive reinforcement is another term for reward, and will encourage imitation of a behaviour. Negative reinforcement is when a behaviour avoids a negative consequence, again encouraging imitation. Punishment is what it says on the tin – a negative consequence that discourages imitation of a behaviour. Social Learning Theory can be applied to the development of gender identity. A child observes a model of their gender in a toy advert on TV. Due to them being the same gender, the child pays closer attention to that model. In TV adverts, we often see girls playing with toys like dolls and boys playing with toys like

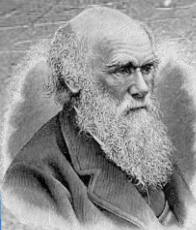
trucks. The child watching the advert, observes that the model gains enjoyment (positive reinforcement) from playing with that toy, and is therefore encouraged to imitate the observed behaviour and take on the gender role being presented to them. The media really does have a powerful effect on us.



Are gender roles learned from TV?

What about the good old notion that we can actually *control* our behaviour? Humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers argued that we do have freewill. They suggested that people select their own goals and activities, growing in their own way. There is also an element of freewill in Social Learning Theory because the observer makes a conscious choice to imitate or avoid imitating the behaviour that they observed. Maybe we do have freewill, or maybe freewill is simply an illusion. Perhaps we should ask Charles Darwin: Would he belong to 'team nature' or 'team nurture'?





Charles Darwin.

Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.
Darwin's family home.

Dear Darwin

Do you think it's fair for us in 2021 to criticise you for the views you had about race in 1840? I heard you were going to be 'cancelled' last year and your statue in the Natural History Museum could be moved to a less prominent position. Were you upset about this?

Jonathan Hughes, West Sussex

Dear Jonathan

Thank you for broaching this sensitive topic. In my day there was, of course, a widespread cultural assumption that Europeans were civilised and that tribal peoples in places like Tierra del Fuego in South America were not. Experiments to 'Europeanise' them appeared to be successful initially but when they returned to their native habitat they quickly returned to their old customs. Perhaps nurture could not overcome nature.

It is of course the case that 'civilised' peoples have come to dominate the globe and left very little living space not only for our hunter-gatherer cousins but also for all other species. Were I to visit the early 21st century, I have no doubt that I would be extremely alarmed by this loss of biodiversity and the impact of so-called 'civilised' lifestyles.

By all means book me onto a diversity awareness course to update me on your politically-correct language.

Dear Darwin

Darwin Day is rapidly approaching and it's normally an event that humanist groups love to celebrate. However, with lockdown restrictions we're not able to meet for our usual big bash. With everything happening this year what do you think is the best way for us to honour your legacy?

Ronald, Poole

Dear Ronald

I'm truly honoured that you are planning to celebrate my 212th birthday and I'm sorry to learn that the virus pandemic is still causing havoc across the Western world. The best way to 'honour my legacy', as you so kindly express it, is to promote the public understanding of science and to ensure, in particular, that children are given a good science education. I'm acutely aware of the fact that schools have had to close and that parents may be struggling to fill the gaps. So please also promote the benefits of vaccination to enable schools and universities to reopen as quickly as possible.

I also recommend eating 'Primordial Soup'. I'm sure you can find a recipe with your 21st century technology.

What's Humanism got to do with the Royal Navy?



As a long time dedicated Naval enthusiast, Aaron Darkwood looks at the Humanist connection with this branch of HM Forces UK.



When it comes to budgets the military are always seen as the bad guys for taking money from other branches of government, and quite often they are the first to make cuts when savings are sought. In recent years, however, spending has increased. Civilians may well think that the military, when not in war, spends all its time training for one with killing as its primary aim. But this is not the case and particularly not with the Royal Navy.

When not at war, the Royal Navy has many tasks that it routinely maintains as standard, with patrols in the Gulf on shipping route protection, the Caribbean on anti-drug watch, the south Atlantic protecting the Falkland Islands, and here at home watching Britain's busy coasts.

In the Caribbean our ships have seized over £400 million of drugs this year alone, with ships intercepting drug smugglers on an almost monthly basis. I think we can all agree

that this is a task well worth maintaining. But that's not all. The ships out there, typically a Royal Fleet Auxiliary craft and a patrol boat, are also on hurricane watch and have been called in to support disaster relief operations both in the Caribbean and in Honduras as hurricane Eta caused immense damage. Tonnes of food, fresh water and shelters were flown in and supported local relief efforts.

