



HUMANIST viewpoints



A picture too delightful not to use. Humanist House's Office had three Dalmatians looking for the other 98. Our ever-helpful Gillian settled things down, and someone had the wit to take a photo of this surreal scene.

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FRIDAY 21 JUNE: WORLD HUMANIST DAY PARTY SATURDAY 22 JUNE: CONVENTION DINNER

Follow us on our website www.hsnsw.asn.au and Facebook



MEMBERSHIP PAGES

President's continuing appeal to members to volunteer to assist in building our future

We still depend on elder members who have been outstanding workers for Humanism in NSW. We wish them a long life, but we cannot expect them to carry the load indefinitely. Times have changed, and we know modern generations find many other demands on their prime time in the twenty-first century. So why don't we all look for new ways to volunteer, with more of us offering to assist in smaller amounts at a time! There are so many ways to help, Send me an expression of interest. List your skills and how many or how few hours a month you might be available., This way we can build a new corps of volunteers, and begin to rebuild our NSW Humanists community. We particularly appeal to members between 20 and 70 years of age, to assist in growing a future for this organisation, now 59 years young, with assets to be treasured, a heritage to be celebrated, a world network of activism, and a positive philosophy to be shared.

Email President at lovemuz@gmail.com WE NEED YOU! PLEASE DON'T ASSUME THIS REQUEST IS TO SOMEONE ELSE.

Please Consider Making a Donation or Bequest. From \$5 to \$10,000, any amount can help protect and sustain the diverse efforts of the NSW Humanist Society. Please also consider us in your Will. All bequests contribute to the longevity of the Humanist Society of NSW and Humanism. Good-quality freethought books can be donated to the Society's Library or for sale in the Rationalist Bookshop.

Please Send Your letters, articles, information and ideas for inclusion in Viewpoints

Some members are not on the Internet and some live far from Sydney. Attendance and interaction get more difficult as we age, and distances need more assistance to be overcome. Stronger, younger and newer members can assist. A newsletter is one thing all members can share in. We report on what's happening at Humanist House through the year, but also need contributions from individual members of the Society. You are welcome and encouraged to send in news and views for publication. These can be controversial - there's no party line. They can be on diverse topics - Humanism has a broad range. We most-of-all love to hear from members who haven't contributed before. A short 'letter to the editor' is a valued inclusion. Disagree with anything you see - or share why you do agree! We can't guarantee everything will be used, but with patience and flexibility we'd love to include all we can. Communication by email is preferred. Handwritten and typed contributions might get postponed. **Email items to lovemuz@gmail.com.**

Members' comings and goings. We still don't seem to be getting any new members, but I'm pleased to say no-one has died in the first quarter of 2019. Remember that two members at the same address get a discount membership of \$45 for the pair. If your cohabitant shares your interest in humanism why not ask them to join up?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I read some excellent articles from Elizabeth Farrelly in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. You might see them at the following URLs if they haven't disappeared behind a paywall:

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/five-ways-sydney-is-determined-to-self-sabotage-20190328-p518hy.html>

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-most-dangerous-thing-about-democracy-20190228-p510tw.html>

Before the recent NSW election she warned:

"We think the election is the small guy's secret weapon, our big win against tyranny, our chance to put the dopes and dunderheads out with the garbage and start over. Wrong. Elections are deeply undemocratic!"

Elizabeth Farrelly is, among other things, an architect who cares about her city's streetscapes and skylines. After the election result she didn't pull any punches:

"A city that voluntarily gives such a government four more years to sack its finest treasures deserves everything it gets - and everything it loses."

Unfortunately her observation is guttingly spot on. The voter out there **will** vote **against** their interests!

Michael Daley certainly was lacking political nous for saying what he said, but I suspect that bringing forth that racism story was timed for maximum political effect, to herd enough voters back to the Libs, to stop him gaining power.

It has shades of how Whitlam was destabilised by the Kemlani affair in the 1970s. I wouldn't put it past the Murdoch press that they had a hand in that.

Shorten *et al*, in the lead up to the Federal election, will be certainly subject to similar destabilising attacks.

Snide comments against Labor and progressive interests nearly completely dominate the *Daily Telegraph* headlines unless there is some sporting interest.

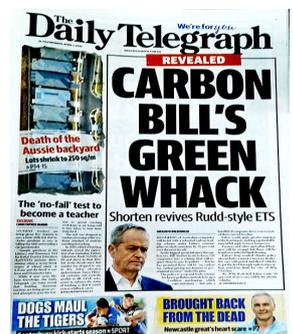
I mean have you ever seen a headline that ScoMo opposed the holding of the banking Royal Commission 26 times, or that Tony Abbott's mucking around with electricity regulations is a major cause of the price rises we all see.

Articles in the business pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* about the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO) have complained often enough that the 'uncertainty' created by government policy - the policy initiated by Tony Abbott - has seriously inhibited investment to maintain supply capacity, and thus driven up electricity prices!

Murdoch's campaign against progressive interests continues on an industrial scale. Yet the vast majority of the punters seem to read the *Daily Telegraph* in preference to the *Sydney Morning Herald* by six to one, looking at the size of the piles of the two papers in a wide range of outlets.

As far as I can see, the approach by *GetUp!* is the only one that can countervail the prevailing Murdoch influence to a meaningful extent.

