

Welcome to our Summer issue

Peter Thompson's provocative piece opposite asks us whether we want to be activists or if we are satisfied with being 'navel gazers'. If you want to suggest how SHandS should respond to the gauntlet that Peter throws down please contact me at shands.editor@gmail.com Ed.

Learning about Humanism

In February, Humanists UK, in collaboration with online course provider Future Learn, launched a new 'massive open online course' (MOOC) entitled '*Introducing humanism: non-religious approaches to life*'. The course is hosted by Sandi Toksvig and a video introduction is available on YouTube [here](#). You can sign up for the course on the Future Learn website. Access for up to eight weeks is free, but if you want unlimited access and yearn for a certificate of achievement the fee is £52.

If you do try the course, please share your experience and opinions through our newsletter. Ed.

Quick Quiz

These questions are loosely related to things mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter. Good luck!

1: In which Commonwealth country was author Margaret Atwood born?

A Australia B Canada C New Zealand

2: Bertrand Russell was a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. Which of these did not attend Trinity College?

A Charles Darwin B Isaac Newton C A A Milne

3: What is unusual about the copy of 'Rights of Man' held by Thomas Paine in the statue commemorating him in his home town of Thetford?

A The title is in French.
B The book is depicted upside down.
C The title wrongly contains an apostrophe.

4: These chocolate companies were all founded by Quakers - but which one produced the famous 'Five Boys' chocolate bar?

A Cadbury's B Rowntree's C Fry's

5: Sandi Toksvig currently co-presents 'The Great British Bake Off'. Who is her male counterpart?

A Noel Fielding B Russell Brand C Harry Hill

6: Which of these is the correct name for Guernsey's legislative assembly?

A Tynwald
B Stannary Parliament
C States of Deliberation

(Answers at foot of back page.)

Where is our advocacy?

A 'Think Piece' by Peter Thompson

As humanists, we don't believe in any god, we don't worship in a temple of any kind, and we meet to discuss what we think are important issues. Nationally, we pursue policies which support secular education in schools and ethical issues which we think deserve government attention. In other words, we lobby national government just as the religious bodies do. Through our national body we are therefore doing battle with faith schools, whether Church of England, Muslim, Jewish, or any other faith group.

But locally, on our own patch in Suffolk, what are we doing? Denis has been the voice of humanism in schools for some years, taking part in debates and assemblies when invited. Before him, Margaret was very active in the same way. Our voice has been heard on Radio Suffolk too, so the Local Education Authority and media know we are here. Yet if you asked the man or woman in the street in this county 'What do you believe in?', how many would say "I'm a Humanist". We know from published statistics that more than half the population say they have no religious affiliation. Many might say they are "Agnostic", meaning they don't know if there is a god but perhaps there is. The ultimate cop-out when faced with a question about belief.

I would like to suggest that we aren't doing much to argue the case for a humanist approach to life. Even compared with the dwindling congregations in Suffolk churches, we are a tiny minority. We attract between 10 and 20 people to our meetings, contemplating our own humanist navels. And this covers the whole of Suffolk, with a population of 740,000! There must surely be scope for a much bigger response than our dozen or so navel-gazers. If we were more proactive on the question of, say, faith schools, setting out to lobby our local politicians, maybe humanism would attract more adherents and maybe our voices would be heard more clearly. That doesn't mean we need to get on a soapbox to try to whip up a mob. But we might pursue a policy of increasing our membership by word of mouth, using the local media to publicise our views and simply standing up to be counted.

Wouldn't it be good to find a vox pop radio journalist picking people out of the crowd and finding at least half of them saying "Well, speaking as a humanist, I think...". Shouldn't we be "selling" ourselves .. as the representatives of a movement which espouses all the things we talk about - the things Thomas Paine was talking about back in the 1760's? The *Rights of Man* are as relevant today as they were then... and he had much tougher and more entrenched opponents!

Peter

"I always wanted to open a delicatessen in Jerusalem and call it 'Cheeses of Nazareth'."

Sandi Toksvig

On Assisted Dying

By George Bethell

One strand of Humanists UK's work in the field of public ethical issues is the support of those who wish, with good reason, to end their lives in ways which are currently illegal in the UK. Their website states, '*We have long supported attempts to legalise assisted dying, assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia across the UK, for those who have made a clear decision, free from coercion, to end their lives and who are physically unable to do so themselves. In many cases, the person in question will be terminally ill. However, we do not think that there is a strong moral case to limit assistance to terminally ill people alone and we wish to see reform of the law that would be responsive to the needs of other people who are permanently and incurably suffering.*' In recent weeks, this topic has repeatedly been in the news.

At the beginning of May, David Goodall, a respected botanist and ecologist, ended his life at a clinic in Switzerland by administering a lethal drug under medical supervision - an option not available to him in his native Australia. Dr Goodall said that at the age of 104 his life was no longer enjoyable because failing eyesight and poor mobility meant he was no longer independent and could not get out into the bush where he had been happiest.