Supporting disaster relief



Drugs were also seized in October by Royal Marines from HMS Montrose who intercepted 450kg of methamphetamine worth £18 million in counter-narcotic operations in the Gulf, whilst on shipping lane escort duties. Although we have Border force in the UK that manages a small fleet of five 'cutters', and six inshore Rigid Hulled Inflatable Boats (RHIBs), the Royal Navy still remains the primary force for stopping and intercepting drugs in far away places, to help prevent them reaching the streets at home.

Seizing drugs

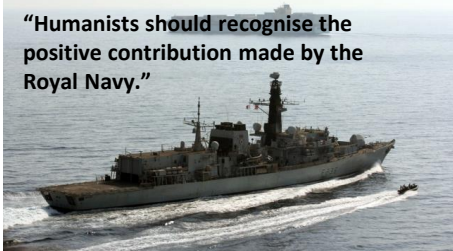




Other busy ships are the Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP) craft of the Mine Counter measure Squadron, whose task is to locate and destroy mines both from World War II, frequently popping up in UK waters, and in more recent years, in the Gulf. GRP hulls do not attract the magnetic mines and thus are used safely, although in future years remote operated vehicles will make this task much safer. Trials are currently under way.

In post-Brexit news there was a big thing made about the UK's fishery protection squadron, a fleet of three patrol boats tasked with monitoring who catches fish in UK waters and what type and in what quantities they catch them. They check all craft, both UK owned and licensed fishing craft plus those who have permits to fish in UK waters. This protects the fish stocks and keeps order in the UK maritime zone. This squadron is one of the oldest in the Navy and has operated constantly.

In between watching the fish, these same ships as well as the UK Fleet Ready Escort, has been kept busy monitoring Russian shipping activity. In December we had nine incidents where ships from Russia required escorting through UK waters. This is routine and happens when we are in their waters. With the English Channel, and being an island nation, this gets quite busy as they test us both in sea-lanes and with aircraft incursions prompting a launch from the Typhoon ready alert in Lossiemouth, Scotland.



In addition, Royal Navy personnel are also on detachment in Afghanistan on peacekeeping operations, and this winter just past, a father and son were rescued on a sinking fishing boat.

All of this comes following a decade where recruitment was a tough call with manpower shortages meaning several ships couldn't put to sea. During the pandemic the figures are up by a third with a 34% increase in officers and 28% for ratings.

The Royal Navy is a 24-hour operation 365 days a year, constantly protecting sea lanes, people, preventing crime and keeping the UK safe. I believe that humanists should recognise the positive contribution made by our hard-working Royal Navy.

You'll Never Walk Alone

*A Tribute to Gerry Marsden
by David Brittain*

At a time when it was fashionable for pop groups to call themselves sexy names, like *Rory Storm and the Hurricanes*, *The Rolling Stones*, *The Animals*, *The Kinks*, and *Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas*, Gerry Marsden was the lead singer for a band called *Gerry and the Pacemakers*. This was before modern heart surgery, of course, so what on earth your average teenager today might think of a name like that I have no idea!

The band would share the same manager as the Beatles, and they had a series of hits in the early sixties. I well remember Gerry Marsden's happy, chirpy persona on TV whilst singing great songs. But I will remember him most for *Ferry 'Cross the Mersey*, which was a reflective ballad about a romanticised Liverpool that kids from all over the world then thought was the centre of the known universe.

But we cannot ignore *You'll Never Walk Alone* which now belongs to Liverpool Football Club. It may surprise you to learn that this song was not written for Gerry, or his Pacemakers. It was written by Rogers and Hammerstein, and came from a 1950's musical called *Carousel*. *Carousel* is largely forgotten today but Gerry revived perhaps the most powerful song I have ever heard and it will live on in Liverpool FC. So thank you, Gerry, for your cheerful persona, for my happy teenage memories, and for keeping one of the greatest ballads of all time alive and well.



Gerry Marsden MBE (front, guitar) died on 3rd January aged 78.

You'll Never Walk Alone

When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm is a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Tho' your dreams
Be tossed and blown
Walk on, Walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone

Roz Mercer, Brighton Humanists, also remembers Gerry Marsden...

