

# Suffolk Humanists and Secularists

Newsletter May 2017

## "Popular Pseudoscience: From astrology to fake bomb detectors"

May Meeting

### POPULAR PSEUDOSCIENCE

Our next meeting will be about pseudoscience and how pervasive and subtle it has become.

Most of us are aware of the obviously nonsensical ideas, homeopathy, astrology, crystal therapies and so forth but we are often totally unaware of just how often similar nonsense has been, and still is, used to peddle other common and not so common products.

Even government ministers have been taken in by con-artists using pseudoscience to sell everything from health treatments to magic rocks that produce fuel.

And right up there with the best of them are the religions based upon a belief in the supernatural - probably the most widely held pseudoscientific idea of them all.

To hear more pop along to our next meeting on

Tuesday 9th May at 7:30  
in  
The Darwin Room  
Arlingtons Brasserie  
Museum St  
Ipswich

Denis Johnston



"Expose every belief to the light of reason, discourse, facts, scientific observations; question everything, be sceptical because this is the only chance at life you will ever get."

James Randi (conjurer and persistent pseudoscience debunker).

### **Voltaire and Candide with George Bethell**

Our (packed) April meeting featured a talk by George Bethell about the philosopher Voltaire and "Candide".

George began by describing the colourful life of Voltaire (or rather François-Marie Aroue to give him his proper name), but most of the talk

was about his most famous work "Candide".

It is a very short book - 30 chapters in 100 pages and recounts the bizarre tales of a young man brought up in the household of a powerful Baron and tutored by an always optimistic teacher called Pangloss. Pangloss had instilled in Candide the belief that 'all is for the best' in the best of all possible worlds.

Banished from his ancestral home due to a dalliance with the Baron's daughter Cunégonde, Candide travels throughout Europe, South America and Asia experiencing disasters at every turn: earthquakes; syphilis; a brush with the Inquisition and imminent execution. However appalling the experience he always remembers his tutor's wise words that although it may not be obvious now in fact everything is for the best.

This of course is both a satire on the religious explanation for suffering that asserts that suffering is necessary because it leads to a greater good, and that since God must be perfect, the world he created must be perfect also.

Voltaire takes this notion to extremes to highlight its absurdity. For example referring to syphilis Pangloss explains to Candide "for if Columbus had not in an island of America caught this disease, which contaminates the source of life, frequently even hinders generation, and which is evidently opposed to the great end of nature, we should have neither chocolate nor cochineal."

In a similar vein Pangloss, in order to prove the existence of design in the universe, says that "noses were made to carry spectacles, and so we have spectacles" a notion that would delight Creationists everywhere.

Throughout the talk I experienced a growing feeling that I had come across some of this before and it was only towards the end that I clicked - this was Monty Python circa 1760!

Candide is downloadable on the web (free).

Denis Johnston

## Future Events

**Tuesday May 9th 7:30p.m.** (Arlingtons, Ipswich)

"Popular Pseudoscience" (see front page)

**Saturday 27th May Lunch meeting:** The next of these will be held at the Duke of York in Woodbridge from 12:00 noon onwards.

Due to ill health our previous organiser (Richard) is unwell and unable to continue doing this so at the moment please let me know if you plan to attend.

As this is a bank holiday weekend we will need to book so please let me know well ahead.

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**Tuesday 13th June 7:30** at Arlingtons  
Topic: Video: "The Stem Cell Revolution"  
Featuring beautiful hand-drawn animations this charts the history and scientific evolution of stem cell research and raises important ethical questions.

### Suffolk Humanists & Secularists

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