Victor Bien



THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN HUMANISM

Humanist House, Sydney
21-23 June 2019

We need a 21st century Australian Humanism, robust and flexible for a big-hearted country with a no-nonsense attitude. In the latter 20th century, humanism in Australia seemed a powerful restraint on authoritarianism, but now it is a receding force, marginalised in the struggle to establish guiding values in Australia's emerging secular culture.

Humanism needs to regain its historic role as a flamebearer lighting a path to knowledge, fulfillment and community, available to every human being - a beacon of hope, reason and decency. A Humanism fit for Australia's future must be actively argued for, and this be made our top priority.

New forms of greed, intolerance and oppression, such as nationalism, neo-liberalism, xenophobic populism, alt-right conspiracy theories, opportunistic evangelical cults, and corporate spin doctoring need to be fought.

Humanism can be a competitive, compelling alternative to religion, if we go beyond criticising religious values of the past, to offering humanist values for the future - values that relate to human needs for meaning, security and fulfilment.

Membership everywhere is in decline. We compete with many distractions. We have a fragile dependence on too few activists. To provide energy for the future, we need to somehow build a stronger, younger movement - more members, more funds, more ideas, and programmes directed towards contemporary needs.

But first we need to set forth a strategy to achieve the growth and enhancement we require, and demonstrate to potential members why our movement is relevant enough to their lives and interests to become permanently involved.

Forget religion. Our real vocation is presenting a compelling Australian form of humanism as a desirable identity, a welcoming community, a matured system of values, a fulfilling way of life, a philosophy with realistic answers, an effective approach to progress, an inspiration for creativity, and a movement with personal, local and global goals.

We'll always need to respond to religious privilege and rights violations, but to hold people's interests we need a positive vision. We need to build a capability to present big ideas that are credible, compelling and command attention.

We need members, funds, and friends in high places. We need to discuss efficient processes to better staff the workload of servicing our movement. We need to attract new members from different age groups and social classes.

New generations need to find their own feet as humanists. Democratic process fails if established members don't share space, or project old needs onto new members. The basis for growth is to broaden our diversity in all dimensions.

This doesn't happen naturally or easily. The who, when, where and how we do this takes hard unselfish thinking. We need generous succession strategies to bring in younger leaders and capable new volunteers. Younger can mean anyone under 75! Young people have some dazzling skills, but real work experience helps sort out the show ponies.

Imagine the difference recently retired members, with time on their hands, could make. We could find less onerous ways to help for those still working or raising families. If you're willing to be involved we'll find ways you can help.

Humanism is forever - and for all human beings. It's not a fad just for one century, or for an obscure elite. We can't afford selfishness, nostalgia, complacency, intolerance or apathy.

Australian Humanism needs to be reborn as a living force with its own distinct visions, policies and social goals. A revived Australian Humanism needs to lead social change again, showcasing how humanism contributes to society.

We will be addressing all these issues at a convention titled **The Future of Australian Humanism** on the weekend of 21-23 June 2019, right here in Sydney at Humanist House.

This will be a convention that gets down to work, with panels of ordinary humanists speaking briefly, and responding to constructive Q&A. A facilitator will deliver a summary at the final session of the convention.

Ideas, agreements, and proposals from the convention will appear in subsequent issues of *Australian Humanist*. The current issue of AH has a supplementary programme, which is also complimentary with PDF distribution of *Viewpoints*.

We're not expecting big numbers to attend. It will be a lot of work and just a little bit of play. But we need the whole Australian Humanist Community to get involved.

The more movers, shakers, champions and activists from around the country who can make it along, the more developments we can hope to get happening. But other who can't get there can still send messages of support, ideas and suggestions, before and after the convention.

This convention isn't where it all ends, but where it begins.

Murray Love, President, Humanist Society of NSW

RELIGIONS: TRIBAL, ANCIENT, MODERN, SECULAR, & ECONOMIC

Our February Meetup event was an effort to provoke an interesting, comparative and dispassionate discussion of religion. Not so much about how religion is stupid and evil, but about what a religion is, and whether there are similar secular stupid and evil movements - or even good ones.

We might ask ourselves: How has what 'religion' means changed since ancient and prehistoric times, and between diverse cultures and indigenous peoples? How have the big religions changed over their history? Do 20th century ideologies like fascism, communism and consumerism behave like religions? Is consumerism the new religion? Is neo-liberalism an economic cult? Is atheism a belief? Is non-religion a religion? Is football a religion?

DEFINING RELIGION

Examining the whole shambolic set of the world's religions, it strains the mind to try to find definitions to fit all varieties.

I checked the encyclopaedias. Synonyms of religion were given as faith, belief, divinity, worship, creed, teaching, doctrine and theology. Elements include as devotional practices such as prayer, meditation, rituals, worship, moral conduct, right belief, and participation in religious institutions. These definitions probably have a Christian bias.

Other attempts at definition include variously:

- ❖ Relation to things holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine
- ❖ Belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power
- ❖ Relationship with or attitude towards gods or spirits
- ❖ Particular systems of faith and worship

There are humanistic/naturalistic conceptions of religion:

- ❖ relationship with or attitudes towards the broader human community or the natural world
- ❖ Ways people deal with ultimate concerns about their lives and their fate after death
- ❖ Pursuits or interests followed with great devotion (*This last definition lets devotion to football be called a religion!*)

Often when defining religion, the emphasis is on the motivation and experience of the individual. Yet often religions are not a personal choice, but come as part of the cultural regime the individual is socialised within.