I was so lucky to see Gerry Marsden live at Wembley in 1989. It was not long after the Hillsborough Disaster and the whole stadium sang "You'll Never Walk Alone". We linked arms with total strangers as we remembered the tragedy of the fallen from that fateful FA Cup semi-final. I grew up with the Merseybeat sound and went to several concerts in London where I saw Gerry and the Pacemakers. He was a great Liverpool lad and did so much to help the victims.

Young Humanists



“Nowadays I’m able to live openly as someone who’s queer and transgender. For the most part there aren’t any problems if you disregard all the threats of death and mutilation I’ve received and the constant insistence from others that my identity is in some way invalid.”

Young Humanists Ambassador Ronnie Barr explains what it was like growing up different...

There are many big events in February: Valentine’s Day, Darwin Day, even Groundhog Day. But the one event I will always draw attention to at this time of year is LGBT+ History Month, introduced in Britain in February 2005 to mark the abolition of Section 28. Since that first event took place LGBT+ History Month has been an important occasion each year for raising awareness of ongoing issues for the community and celebrating how far we’ve come.

I’ll be turning 23 in March and even I can see the massive shift in attitudes towards the LGBT+ community throughout my relatively short life. It would only have been 10 or so years ago that someone being gay was openly mocked and treated as a joke; being transgender wasn’t something you could even speak about. Yet now we see ourselves as a tolerant and progressive society where all identities are protected under the Equalities Act. You can marry who you like,

and you can be whoever you want to be in a world that’s so wonderfully accepting of everyone... in theory.

While we should definitely celebrate the progress we’ve made there are still many things wrong with the way our community is treated. Many issues came to the fore in 2020 alone: the government axing funding for anti-HBT (homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic) bullying campaigns in schools, the BBC banning journalists from attending Pride events even while not working, the lack of action for the sorely needed ban on conversion therapy, and of course the sorry attempt to reform the Gender Recognition Act. Actions like this send a clear message to the LGBT+ community, that we are still lesser people than those who are straight or cisgender. It’s getting easier for LGBT+ people to come out and live freely but we are nowhere near done with our battle for equality.

Nowadays I’m able to live openly as someone who’s queer and transgender. For the most part there aren’t any problems if you disregard all the threats of death and ►



"I always knew I was different, even as a child. I had absolutely no romantic interest in anyone, I saw no point in wearing makeup, and skirts and dresses made me feel incredibly uncomfortable."

mutilation I've received and the constant insistence from others that my identity is in some way invalid. I always knew that I was different, even as a child, the way I experienced romantic and sexual attraction and viewed my own gender identity was completely different to the way my friends would talk about their sense of self. I had absolutely no romantic interest in anyone, I saw no point in wearing makeup, and skirts and dresses made me feel incredibly uncomfortable. Peers who saw this behaviour branded me a lesbian, a label I desperately tried to shake off all the way until my adulthood. Not only did the label not fit the way I perceived myself, but it was used as a catch all insult. Clearly being gay was bad!

When I moved on to grammar school and found myself surrounded by friends who were open-minded and supportive I finally started coming out as bisexual, though I only openly showed interest in boys and absolutely refused to acknowledge my trans status. I was at an all-girls school after all.

As I entered adulthood and shook off a failed relationship where I felt forced to be more feminine I slowly began to explore my

gender identity. Attending local LGBT+ support groups I finally had a place where I could discuss how I was feeling and experiment with what felt right for me. After a few years I felt confident in my identity as pansexual and transgender and did everything I could to ensure others had access to resources to help them.

Last year I was so certain that my self-discovery had neared its end. Then lockdown happened. Separated from my partner and isolated in my childhood bedroom I took solace in talking to other content creators online, many of whom were LGBT+. Stuck inside with nothing to do I began researching and educating myself even further, stumbling into a rabbit hole of new terminology discussing QPRs (queerplatonic relationships) and outercourse (non-penetrative sexual activity). After considering my boundaries and re-evaluating my relationship I embraced my wildly different romantic and sexual orientations and amicably ended things with my partner. Education doesn't stop in schools; it's ongoing, and the issues affecting LGBT+ are constantly changing and evolving. We need to be able to speak up about them.

You can contact Ronnie for support with any of these issues.

