

Welcome to our Autumn issue

The AGM (see below) marks the passing of another 'solid' year for SHandS. The question now is, how do we strengthen our group and spread the word more effectively? If you have suggestions, please share them with the Committee or contact me at shands.editor@gmail.com

Ed.

Committee for 2018/19

- Denis Johnston (Chair)
- George Bethell (Deputy Chair)
- Liz Thompson (Secretary)
- John Mellis (Treasurer)
- Sue Hewlett
- Mike Whybray

Annual General Meeting

Our Annual General Meeting was held on 21st August, followed by a barbeque generously hosted by Anthea and John Mellis. Details of the formal business will be included in the minutes of the AGM, but one important development is worthy of inclusion here - the unanimous adoption of a motion for SHandS to become a 'partner' of Humanists UK (HUK). The main advantage of this arrangement will be that it will connect us, through a presence on the HUK website, with more than 1000 HUK members in Suffolk. This could be an important factor in determining the success of a publicity campaign and membership drive that the Committee is planning for 2019.

Humanists UK has more than 70,000 members nationally and increasingly speaks on behalf of humanists on political and social issues. Its public campaigns fall into four areas: **Schools and Education**, including 'faith' schools, Religious Education, Science including evolution and creationism, PSHE and sex and relationships education, and collective worship;

Human Rights and Equality, including the need to defend and strengthen the current legal settlement, work related to the specific rights of freedom of religion or belief, freedom of speech and expression, children's rights and socio-economic rights, and issues to do with conscientious objection, marriage laws, chaplaincy/pastoral support, and broadcasting;

Secularism, including the need for constitutional reforms such as disestablishment and removing the bishops from the House of Lords, the relationship between Government and faith communities, national ceremonies such as Remembrance, and public service reform;

Public Ethical Issues, including assisted dying, abortion and other sexual and reproductive rights, human tissues, organ donation, homeopathy, animal welfare, and the genital mutilation of children.

Further details, together with news of progress (and setbacks) can be found at <https://humanism.org.uk/>

Please note that becoming a partner with HUK does not automatically make SHandS members, members of HUK. Individual membership is £4/month and family membership is £6/month. Details at <https://humanism.org.uk/join/>

We will inform you through the monthly bulletin when our partnership is active.

Postscript on human chromosomes

The last newsletter included a piece explaining how we finished up with 23 pairs of chromosomes whilst our great ape cousins retain 24 pairs. Well, immediately after we went to press I stumbled across a fascinating article¹ discussing the counting of human chromosomes. The essence of the article is captured by the paragraph below.

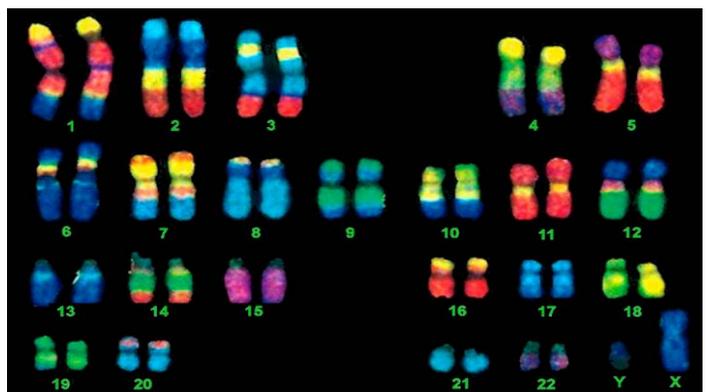
'Blind faith can also impact the field of science. A great example comes from studies of the human chromosome. In 1923, a zoologist by the name of Theophilus Painter reported, based on microscopy, that humans had 48 chromosomes. For the next 30 years, there were numerous reports confirming these findings from various laboratories in the world. Indeed, in 1954, Dr Leo Sachs from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel wrote 'the diploid chromosome number of 48 in man can now be considered an established fact'. Yet, just two years later, two scientists based in Lund, Sweden, Joe Hin Tjio and Albert Levan, reported that there was an error in the counting and that the actual number of chromosomes in humans was 46.