At the same time, Noel Conway, who is terminally ill with motor neurone disease, went to the Court of Appeal to challenge the current ban on assisted dying in the UK. He wants the right to enlist the help of medical professionals to end his life when he feels it has become unbearable. Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, puts an eloquent case for those, like Noel Conway, wishing to die with dignity in an interview with Sky News.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1PeICe4MUk>)

In the interview, Copson tackles the often cited argument that changing the law will put pressure on people to end their lives when they think they have become a burden to others. He argues that for some individuals, but not all, loss of independence and, as a consequence, increasing dependence on others may well be a valid reason (amongst many others) for choosing to end one's life.

Finally, in mid-May, the parliament of Guernsey (a British Crown Dependency) debated a proposal to give terminally ill people access to assisted dying. This was supported by the Chief Minister, Gavin St Pier, but ultimately defeated by 24 votes to 14. Richy Thompson, Humanists UK's Director of Public Affairs, said, '*We are disappointed by today's outcome, which will let down many people who need a change in the law. With more and more jurisdictions around the world making assisted dying legal, it seems clear to us that legal assisted dying in Guernsey and across the rest of these isles is surely a matter of when, not if.*'

George

Assisted Dying in the UK: A Timeline

1961 – The Suicide Act decriminalises suicide in England and Wales. The Criminal Justice Act (1966) extends this to Northern Ireland. [Suicide was never an offence under Scots Law.]

2002 – Diane Pretty dies just two weeks after losing a case at the Human Rights Court (HRC) to legalise assisted suicide

2015 – HRC rejects a case brought by Jane Nicklinson and Paul Lamb to change the law to allow assisted dying

2015 – Parliament votes on plans to make assisted suicide legal, but the proposal is defeated 330 to 118 votes

2017 – Neil Conway is granted permission to appeal to the Court of Appeal after his case to die with dignity was rejected by the High Court.

Poetry: a personal selection

When asked to select a piece of poetry, SHandS Secretary Liz Thompson selected Robert Frost's celebrated poem '*The Road Not Taken*' because "it is about choice and making your own way in life and not taking the easy path".

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

The flags of the six countries in which human euthanasia is currently legal are shown below. Can you name them?
(Answers on back page.)



Letters to the Editor

Dear SHandS

I've read the Spring edition of the newsletter but, unsurprisingly, apart from one brief Facebook quote, the contents are entirely homo-centric.

Since sentient life evolved on the planet suffering has been incalculable but, with the arrival of *Homo sapiens* it has been given an additional dimension. Hunter-gatherer man, leading a precarious hand-to-mouth existence, could hardly be expected to have shown concern for other animals but, modern mankind, influenced no doubt by its genetical inheritance, continues to use the planet and all life on it for its own utility, with disastrous consequences, not least for animals.

Sapiens behaves with unimaginable violence towards its own kind, but this is dwarfed by the scale and ferocity of violence, mostly legal, meted out to animals. This truly is seen as the biggest 'elephant in the room' by those who have freed their minds from cultural prejudices in the treatment of animals. In this respect, I fail to make any distinction between humanists and the religious groups they criticise. There are animal rights groups within some of them and Quaker Concern for Animals is uncompromising in its literature. Is there a similar group within Humanists?

Every day is a holocaust for animals so, it is in poor taste for George Bethell to find humour in Dr. Fleischman's name. She is trying to reduce suffering in the face of callous indifference and hostility.

Barrie Sheldon

Humanists UK has produced a paper giving a humanist perspective on animal welfare. This begins with the statement, *'There is no universally agreed humanist perspective on animal welfare. Humanists try to use reason, evidence, empathy, and respect for others when thinking about ethical questions. They do not have a strict creed or any unquestionable rules to follow, or any compulsory customs or food taboos that might influence their attitude to the treatment of animals. Reason and experience can lead humanists to different conclusions when addressing questions on animal welfare. They have to think for themselves, and decide whether, and how far, to extend their concern for the welfare of human beings to other animals'*. The paper is available at <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/public-ethical-issues/animal-welfare/>

Information on Quaker Concern for Animals is available at <http://quaker-animals.co.uk/>

Ed.

Did you know...

The chimpanzees and bonobos mentioned by Richard and John (see opposite), along with gorillas and orangutans have 48 chromosomes (24 pairs) whilst we members of the genus *Homo* have just 46 chromosomes (23 pairs). This looks like a major problem for those who argue that we have a common ancestor. However, sequencing of the genomes of humans and chimpanzees shows that our chromosome #2 was formed by the end-to-end fusion of two chromosomes that remain separate in our great ape cousins. Problem solved!

For a nice presentation of this see Ken Miller on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dK3O6KYPmEw>

Dear Editor

In the Spring Newsletter, John Mellis's report on 'Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Humanist View' appears to support the 'Killer Ape' theory of Human-kind, but this view is now rejected by most scientists. John states, "Some Humanists believe that humans are intrinsically good... I don't think so", but I doubt Humanists would agree with the neo-religious view that we're all sinners!