Email Ronnie via: Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com



Interviewing the 'Chair'

Our regular spotlight on Humanist group leaders interviewed by David Brittain

Humanism Goes To Bligh-ty

...on the Isle of Wight

Simon Bligh lives in what to many folk is the holiday destination of the Isle of Wight, and it has to be said that he does live in comfort with his family in a large home with its own pond, swimming pool and games room, but – lovely as those luxuries are – that doesn't mean Simon lives a holiday existence.

An entrepreneur, he makes frequent trips to the mainland running his financial services company during the day, and he leads the Isle of Wight Humanists in his spare time.

Given his unusual surname, and his location so near to Portsmouth, my first interview question had to be whether he is a relative of the Captain Bligh of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame (or infamy, depending on your point of view). "I think he must be a relative of mine," Simon replied, "But I can't say where he fits in my family tree."

The famous captain was surely a very hard man – even for those days. But you can't take away the fact that he was an outstanding and determined sailor, and I do wonder if some of that drive has been inherited down the family line. However, Simon's road to Humanism was not a drama, and there was certainly no mutiny! "There was never a *Road to Damascus* moment for me with Humanism" he said. "Our family just weren't religious, and we never went



Simon Bligh
Isle of Wight
Humanists

to church. I did go to Sunday School as a kid and I had some vague idea that God was an Englishman – though come to think of it I might have got that from my Grandpa. I was sixteen when my Dad died and twenty-one when my grandfather passed away. These were naturally traumatic events for me at a relatively early age, and I think the seeds of doubt began about that time – but there was no dramatic shift in belief, just the beginning of a more critical process of thinking which led me to decide that the idea of an all-seeing deity in the clouds just seemed a bit daft, frankly."

"My father's death effectively ended my hopes of going to University, and since I didn't know what I wanted to do, I drifted a bit in my youth – leaving for the USA to work with my brother for a while before moving on to Australia, then finding my way back to Blighty (that word again!) over land. The journey took over eight months, and proved to be an amazing and wonderful experience for me, but on getting back to my flat in the Isle of Wight, I still had little idea of what I wanted to do. Then one day a friend invited

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me to work in his financial services company, and I found that I loved the work. Far from being the dry accounting job I expected, it involved meeting lots of people, and – social person that I am – I loved that.” So I studied, taking professional qualifications before setting up my own business.” (As an interviewer, I can vouch for Simon’s love of engaging with people. He clearly enjoys a chat, which makes him – for me – an absolute gift!)

Simon shrugged a little before changing the subject to Humanism. “My route to being an active Humanist began just about 15 years ago when, after reading something about Christopher Hitchens, I discovered Humanism, and I read a quote from Claire Rayner who was just finishing her stint as president of the then British Humanist Association. In that quote she said *“I was a Humanist without knowing it for many years before I found the association. When I did, it was like finding a sort of home”*. That pretty much summed up how I felt. I had been an atheist for many years by then but *Humanism*, for me, was so much more positive.

“But not every Humanist is an *active* Humanist?” I suggested. “No” replied Simon, “But I guess I am a joiner at heart. As a kid I was in the Cubs, Scouts, Air Training Corps, youth club and every sports team I could

have a go at. Later on I coached cricket and football teams and I always ended up in organizing committees. When I discovered the then local Isle of Wight Humanist and Secular Group – run by Derek Stirman – it seemed natural for me to get more involved.”

“So what do you get out of it?” I asked. Simon smiled. “Well, I get to meet so many inspiring people who I might never have come across in normal life. As a sporting person I would describe meeting and engaging with Humanists as a kind of mental workout, and some of those people are truly inspiring. Jim Al-Khalili was a prime example, and he gave a talk to us here a couple of years ago. It was amazing, and there was standing room only – his talk was our most successful event so far, with over 140 people attending.”

It would transpire during my interview with Simon that Jim Al-Khalili was a Humanist hero of his anyway. It was Jim that got Simon into the Blackham Society which Jim formed. “Humanist philosopher, Harold Blackham, is certainly someone I would have loved to have had a long lunch with” Simon explained. “Alice Roberts is also one of my heroes,” he added. “She has done wonders for the membership of Humanists UK. When she became our president, there was another rush of Humanists UK members, and membership there is now nearing the 100,000 mark.”