One might ask how scientists could incorrectly count the number of human chromosomes for 30 or more years. Certainly, the technique was difficult in those days. and hence it is possible that they represent innocent errors. However, the fact that at least nine different groups counted the same number raises the possibility to this author that it is easy to be trapped into seeing what one wants to see, of having bias from preconceived ideas, and of not wanting to challenge that which has been published if one obtains conflicting data."

Apparently, scientists are only all too human!

Ed.

¹ Johnson, R. J., 'Finding the truth: blind faith and the lemming phenomenon'. *JRSM*, 2018, Vol. III(5), 175-176.



Poetry

By Richard Layton

Richard offers his tongue in cheek observations on a 'philosophy school' that he joined only to find it was a front for an Advaita Hinduism religious cult where clearing one's mind was advocated as a method of acquiring 'wisdom' - but an empty mind is more receptive to indoctrination...

CLEAR YOUR MIND OF KANT!

(With apologies to Samuel Johnson)

I sit cross-legged on the dew-kissed ground,
Upon the Maharishi's mystic mound;
Where by osmosis, Karma fills my brain,
Which I have cleared of cant and hype again.

This Lotus squat position truly is,
The fast-track answer biz to life's great quiz.
But Sikhs it not in some Guru-some way,
Nor on the Buddhist 'Road to Mandalay'!

Thus as per my Advaita peers and seers;
I've squatted here alone some twenty years;
My empty mind a form of catalyst,
Whereby I morph into a physicist!

I've cleared all of the quirks inside my mind,
My transcendental Quarks are all aligned;
I with complete uncertainty, recall,
Young Werner Heisenberg's famed principle.

The Sutras in my cranial cavity,
Contain all 'Special Relativity';
And 'Quantum Wave-Form Non-Duality',
Along with 'Kant's Space-Time Causality'!

I am, therefore, each Solar day, forsooth,
Pursuing passive pathways to the truth;
That's why each Lunar night I meditate,
To blindly let Advaiters choose my fate.

My mind now drifts through wormholes into space,
And fully brainwashed, I now know my place!
My Dharma lies in every shooting star,
And I know that Nirvana isn't far.

I am reborn the teardrop of a god,
My mind erased in a celestial pod;
My unity has now become diverse,
In fact, I am now Mr Universe!

This party humbled so by Natural Law,
That I'm now Yogic Flying in my awe;
With Vedic wisdom and truth the result,
Of my submission to this blessed cult!

Richard



Pope Rethinks the Death Penalty

By George Bethell

Until earlier this month (August), the Catechism of the Catholic Church stated that capital punishment was "an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes" and "an acceptable... means of safeguarding the common good". Now Pope Francis has declared that the death penalty is, in all cases, "inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person". This is a welcome move, but what took the Church so long to reach the moral high ground long since occupied by most liberal, democratic societies? For example, did the Vatican's most famous resident not realise that the death penalty has for some years been illegal in every European country with the notorious exception of Belarus?

This latest example of the Church playing catch up with social progress on moral issues reminds me of Stephen Fry's intervention in the 2009 [intelligence² debate](#) on 'Is the Catholic Church a Force for Good in the World'. In response to Ann Widdecombe's suggestion that the Church's historical behaviour should be judged by the standards prevailing at the time, Fry responded, 'They thought that slavery was perfectly fine... and then they didn't. And what is the point of the Catholic Church if it says 'Well, we couldn't know better because nobody did'? Then what are you for?'

George

[To watch an 'animated short' (10 minutes) of Fry versus Widdecombe on the moral position of the Catholic Church click [HERE](#).]

Quick Quiz

(All questions are loosely related to things that appear in this newsletter!)