As for comparing us with chimpanzees and bonobos, according to Psychology Today* : 'We know that common chimpanzees can be highly aggressive, but their sister species, the bonobos, rarely are; and *both are equally related to humans*'. (Emphasis added.)

John then claims, "history shows we are intrinsically a warlike, aggressive... species" but the Psychology Today post states: 'In the human fossil and archaeological record there is no good evidence of intense aggression and warfare until very recently, and it is associated with the advent of permanent settlements, agriculture, and social stratification. Increased social inequality and more complex political and economic systems seem to correlate with more types of aggression and violence in human societies'

The existence of the 'Golden Rule' in most religions and societies and the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' clearly demonstrate that most humans desire peace.

Finally, The Seville Statement on Violence adopted by UNESCO in 1989 was designed to refute "the notion that organized human violence is biologically determined.

Richard Layton

*Fuentes, A. (2012). *Bad to the Bone: Are Humans Naturally Aggressive?* available at <http://psychologytoday.com/>

Richard has commented on my address to the local UN Association meeting on Article 1 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights where I said "Many humanists believe that humans are intrinsically good - capable of reasoning their way to morally good behaviour or using our conscience to guide us instinctively. I don't think so - I am afraid that we are intrinsically a warlike, aggressive and tribal species more like our distant cousins the chimpanzees than our other, gentler distant cousins the orang-utans and bonobos". I went on to say that therefore "the final words of Article 1 are crucial - 'to act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. This is essentially the so-called Golden Rule ...".

Richard's reference to the 'Killer Ape Theory' of human evolution (which, I admit, I'd never heard of) is interesting but no part of my opinion. I merely observe the modern history of human conflict and the fact that the animals directly responsible for most human deaths are... Humans. Currently around 0.5 million deaths annually are due to warfare, genocide, terrorism and homicides - a number second only to deaths from mosquito-borne diseases*. The extent to which our tendency to aggression is intrinsic or newly-found is debatable - but its outcomes are clear.

* See <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-animals-that-kill-most-humans.html>

John Mellis

We welcome letters from readers. Letters should be sent to shands.editor@gmail.com. Please note that letters may be edited for length and clarity.

A Quarter Past...

13 March: Sue Hewlett arranged a most successful visit to the Ancient House, Thetford to hear about the life and works of Thomas Paine. Subsequently, on the 25 March, Denis Johnston appeared on Suffolk Radio to talk about the visit and the great man.

26 March: George Bethell took part in an inter-faith event at Colchester Academy where he introduced Year 7 students to a humanist world view.

31 March and 28 April: Members enjoyed the monthly SHandS lunch in Woodbridge.

11 April: Following a SHandS visit to the Quakers in January, we were invited back to talk about humanism. Denis Johnston met with a group of about a dozen and found considerable common ground.

23 April: Liz and Peter Thompson talked to us about the Margaret Atwood trilogy 'Oryx and Crake' and all the issues raised for the future of our species and the planet.

8 May: George Bethell talked to us about the mathematician, philosopher, and social activist Bertrand Russell.

Suggested Viewing, Listening and Reading

Recommended on YouTube

In 3½ minutes, Bertrand Russell explains why he isn't a Christian.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsSCyNpo_I

Recommended on YouTube

The charismatic Jane Goodall gives a passionate and challenging lecture on 'What separates us from chimpanzees.'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51z7WRDjOjM>

Podcast: We Need to Talk About Death

All six episodes of this BBC radio series, hosted by Joan Bakewell are available at

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09jvp31>.

Article: Malaria genetics: study shows how disease became deadly

A short BBC piece on how the most effective killer of humans evolved. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-44146321>

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 autumn edition, please contact the editor on shands.editor@gmail.com. We look forward to hearing from you.

Euthanasia Quiz Answers Netherlands, Belgium, Colombia, Luxembourg, Canada, India

Forthcoming SHandS Events

Tuesday, 12th June: AI - Ethical Issues?

This meeting will include some short presentations of developments in Artificial Intelligence together with discussions on some of the major ethical issues to be faced as AI becomes a more significant part of our lives.

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

Saturday, 24th June: SHandS Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 10th July: Humanists UK Presentation

The details have yet to be finalised but it is hoped that a representative of Humanists UK will talk to us about the organisations work. In particular, we will be exploring whether or not SHandS should become formally affiliated with Humanists UK.

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

Saturday, 28th July: SHandS Pub Lunch

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

Tuesday, 21st August: AGM and BBQ

Anthea and John Mellis have kindly offered to host the BBQ designed to encourage people to attend the AGM! Further details and requests for help will follow.

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

Following hot on the heels of our annual BBQ, the topic of our September meeting will be on the ethics of being a vegan.

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

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/>

Quick Quiz Answers

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