But he agrees that there is still much that needs to be done locally to support wider Humanists UK initiatives – especially to do with assisted dying, abortion, and Humanist marriage, and of course faith schools, where there is a serious lack of choice for non-religious parents on the Isle of Wight. ▶



"I have two step daughters and a son, all of whom I am immensely proud," said Simon, "but I have had some issues with the religious element of their education such as assemblies when the girls were at a local CofE controlled school – and as a governor of that school I always found prayers before meetings embarrassing and slightly annoying." Among other things, Simon also wants to ensure that local Humanists have some proper representation at Remembrance Sunday ceremonies in the Island – a particular issue that the IOW Humanists committee have been considering recently.

Simon frowned a little when I asked him whether he was optimistic about the future of local Humanism. "I feel we have lost some momentum since Covid," he said. "Initially, I just wanted to reach out to all our members and supporters on the Island to make sure they were OK, and we have had some successes – most notably a lovely summer evening we had at Ventnor Botanical Gardens. We are also arranging some online speaker talks for early 2021, but the pandemic would have set back thousands of local groups and associations of all sorts, and like everybody

else, we will have to work hard to regain our momentum."

As the interview began to draw to a close, I asked Simon if he had anything to say to you, our lovely readers of *Humanistically Speaking*. "Please look us up on social media," he said. "Google IOW Humanists and follow us on Facebook and Twitter and on my personal Twitter at @sbligh." "I'll do that with pleasure," I said.

My thoughts at the end of the interview were that the Isle of Wight might be a great holiday destination, but the Isle of Wight Humanists are not by any means a sleepy sinecure. It is without doubt a dynamic and ambitious group with fresh ideas, and certainly worth keeping an eye on.

I thanked Simon for his time, vaguely wondering what my chances might be if I asked whether – after the coronavirus has passed – I could pop over sometime on a nice summer's day for a swim in his private pool. And later on I kicked myself for not asking him! Oh, well...

David Brittain
Executive Editor



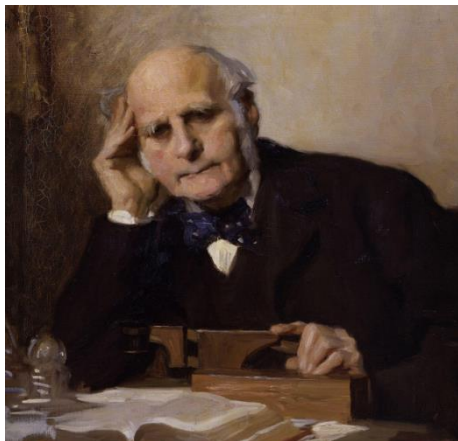
Thought for the Day

What happens when the theory of evolution goes bad?

David Brittain reflects on the life of Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton

In Victorian Britain, Francis Galton was not just a child prodigy, he was a member of scientific aristocracy. A younger half-cousin to Charles Darwin, and an early exponent of Darwin's theory of evolution, he was a respected member of the most august scientific societies of his day. So what could possibly go wrong?

When Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 Galton's life changed irrevocably, because on reading Darwin's reports on animal breeding he quickly realised the implications it had for human development. He began to gather data on a massive scale in order to research human heredity. He sought family links for features like height, facial image, colour of eyes and hair etc., and any unique abilities like intelligence and physical prowess. The result was his 1869 book, *Hereditary Genius*, published exactly ten years after Darwin's *Origins*, in which he explored the possibility of improving the human race, where *'the weak could find refuge in celibate monasteries or sisterhoods, and where the better sort from other lands were welcomed, and their descendants naturalised'*. Such an assertion



Sir Francis Galton, Fellow of the Royal Society (1822 – 1911) pioneered the idea of eugenics

from an eminent scientist today would mean the end of their career overnight, but in Victorian Britain it merely served to stir debate. Later on, he would suggest that *'... The Chinese... should be encouraged to emigrate to Africa and displace the inferior aboriginal blacks.'* A comment that might lead to arrest for inciting racial hatred today, but in 1873 it was merely a controversial opinion. Of course, to some extent we all inherit our abilities from our ancestors, and his findings might be seen as logical for that time, but heredity was not really understood until Mendel's discoveries were uncovered in the 1900s, and even then, the complexities of heredity in animals were not appreciated properly until much later. Nevertheless, Galton's naïve conclusions led him to coin the



Musings by Maggie

Some people will perish because of their irrational beliefs...