- 1: How many species of wild orchid grow in Britain?
A 17 B 33 C 52
- 2: Who wrote the poem 'Mandalay'?
A Keats B Kipling C Tennyson
- 3: Ann Widdecombe appeared on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2010. On how many shows did she dance before being eliminated?
A 4 B 7 C 10
- 4: Which of these countries abolished the death penalty in 2017?
A Mongolia B Japan C Cuba
- 5: In the acronym 'TED', T stands for Technology and D stands for Design. What does the E stand for?
A Education B Entertainment C Enlightenment
- 6: According to Yuval Harari, *Brave New World* is the most prescient science fiction book ever written. How was its author, Aldous Huxley, related to 'Darwin's Bulldog', Thomas Henry Huxley?
A Grandson B Great Grandson C Great-nephew

Opposite: Yogic Flyers [Come on guys, it's just bouncing around a bit isn't it?]

'Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow' by Yuval Noah Harari

Book review by John Mellis

Professor Harari is a historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem whose best-selling *Sapiens* became a phenomenon - a captivating history of humanity from our development of language and social structures to the present day. In *Homo Deus*, Harari turns his attention to the future of humankind with a series of speculations that are enlightening, entertaining, provocative and shocking.

His thesis is that future human development will be dominated by two desires. First, the pursuit of immortality driven by advances in medicine, genetic engineering, and cybernetics. Harari notes that Christianity, Islam and Hinduism insist that death is decreed by God and that the meaning of our existence lies in the afterlife. However, modern 'humanist' culture and science have a different take - death is a technical problem that we can and should solve.

Second, the pursuit of happiness will continue to govern our behaviours. Harari even foresees the replacement of government targets for GDP with GDH - Gross Domestic Happiness. After all, people don't just want to produce - they want to be happy, and production is important because it provides the material basis for happiness. This comes with a warning that the pursuit of individual and collective bliss is complicated and may result in the widespread use of bio-chemical aids, drugs and virtual realities. In seeking bliss and immortality, humans will acquire god-like control over their biologies. They will be able to create up-graded (and down-graded) versions of humans, as well as machine-enhanced cyborgs and wholly non-organic intelligences. If this sounds like science fiction, Harari observes that researchers have already taught monkeys to control bionic hands and feet disconnected from their bodies through brain-implanted electrodes, and that 'mind-reading' helmets for controlling household devices are currently on the market for just \$400.

Conversely, Harari postulates several scenarios whereby the importance of human individuals will be superseded, and the 20th century 'religions' of humanism and liberalism replaced by other 'religions' based on information networks and artificial intelligences. If humans become inferior to algorithmically-driven systems that replace soldiers, doctors, lawyers and taxi-drivers, then where will political power reside?

Harari's definition of humanism is unconventionally expansive and is expounded in his chapter on 'The Humanist Revolution'. He regards humanism as the defining philosophy of the 20th century and sees it as a 'religion' which has made sacred the supremacy of human thought, expression, feelings and experiences. He even defines three humanist 'sects': liberal humanism, socialist humanism, and evolutionary humanism (which views conflict as the raw material for evolutionary progress). These ideas are unfamiliar and challenge our conventional definition of Humanism. They lead Harari to his final persuasive speculation - that the next cultural revolution will be driven not the sacredness of human thought and freedoms, but by the free exchange of big data and information between algorithms that will know us better than we know ourselves. This, according to Harari, is likely to give rise to a new religion - 'dataism' - which may dominate our political and social structures in the 21st century.

[*Homo Deus*, and its prequel *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, are published by Vintage.]

John

Yuval Harari talks about artificial intelligence, religion, and many other things on an Ezra Klein show podcast [HERE](#).

Ed.

The difficulty of speaking 'Darwin'

At our November meeting last year, we explored the difficulty of talking about evolution in true 'Darwin-speak'. So I listened carefully when, on Saturday 11th October, Leif Bersweden, author of *The Orchid Hunter* was interviewed on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme by Mishal Husain. Here is part of their conversation. Can you spot the words that would have Charles Darwin spinning in his grave?

LB: The bee orchid has flowers that look like bees. They've evolved to exploit the sexual desire of male bees...

MH: What does that mean in terms of how it looks?