Religions come with a whole socialisation package, to encourage good behaviour, and to bond the individual into the society. If the society has a particular power structure, the religion will reinforce the power structure. Kings have divine rights, while the peasants are burdened with sin!

Religions and superstitions are learned as part of the system of customs that defines membership in a tribe, nation, or subculture. Even taboos, and other forbidden behaviours, can denote an exclusive identity that contributes to self-esteem. Rituals can provide reassurance and social bonding.

Unfortunately factors that bind and lift up those within the group, can work against those that don't fit in. Woe betide outsiders, or those who leave. Humanists are outsiders of all the religions, so it's not unreasonable they have a generally negative view, but religion is still a topic worth clarifying.

TRIBAL RELIGION

Tribal religion is a phrase I'm using to encompass animistic types of religion found in indigenous and hunter gatherer societies - modern, historic and prehistoric. Animism is generally understood as the basis of other types of religion.

Animism attributes humanlike agency to animate, inanimate and invisible beings in the environment. Some of these ideas live on in common superstitions, and in our habit of getting angry with whatever we might have stubbed our toe on. The whole Earth has been conceived as an agency named *Gaia*, capable of defending itself against human depredation.

The belief is that invisible animistic agencies can be appealed to, or even controlled, by various acts of sacrifice or magic. Monotheists view these beliefs as 'primitive', but I find it hard to see the difference, especially when it comes to American evangelicals praying for rain.

Of course there *are* other agencies in the real world, and in most cases these are other *human* beings, with whom we *do* need to develop effective negotiating skills - rather than incantations to manipulate 'hidden' agencies. Of course, we now use science to control natural phenomena, at the risk of failure to appreciate autonomous agency in other species.

Tribal societies like our own traditional Aboriginal people had their own science, integrated with their ceremonial and totemic traditions. They knew the implications of the minutiae visible on the land, to follow game and find water, how to make effective equipment for hunting and gathering and cooking, and how to find their way over long distances.

I don't see evidence that Aboriginal religion actually clashed with their own science, and both seem to have been centred on the needs of the human being, relatively speaking.

ANCIENT RELIGION

Now when we turn to look at 'ancient' religions, after 'civilization' has entered the picture, matters get a bit out of hand. We get things like human sacrifice. The Aztec religion was fierce and oppressive. The ancient Egyptian and Chinese were also oppressive. Workers would be killed to be buried alongside the dead ruler, there to serve him for eternity.

Many of the worst aspects of religion developed in ancient times. Tribes became kingdoms, and there were war gods, and gods exclusive to one nation. Religion was part of the common culture that held a successful state together.

Paradoxically, when tribes and nations were absorbed into

great empires, there was such a mixing of religious traditions that a surprising level of tolerance developed.

Egyptian religion got democratised, with everybody able to get eternal life, once the right hieroglyphs were painted on your coffin! The ancients readily integrated their pantheons, with Ishtar equated with Aphrodite, Venus and so forth.

All sorts of ideas were swapped around and blended together syncretically, and there were secret esoteric or philosophical religions like Mithraism, Gnosticism, Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, Neo-Platonism, or Epicureanism.

Then the empire adopted the aggressive, new, modern religion Christianity. Islam broke though. The fun was over.

MODERN RELIGION

Buddhism, Confucianism and Judaism go back to around 500 BCE but their persistence into modernity makes me include them as modern. The offshoot modern religions, Christianity and Islam, are the most persistent! Modern religions would be yet more totalitarian and warlike than ancient ones.

Hinduism is hard to place, being both ancient and modern. It goes back thousands of years, and major old gods like Indra and Varuna, barely get a look in these days. Is it still the same religion even though the gods keep changing?

Hinduism is held together in an enduring cultural tradition. After all, Hindi is no longer Sanskrit, but there is a continuity between the languages, and modern Hinduism maintains a continuity with its ancient forms.

Historically, Hinduism spread widely in Asia, but was superseded by Buddhism or Islam outside of India. These latter two religions spread even further. Meanwhile, Christianity spread in Europe and their colonial empires.

Buddhism appears exceptional, as a religion that spread on its own merit, without violence. Fundamentalist Christians have tried to deny Buddhism recognition as a 'religion'. It is sometimes described as an atheist religion, but there are prayers, superior beings, and superstitious elements in some varieties of Buddhism.

Confucianism has been tied in with the Chinese state religion, and with Feng Shui and ancestor worship, but, like Buddhism, can also function like a secular philosophy.

There are outliers like Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism and Shintoism, and 'ultra-modern' religions like Mormonism and Scientology. The big modern religions, Christianity and Islam, have been through many different phases and splits.

SECULAR RELIGION

The consciousness of the natural environment has led some in the post-modern world to reconnect with aspects of the indigenous forms of religion. The concept of Gaia has a religious tone. Some activists attribute a quasi-sacred quality to the species and areas they campaign to preserve.

Is environmentalism a secular religion? It could be. But then, we see climate change deniers castigating climate scientists as priests of a new, presumably false religion. This is silly, but if we have anyone acting as priests of any kind, we would like them to have scientific training first!

Looked at from the outside, totalitarian ideologies like Fascism, Nazism and Communism can be thought of as

secular religions, having dogmas, martyrs, penances, heretics, and twisted concepts of salvation.