If ever Darwin's theory regarding the adaptation and evolution of organisms needed a demonstration in real terms, nature has certainly provided us with one in the virus which causes Covid-19. Fortunately, we are assured by scientists that the recent new variants, although far more virulent than the original one, will still be defeatable by the vaccines that are now becoming available in order to fight this rampant disease.

However, a vaccine will only be effective if the recommended 70 per cent uptake is achieved and it cannot have escaped the notice of anyone who keeps an eye on the media that there are certain sections of society that are cautious, suspicious or even downright sceptical on the issue. The reasons for this are many and various and not all to do with religion, but many of them are and it is some of these that I would like to look at here.

In the US, objections to vaccination are tied up with politics. There is a strong "religious right" movement there connected with anti-statism.



Rapper Kanye West believes that vaccines will put chips inside us

The rapid decline in religion and the prospect of more liberal legislation around issues such as abortion, equal marriage, LGBT+ rights, sex and relationship education, etc., has increased mistrust of authority, leading to conspiracy theories. For certain Christians there are anxieties relating to the "end times" as depicted in Revelation, with references to the "mark of the beast" which, if accepted, puts one's soul in jeopardy of unfavourable divine judgement, with organisations like the WHO and the UN seen as the Antichrist: "You will be mandated to accept vaccinations, or you will not be able to buy or sell" states the [Plain Truth](#) magazine. Popular US rapper Kanye West has added fuel to this fire in a [recent interview](#): "It's so many of our children that are being vaccinated and paralyzed. So when they say the way we're going to fix Covid is with a vaccine, I'm extremely cautious. That's the mark of the beast. They want to put chips inside of us, they want to do all kinds of things, to make it where we can't cross the gates of Heaven."

Another strong influence is the [Word of Faith movement](#), whose adherents preach a “Prosperity Gospel” or “Health and Wealth Gospel”, in support of which various biblical texts are invoked, including Psalm 91 which includes several verses exhorting believers to trust in God and God only to protect them from disease:

“Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence... (do not fear) for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday... A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee... There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.”

One preacher, Kenneth Hagin, explains on his [website](#) in an article entitled “The Christ Cure”:

“It is up to you to believe and receive from ascension and seating on High, Jesus Christ already has purchased everything you’ll ever need. We talk about Jesus’ blood being shed for the redemption of sin. Yes, it was, but that blood also was shed to obtain our healing. Jesus Christ has healed you. It’s now time for you to arise and receive. We have the anointing or power of God. And with that power, we can take what God says in His Word, believe it, act on it, and receive it for ourselves. That is why it is now up to you to receive whatever you want from God Based on God’s Word, I can confidently say to you — whoever you are, wherever you are, and whatever your situation: “Jesus Christ cures you! Arise and receive your healing — right now!”

In other words, you don’t need a vaccine to protect you from Covid 19 and if you do get it, it’s your own fault for not having enough faith.

The fear that foetal cell lines from aborted babies may have been used in the manufacture of vaccinations bothers not only Christians but also Muslims and Jews, who also worry that [pork gelatin](#) may be present. Muslim scholars have come forward to say that the vaccine is [not halal](#) and there have been assurances from [Pfizer](#), [Moderna](#) and [AstraZeneca](#) that there is [no foetal matter or animal gelatin](#) in any of the Covid 19 vaccines.

Stigmatisation of Muslims as super-spreaders of the virus has intensified a pre-existing mistrust of authority, of which health services are seen as a representative, based on longstanding feelings of marginalisation.

These are all real fears based on deeply held beliefs and will only be overcome by clear messaging and addressing the underlying social issues. Some people, of course, are so ingrained in their beliefs that nothing will convince them, and sadly some of them will perish because of those beliefs.





Letters & Emails

Eric Hayman, Dorset, in defence of Marcus Rashford's dad...

For Roz Mercer (*Humanistically Speaking*, January) to write that Robert Rashford (father of footballer Marcus Rashford) 'sired' five children implies he is an animal. Animals have 'sires' and 'dams'; people have 'fathers' and 'mothers'. That Robert and Melanie Rashford split up when Marcus was young is nothing rare; it happened to my parents. When in 1940 my feckless unmarried father had sex with my unmarried mother they were *jointly* responsible for my conception. My father was an unwilling bridegroom some five months later and he and my mother were soon divorced. It's not necessarily the father's fault.