LB: Each flower looks like it has three pink petals then there's a little 'bee' resting on the petals. The male bee comes along and he thinks it is the female. He tries to mate with the flower and in doing so picks up pollen which he then takes to the next plant.

MH: Gosh, they are cleverer than one imagined.

LB: Yes, they are pretty clever. It's actually abandoned that mechanism and it now pollinates itself because its pollinators have died out. So it's had to make this drastic life style change in order to survive...

George



Above: Flower of the Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera*. How clever is that?

Forthcoming SHandS Events

Tuesday, 11th Sept.: The Ethics of Being a Vegan

Following hot on the heels of our annual BBQ, Paul Hay will talk on 'the ethics of being a vegan'.

7:30 pm at the Coop Meeting Rooms, 47 St Helen's Street, Ipswich, IP4 2JL

Saturday, 29th September: SHandS Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Tuesday, 9th October: 'Ten-Minute Topics' Evening

A return, after a long absence, to the popular 'hat debate' format where members submit topics of personal interest. Those selected are discussed under a strict 10-minute rule!

7:30 pm at the Coop Meeting Rooms, 47 St Helen's Street, Ipswich, IP4 2JL

Saturday, 27th October: SHandS Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Tuesday, 13th November: War Poetry

Coming just two days after the centenary of the Armistice, we will listen to, and talk about, the poetry of war. Further details will follow in the monthly bulletin.

7:30 pm at the Coop Meeting Rooms, 47 St Helen's Street, Ipswich, IP4 2JL

Saturday, 24th November: SHandS Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Reading the paper version?

If you are reading a paper version of this newsletter but still wish to access the web links, just drop me an e-mail at shands.editor@gmail.com and I'll send you the URLs. Ed.

Call for Contributions

If you wish to comment on anything you've read in this edition of the newsletter or if you would like to contribute a piece for the winter edition, please contact the editor on shands.editor@gmail.com. We look forward to hearing from you.

Interested in joining us?

If you would like to join Suffolk Humanists and Secularists or if you simply want to know more about us, please contact Denis Johnston on 01394 387462 or

denisjohnston@btinternet.com

You can also contact us through our website:

<http://suffolkhands.org.uk/>

Other Events...

Saturday, 6th October: Clean Air Seminar

A seminar organised by Café Scientifique entitled 'Clean Air Ipswich - Raising awareness, fostering collaboration & taking action'.

09:30 - 12:30 at the Coop Meeting Rooms, 47 St Helen's Street, Ipswich, IP4 2JL

Attendance is free but registration is necessary. Details can be found on the Eventbrite website or click [HERE](#).

Friday 9th November: Remembrance Lecture

The University of Suffolk's Remembrance Lecture for 2018 will be given by Dr John Greenacre and is entitled "I Consider an Example Should be Made": The trial of Private Benjamin Hart, Suffolk Regiment.

Attendance is free but registration is advised. Details can be found on the university's website (www.uos.ac.uk) or click [HERE](#).

Until 20th January 2019

'I Object' - an exhibition at the British Museum on the subject of dissent. *Private Eye* Editor Ian Hislop was invited to select objects that explore the idea of dissent, subversion and satire. Chosen objects range from graffiti on a Babylonian brick to a Trump-era 'pussy hat'.

Details can be found on the British Museum website or click [HERE](#). Tickets cost £10.

Suggested Viewing and Listening

Recommended on YouTube

An example (90 seconds) of the beauty that can arise from simple laws of physics. Click [HERE](#).

Recommended Web Page

An interactive map from Amnesty International showing how, over the past ten years, some progress has been made towards the abolition of the death penalty around the world. Click [HERE](#).

Recommended Podcast

Subscribe to the **TED Talks Daily** podcast to hear 'thought-provoking ideas on every subject imaginable -- from Artificial Intelligence to Zoology, and everything in between -- given by the world's leading thinkers and doers'. App available for all mobile devices or access talks directly through Alexa or Google Home.

Quick Quiz Answers

1: C
2: B
3: C
4: A
5: B
6: A