Nationalism and neo-nationalism can also qualify as secular religions. Secular religions can be among the nastiest kinds. In ancient and pagan times, nations had their specific gods of war, but the millennia of Christian monotheism took that away. The Nazis achieved a lot of effect with sound and light, salutes, symbols, secret societies and propaganda where once gods and sacred rites might have been used.

Unfortunately, there's no room here to explore how people get sucked into these irrational ideas that can harm health, life and human progress. Listing fallacies doesn't get you there. There are deep emotional factors regarding hope and fear, love and hatred. Not to mention lies, and the will to believe them. There's more discussion and study needed.

Calling something a secular religion seems to mainly operate as a critique of someone else's movement as problematic along the lines of an alien religion. Yet it's not impossible for a secular religion to be 'good'. Are there any? I'm not sure.

Some contemporary developments of Epicureanism, Stoicism, Confucianism or even Buddhism can possibly be viewed as progressive and secular, but their proponents might prefer to call them philosophies, rather than religions.

For that matter, it is an interesting question as to what is the difference between a philosophy, a religion and an ideology? What value are words like worldview or lifestance? Where does humanism fit into all this, and what responsibility do humanists accept to construct workable alternatives offering authentic forms of fulfilment?

ECONOMIC RELIGION

A category within secular religion is economic religion. This involves things like the sacralisation of the market within a neo-conservative or neoliberal ideological framework.

Otherwise democratically elected government, become the Great Satan or child-devouring Moloch, to be fought by the knights of private enterprise in defence of the corporations, imagined as heroic individuals defending humanity against the barbaric socialist horde.

There's no shortage of priestly experts in the various think tanks. The hidden hand of the market is the very hand of God, and the successful are his chosen ones.

Similar psycho-economic gurus indirectly drive the popular religion of Consumerism, with the worship of brand labels, status symbols and celebrities. I'm reminded of Edina in the TV show *Absolutely Fabulous*, or the mock motto 'Whoever dies with the most toys wins'.

At the Meetup in February it was hard to get discussion going about economic religions. Perhaps those most concerned about economic oppression can be less concerned about religion. But I think it is unwise to believe that a shift to consumerism from salvationism is a victory for secularism. Worse still, neoliberalism teams up with nationalism in Trumpism - a potent dangerous mix.

Humanists need to be careful not to be dragged into silly culture wars with the clowns of the religious right, while even worse ideologies loom on the horizon.

Murray Love

CALENDAR APR TO JUN 2019

PLEASE REMEMBER THERE IS NO ENTRY TO HUVAT BEFORE 3.00PM DUE TO A COMMITTEE MEETING

HuVAT Sunday 14 April 2019 3.00 for 3.15 p.m. is on CONCEPTS IN ETHICAL DISCUSSION

We need to know what we're talking about on a subject front and centre in the big ideas that have intrigued humanity. Humanism's ethical stance emphasises the agency of human beings, preferring reason and evidence over dogma. So, how do we develop and implement this ethical stance? This talk is an enlightening overview of ethical theory and social behaviour, looking at ethical theories developed by philosophers, including means-based (deontic) vs ends-based (teleological) systems, selfish vs altruistic ethics, and individualistic vs consensus ethics. We'll look at major mechanisms of social behaviour as revealed by biologists, including tit-for-tat behaviour, inclusive fitness, and the genetic basis of reciprocal altruism. We will examine the determinants of ethical behaviour revealed by psychologists, including concepts of fairness, empathy, retribution, and tribalism. How do these contribute to the actual ethical decisions we make? Can we resolve the trolley car paradox? If time permits, we will look at some attempts to live an ethically positive life. Come and explore this key to effective living for human beings. There will be an extensive Q&A session. The speaker will be David Killingly PhD.

NSW Humanists Meetup 3-6PM Sunday 28 April 2019 - a discussion titled COMMUNITY SOCIETY FRATERNITÉ

What does community mean in 21st century Australia? What forms community boundaries? - street, village, tribe, nation, club, movement, humanity, crowd, mob, lifeboat, planet. We used to talk a lot about society but now the word community seems to come up more often. What are the differences? Margaret Thatcher said there was no such thing as society! She didn't seem to understand community either. When 'aspirational' have achieved their McMansion with its own pool, bar, snooker room, and gadgets for every conceivable foodstuff, they don't need to go out. Community can shrink to just family and a few mates. The French Revolutionary value of *Fraternité* suffers from a masculine bias. Siblinghood sounds correct, but does it move us? The word seems mostly used by academics and christians. What can we say to replace the humanistic phrase "The Brotherhood of Man?" Are online communities real communities? How many different 'communities' can one person belong to? Who wants to be part of the NSW Humanists community? What makes anyone part of any community?

HuVAT Sunday 12 May 2019 3.00 for 3.15 p.m. is Murray Love giving a PREVIEW OF THE 2019 HUMANIST CONVENTION

We'll preview what we'll be doing, what we won't be doing, how to help, how not to hinder, what it's all for, and what it all depends on. This has to be a convention that rolls up its sleeves and gets on with the job of revitalising the humanist movement in Australia. A new wave of humanism is urgently needed for the 21 century, responding to contemporary needs, while also continuing essential traditions. We need the whole Australian Humanist Movement to get involved, whether you can manage to get to the convention or not. This convention will not, must not, be where it all ends, but where it all begins. There will be panels of speakers and lots of Q&A. Speakers won't be the usual celebrities, but ordinary humanists with optimism for the future. Over the two days we will have a number of themed sessions. Details are in the programme issued with the *Australian Humanist* and with the PDF version of *Viewpoints*. Tickets will be available at the preview and other Sunday events leading up to the convention. If you can't be there, get them online at: <https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/2019-australian-humanist-convention-the-future-of-australian-humanism-tickets-59694742582>

The convention in June will be in the hall at Humanist House. There aren't a lot of tickets, and you'll need a ticket to get in.