And why blame governments that 'have failed consistently to tackle what is at the very heart of poverty'? To some extent this may be fear of being called 'racist', as in the Rotherham sex abuse scandal. One of the biggest alleged causes of crime and poor school performance among African-British children and adults is the absence of father figures at home. But how is people having children they cannot afford to have, or parents not bringing up their children together, the fault of governments? You might as well blame the government for every human misdoing; how about blaming it when I break a speed limit? For children to 'grow up with better financial stability' requires better parents more than better government.

P.S. Re Chris Smith's problem with reading the relatively small type face of the online version of *Humanistically Speaking*, try enlarging the type on the screen. In Windows, use Ctrl and the + key. I'm sure Mac has something similar.

Charlie Yianoullou, Guildford & Woking Humanists, on the case for vegetarianism

About three years ago I was persuaded by the environmental, health and in particular, the animal welfare arguments to become a vegetarian. However, as a lifelong lover of meat, I was looking for reasons/excuses to reverse my decision. Perhaps, if the animal was free range and had a good life it would be ok to eat it? I tried to ascertain the characteristic of a human life that made it more valuable than the life of an animal. Some have said it is our superior 'intelligence'. But is that really an appropriate metric? If one of my children is more intelligent than the other, does their life have more value? I concluded the answer to be 'no'. In my opinion this is a question of morality. Is it moral to take the life of an animal in order to consume it? I think not!

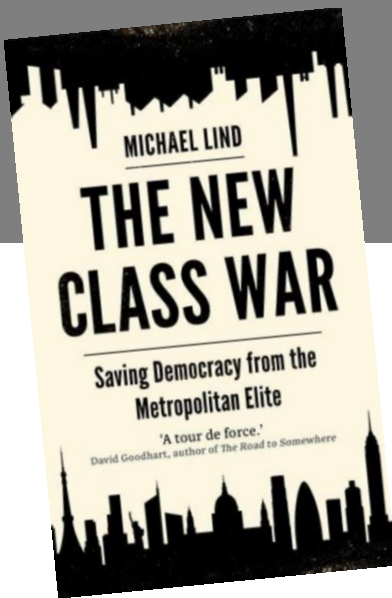
Meg Rolfe, Dorset, on 'Cats and the Meaning of Life'...

Having four cats during the past 35 years has proved to be one of the best experiences of all. They have the best of all worlds, perfectly adapted to their natures, and yet with very individual characters, like humans, but without the negative qualities!

Stephanie Forster, Humanist Celebrant, on controversial opinions...

Many thanks for the January edition of *Humanistically Speaking*, an enjoyable read – it's great to hear other people's opinions on topical and possibly controversial items and often they resonate with views of my own that I may not share so readily!

'The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Metropolitan Elite' (2020) by Michael Lind



Michael Lind is a professor at the University of Texas and co-founder of New America, a centre-left think tank.

It's now commonplace to blame the likes of Donald J. Trump for the perilous state of democracy but Michael Lind, in this illuminating book, argues that Trump and 'populism' are symptoms of a much deeper problem in Western democracy.

But first, a primer in political terminology. We hear a lot about 'liberalism', 'neoliberalism', and the 'metropolitan liberal elite'. What do we mean by these terms? 'Liberalism' is multi-faceted and difficult to pin down, but in general it means freedom of the individual from the constraints of religion, gender, traditional morality, place of birth and so on. 'Neoliberalism' means handing over as much of the economy as possible to the private sector and accepting the gross inequalities which result from this as inevitable and even beneficial. The 'metropolitan liberal elite' are

are university-educated city-dwellers who are doing very well out of the borderless globalised economy. They are suspicious of democratic politics and as far as possible they want to hand government over to experts and legally-enforceable rules.

Lind argues that this metropolitan elite has successfully installed itself as the dominant 'overclass' over the last forty years to the detriment of working class people. It no longer matters whether you vote left or right, you always end up with government by this elite. This, he argues, causes smouldering rage and it is the real reason for the populist backlash of Trump, Brexit, and the *gilets jaunes*.