At the NSW Humanists Meetup 3-6PM Sunday 26 May 2019 we'll discuss the problem of THE TWO CULTURES

The full title is *THE TWO CULTURES: Modern vs Postmodern, Science vs Humanities, Fact vs Fiction*. May 2019 is 60 years after C. P. Snow's historic lecture: *The Two Cultures* in which he complained intellectual life in Britain and the West was split between cultures of science and the humanities - a major hindrance to solving world problems. Snow claimed that no more than one in ten at a gathering of the highly educated could answer a simple scientific question. He said the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have no more insight into "the great edifice of modern physics" than their Neolithic ancestors. He later modified his view, hoping for a third culture, and others have pursued this goal. The split affects humanists too. Can humanism become a reconciliatory force? As Snow points out, the majority of the clever people don't go into science. If humanism gets dominated by engineers or the IT crowd, then we're missing out on some clever people. We need balance, but also communication across the divide. There is so much to resolve. Modernism vs Postmodernism isn't a progression, but a dialectic. Let's end the barely unspoken contempt between the science geeks and the humanities nerds. In Fact vs Fiction both sides think they're the winner. Factoids think fiction is bunkum, and Fictoids think facts get in the way of a good story. After sixty years, can we bury the hatchet? - in the ground, not each other's heads. Please join this historic discussion and help solve the division.

WINE AND NIBBLES PARTY FOR WORLD HUMANIST DAY at Humanist House 7.30 pm Friday 21 June 2019 - ALL WELCOME

Whether going to the convention or not, come along and celebrate our movement at a rare Friday night social event.

ALL AT HUMANIST HOUSE, 10 SHEPHERD STREET, CHIPPENDALE - CHECK OUT THE NEW FLOORING

2019 CONVENTION IS ALSO AT HUMANIST HOUSE DISPLACING HUVAT & MEETUP FOR JUNE

'Open Forum' continues to meet each Wednesday night at Humanist House 8.00pm

2019 AUSTRALIAN HUMANIST CONVENTION - THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIAN HUMANISM

HUMANIST HOUSE, CHIPPENDALE - WEEKEND OF 21-23 JUNE 2019

For HSNSW members, there'll be up to twenty \$60.00 tickets (receipts) directly available from the Committee at our Sunday events. Please try to get your tickets by 11/12 May. After that, ticket prices will rise to \$65.00.

If you can't get to Humanist House on those days, 20 early bird tickets are available at Eventbrite for \$60.00 each.

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/2019-australian-humanist-convention-the-future-of-australian-humanism-tickets-59694742582>

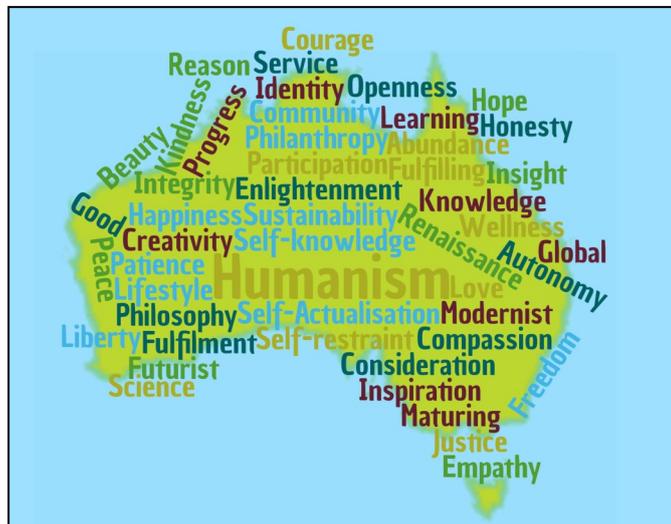
The ticket price is to cover the cost of morning and afternoon teas and lunches on the two days. All events themselves are free to ticket holders, but seats are limited in a small venue, so tickets are required.

The Convention Dinner on the Saturday evening is a separate affair. Please register your interest in attending at:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/2019-humanist-convention-dinner-tickets-59697883978>

and you will be kept in touch regarding dinner plans closer to the actual event.

The World Humanist Day Party on Friday 21 June 2019 7.30 p.m. at Humanist House will be open to all without ticketing, but no meal will be served. There will be wine and snacks.



- 10-Apr** _____ **Sibling Day**
- 15-Apr** _____ **Micro-Volunteering Day**
- 18-Apr** _____ **World Heritage Day**
- 21-Apr** _____ **Creativity Day**
- 22-Apr** _____ **Earth Day**
- 30-Apr** _____ **Honesty Day**
- 03-May** _____ **International Space Day**
- 04-May** _____ **Star Wars Day**
- 11-May** _____ **Egoism Awareness Day**
- 17-May** _____ **Bike to Work Day**
- 25-May** _____ **Geek Pride Day**
- 28-May** _____ **Amnesty International Day**
- 01-Jun** _____ **Say Something Nice Day**
- 05-Jun** _____ **World Environment Day**
- 14-Jun** _____ **Blood Donor Day**
- 15-Jun** _____ **Elder Abuse Awareness Day**
- 21-Jun** _____ **World Humanist Day**

<https://www.daysoftheyear.com/>



At some level, if we specialise and trade with each other, we're all better off. But there are problems with economics, that result in various distortions and misunderstandings.

The ideal of us all being artisans trading with each other is to some degree the principle behind both Marxism and Distributivism, which is a more 'enlightened' approach to the economy, embraced for a time by Catholic activists.

If we were indeed artisans, on roughly comparable economic levels, trading honestly with each other, that would be an arrangement whereby a lot of the ideals of trade and the market could be realised.

However, the world we live in is a far cry from that ideal. We have different levels of competence and wealth. Some of us are employees, of various skill levels, and some are employers. Some of us have small amounts of personal wealth, others own large assets.

We do not trade freely, but rather there is both the legal framework around us, and also Government regulation.

In spite of the claim to honest trade, a lot of advertising is not about informing us of our options, but rather about taking advantage of our psychological vulnerabilities. When it comes to us making sovereign decisions as independent thinkers, psychology tells us that this ideal - while not something to be denied - is but part of a larger picture.

Further, ideas about resources, growth, employment and the nature of land are subject to abuse by vested interests.

But let me move from some of the concerns about Government to what I in fact see as a greater concern - corporate manipulation. I see discussion about how governments diminish our individual sovereignty, but corporate actions and advertising seem a much stronger contributor to the reduction in our personal sovereignty.

Corporate appeals to the worth of being free in the market are deceptive. Does anyone go out into the market and of their own free will become addicted? But this can happen. We see corporations talking about people 'enjoying' a cigarette, while some smokers I know admit they ended up smoking not through enjoyment, but through compulsion.

It is also known that poker machines are designed to take advantage of our psychological vulnerabilities.

More broadly speaking, we see social media trying to take advantage of the same things, though obviously to somewhat less effect. You even have advertising telling us that "we're in control", when we have no control over being subjected to that advertising.

Ideally, advertising can inform us of our options, but in reality it *shapes* our desires rather than just giving us options for realising our pre-existing desires. Perhaps the old Classified Ads approached the ideal of 'informational' advertising, but these represent only a small part.

We suffer a decline in personal freedom, in the extent to

which advertisers 'shout' at us during our daily lives. It is a perverse outcome of what it means to own something - this has been interpreted to be a license to 'shout' at others.

We see advertising all around us - on bus shelters, on boom gates as we leave car parks, on the dividers when we stand in queues at the shopping centre. In Saõ Paulo in Brazil, they have banned billboards - a positive move, I think.

To some degree this is the result of complexity in the world and perverse incentives. I for one would like to have bus shelters free of advertising, and pay higher rates. Whether from a council's desire to minimise rates, or a corporation's desire to maximise profits, we end up at a bad place. Such pressures cannot be readily identified, so we could see the problems that result, and push back against them.

While we've had the maxim of "Jobs and Growth" - there's more to it than that. Growth has a lot of negativity behind it. If we spend more money on security or on fixing people up who have been assaulted, it shows up as economic growth! But in an overall moral sense, these are negatives best avoided - yet they are effectively endorsed by those who pursue growth. We need to concern ourselves with the *quality* of both the jobs and the growth.

We also see another trend at work - pushing responsibility for production uncertainty onto the employees through the casualisation of the workforce, and other measures.

What gets called Jevon's Paradox occurs when technological progress, productivity growth, or changes in government policy improve the efficiency with which a resource is used, thus reducing the amount necessary for any one use.

Potentially we use less energy or fewer resources. But this ignores the fact that as something gets cheaper, we end up consuming more of it. The rate of consumption of those resources rises due to increasing demand. Unless we are in a recession or depression, with workers laid off, the decline is almost always compensated by growth, to more than take up the resources we thought we'd saved.

And so, despite efficiencies, we consume more and more. Alternately, growth in productivity reduces workforce requirements, and thus employment declines.

Some resources are renewable - we can grow more of them, or they rely on sunshine or wind. But some are non-renewable. You can only take so many fish before stocks decline. You can dig up so many tonnes of coal each year - or you can dig out ten times that. Eventually you run out.

Finally we have the idea of 'equivalent earths'. A consumer's ecological footprint is calculated and the results expressed as the number of 'equivalent earths' it would require if everyone on the planet lived like *that* consumer.

Yet I think perhaps the real issue isn't 'equivalent earths', so much as a matter of intergenerational equity.

John August



Would the way we understand life on Earth be different if Darwin had never existed? Some say that the cumulative efforts of other thinkers, prior to the publishing in 1859 of *The Origin of Species*, would have led us to the same place.

Frenchmen like Louis-Constant Prévost, Louis-Melchior Patrin, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Julien-Joseph Virey, and Jean-Baptiste-Julien and British thinkers like Chambers, Mathews, Blyth, Spencer, Wallace and Charles's own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin might have got us there eventually, not to ignore the work of Gregor Mendel, forgotten at the time.

But the Darwin family member that we celebrate on Darwin Day is Charles, whose speculative rather than inductive essay, crammed with 500 pages of fairly dull facts, is credited as achieving a revolution in biology as important as Copernicus's sixteenth century work in Cosmology.

Darwin's 1859 book made no mention of the incendiary phrases "evolution", "survival of the fittest" or "missing link". But the impact as we know was phenomenal. As late as 1872, the *Family Herald* is credited as declaring: "If Darwinism is true the world will fall apart"!