He argues that the answer to 'demagogic populism' is not more liberalism or a return to the status quo. We need to return to some form of 'democratic pluralism' or the 'class compromise' which was installed after the Second World War and lasted until around 1975. If Western democracies fail to reinstate some form of democratic pluralism, Lind predicts that they will simply decay into banana republics which oscillate between repressive oligarchic rule and disruptive populist revolts. The United States has already advanced a considerable way down this path.

Lind points to countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan as examples of more cohesive and less unequal societies, and countries like Brazil and Mexico at the opposite end of the spectrum. So which way are we heading?

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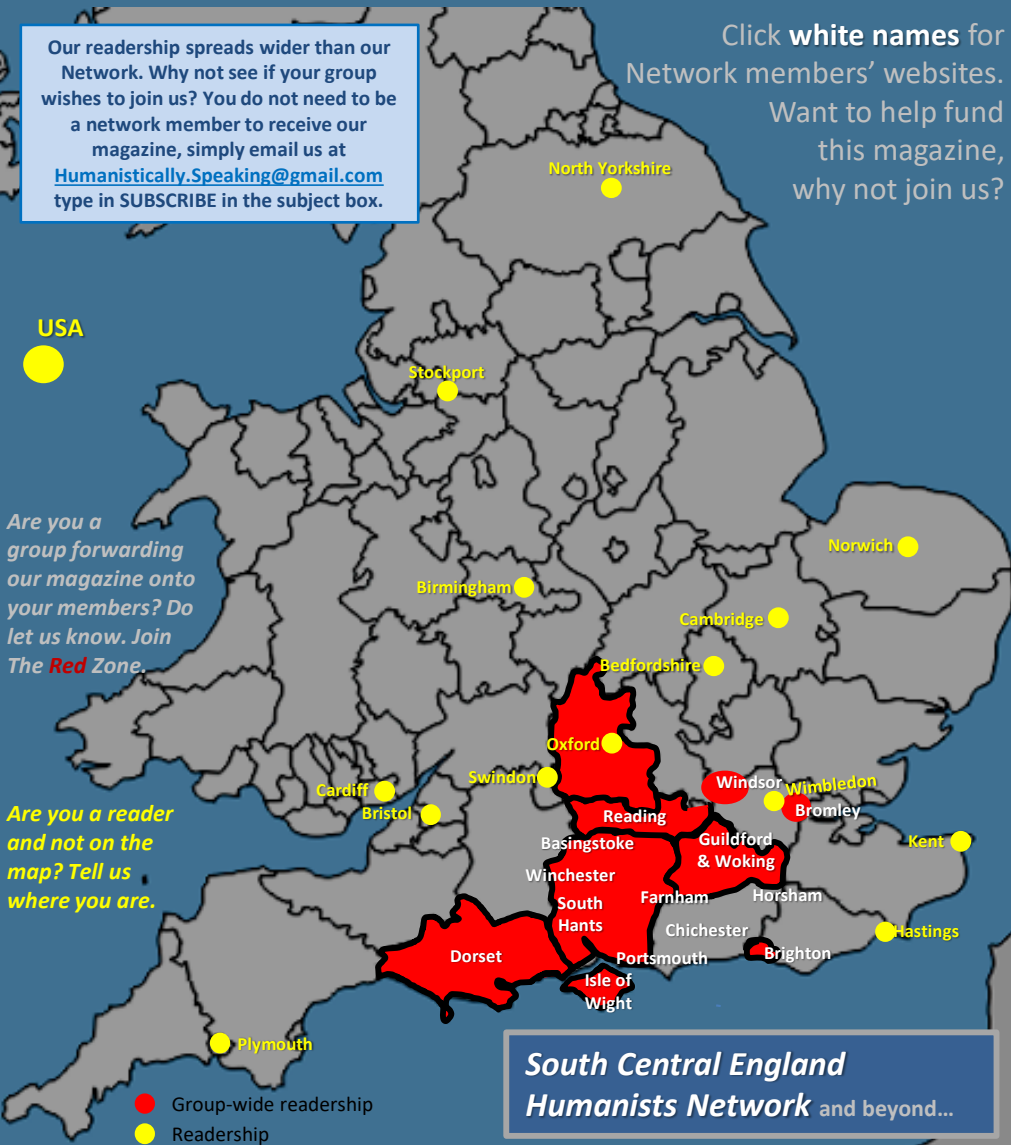
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