Darwin saw variation in species because he travelled. Museum collections grew because of such travel and exploration. The majority of the growing middle classes, while they revelled in natural history, did not get to travel.

The publication of Darwin's book in 1859 had no immediate impact on the aquarium and fern crazes, which were at their height. Then in 1861 the paper tax was repealed in England and a flood of cheap popular history books (some with colour illustrations) hit the market, easily eclipsing the sales of Darwin's turgid tome.

A lot of these popular works pilloried 'ape theory'. Yet the public loved it. It was a form of modern popular culture.

Prior to Darwin there had always been collections of natural curiosities. The concept of a museum extends back to the 3rd century BCE. with the great library at Alexandria. The word museum in classical times signified a temple dedicated to the Muses, who were nine goddesses who watched over all aspects of human culture - of which science was one.

Museums were revived by Renaissance humanism, and evolved through 18th century Enlightenment, and 19th century Democracy. James Thurber mischievously described museums as "a depository of curiosities, that quite often

include the people who work there!"

Since classical times, museums have developed many roles and functions in response to prevailing cultural, religious and scientific beliefs - interpreting, explaining and preserving our understanding of the human condition, including the human experience of the natural world.

When fossils were first found many people believed them to be failed life experiments, God's mistakes, or projects only half developed, that he or she then lost interest in. Those more knowledgeable of biblical matters considered fossils wicked creatures, banished to a rocky grave by an angry deity, who was so cheesed off he flooded the world.

One early attempt at rationally framing fossils in an understanding of the world came from the wealthy French diplomat Benoit de Maillet. He wasn't concerned with what fossils were, but rather with what they might be able to tell him about the age of the Earth.

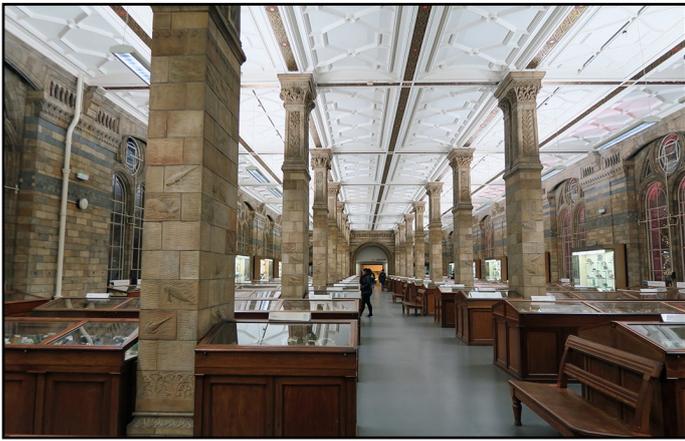
He spent most of his diplomatic career around the Mediterranean, and noticed seashells in rocks far inland. He rightly concluded water levels had once been much higher, and that if he could establish the rate at which the sea level had been falling, he could calculate an age for the Earth.

Benoit de Maillet's work was not published until 1748, ten years after his death. He accepted the notion that the Earth was once covered entirely by water, and this water had slowly been lost to the **vortex** of Cartesian cosmology, mentioned in the *Philosophiae Principia* of René Descartes.

Evidence for the retreating sea level could be seen far inland where sea shells were part of rock formations. Benoit de Maillet's grandfather supposedly calculated that the sea was retreating at a rate of three inches per century. From the height of the tallest mountains they estimated the time since the sea began disappearing into the 'vortex' at around two billion years - giving a minimum age for the Earth.

The methodology was dubious, but, given the prevailing orthodoxy was that the world was 6000 years old, the result wasn't bad. We now know the Earth is 4.6 billion years old.

Fossils became a focus of public and scientific interest with the great European explosion of natural history between 1820 and 1870. In those days natural history meant the three kingdoms of nature - animal, vegetable and mineral.



Endless rows of hand-crafted timber and glass cabinets in a vast hall at the British Museum of Natural History, London in 2019. Photo: Murray Love

A burgeoning middle class, with wealth and time on their hands, wanted to celebrate God's creations by getting out, collecting, and classifying them. It's also thought things like the invention of the microscope and the glass aquarium contributed to the public madness for natural curiosities.

This all led to the development of the large, systematic style of museum, wherein every known variety of plant, animal, or mineral was displayed in endless rows of hand-crafted timber and glass cabinets in vast, poorly-lit halls, glorifying the seemingly endless bounty of God's Providence.

Every Victorian natural history book started with a turgid preface outlining the moral, practical and life-enhancing benefits readers would find between the covers. Readers would become more cheerful, more alert, more patient, more interesting - their temper would improve, their health would improve, they would live longer and more virtuously.

It was, as we all know, very popular with the clergy. J.D. Loudon wrote: "a taste for natural history in a clergyman has great advantages over sport or gardening - as a naturalist he is abroad in the fields, invigorating his health by investigating God's creation, and affording ample opportunity for intercourse with his parishioners. In this way their reciprocal acquaintance is cultivated and the clergyman becomes an adviser and friend as well as a spiritual teacher."

The public's fascination, particularly in Victorian England, was insatiable, but fickle. Fads spread like wildfire. Between 1845 and 1855 the craze moved from seaweeds to ferns to sea anemones. Limpet collecting fever hit Bangor in the 1820s, and a passion for keeping baby alligators grabbed the imagination of womenfolk in Southport in the 1870s.

The more bizarre or strange the better. Private as well as public collections treasured the rare, the odd, the curious. Famous ornithologist Audobon complained: "the world's all agog and for what? Bugs the size of watermelons!"

Being an amateur was no disadvantage. Paid professionals were extremely rare. The botanist in charge of Kew Gardens was paid less than his secretary.

The famous Thomas Huxley had such problems in his youth. He wrote to his Australian fiancée: "there is no chance of living by science. Richard Owen the leading anatomist of his time earns £300 a year less than a bank clerk!"

There was little or no interest at the universities, where any Natural Historian on staff was there for decorative purposes. One Cambridge zoologist wrote in 1840 that "the university

discourages natural history..., it is considered idle trifling and there are no prospects for employment in the future."

In 1836, King's College, London actually got rid of its Professor of Natural History - because no one attended his lectures. It's amazing how little things have actually changed in 170 years. Yet the public enthusiasm was undiminished.

Predating this wide fascination with the natural world, was the eighteenth century Linnean revolution. Linneaus was born in Sweden in 1707. He trained in medicine, then abandoned it to travel extensively, and publish profusely on his findings.

Like almost all scientists of the time, Linneaus believed in the immutability of species, rather than evolution. Yet his binomial system of classification, a genus name followed by a species name, came to revolutionise the natural sciences.

Linneaus separated diagnosis and description from the naming of a species, creating a universal scientific language. Linneaus recognised the system's potential for ingratiation. He named a plant *Rudbeckia* after his tutor and wrote to him saying: "in this way your good name is justly immortalised."

A century later, natural historians, amateurs, and the few rare professionals were in passionate competition to find fossil and specimens of new species. They hoped to have their discovery published and the species named after them.

During this practice's height of popularity, Charles Kingsley wrote: "the pleasure of finding new species is too great, it is morally dangerous, it brings with it the temptation to consider the thing found as your own possession as if God had not known of it for ages since, you pride yourself on it and even squabble jealously for the right of having it named after you and being recorded in the Transactions of the such and such Society as its first discoverer."

The practice had so many over enthusiastic proponents that one way of discovering them was simply to invent them - in one case literally out of thin air. A naturalist with the exotic name, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque Schmalz (1783-1840), once published a paper defining 12 species of thunder and lightning! He wasn't a complete crank. Some of his species of fish and bivalve from Ohio still stand in the record today.

During the Victorian era, men held all the rare professional positions, but women were some of the most outstanding, if usually unrecognized, amateur natural historians, especially as collectors and illustrators. John Gould's wife drew all the plates for his famous book *Birds of Europe*.

One of the best known women fossil collectors was Mary Anning of Lyme Regis in Dorset. Barely literate, with no training, she supported her mother and siblings by selling ammonites and fossil curiosities to tourists. Her father had died when she was 11, leaving her to support the family.

In 1812 at the age of 12 she found the first British Ichthyosaur, in 1824 the first Plesiosaur and 1828 the first Pterosaur. She had a remarkable eye for recognising an important fossil from a small piece of bone exposed at the surface, then incredible patience for recovering it. The Plesiosaur took her ten years to fully expose and extract.

All leading geologists of the day were at pains to cultivate her acquaintance. She never published or even identified anything she found, but numerous palaeontologists made

their reputations on her discoveries. A recently discovered species, *Ichthyosaurus Anningae*, was named in her honour.

The modern concept of a museum evolved slowly over the 19th century. In 1800 those that existed were heterogeneous jumbles of curiosities, with no methodological arrangement along Linnean or any other lines. The Ashmolean Museum contained exhibits of dragon eggs and phoenix feathers!

One of the oldest British natural history collections was based on the Lever collection - a wealthy landowner whose passion for collecting sent him broke. He was forced to dispose of his whole collection of over 50,000 objects, which he did by the unusual method of a public lottery.

It was won by a dentist called Parkinson, the discoverer of Parkinson's Disease. Parkinson became insolvent in his turn, and the collection was auctioned off in 1805, mostly to continental collectors & museums. The British Museum of Natural History didn't have any money to buy any of it.

In the New World, Charles Peale, a portraitist, was asked to draw some mammoth bones by a local naturalist. He decided the public were more interested in the fossils than his drawing and turned his gallery into a museum.

Charles Peale placed an advertisement in 1786:

"Mr. Peale ever desirous to please and entertain the public, will make a part of his house a repository of natural curiosities - the public he hopes will therefore be gratified in the sight of the many wonders of nature which are now closeted and seldom seen. Mr Peale will most thankfully receive the communications of friends who will help him in this endeavour and favour him with their assistance."

Peale was swamped with stuff, and needed larger and larger houses. He grew rich on charging entrance fees for the public. Peale exchanged material internationally and became involved in disputes with old world naturalists, even though he had no scientific training. As an entrepreneur he was incredibly skillful, but he failed to convince legislators in Congress that his collection should be the basis of a national collection.

Peale soon had rival museums copying his success. One was P.T. Barnum, who eventually swallowed up many private collections, unfortunately discarding much to concentrate on startling the public with freaks and oddities of nature.

With so many collectors in the game, some sought success through specialisation. In the early 19th century, the English conchologist Hugh Cuming was an illiterate sailmaker who made enough money to retire at 35. He devoted his life to sailing round Polynesia and elsewhere collecting shells. He bought shells from locals in exchange for trinkets, or sent the natives out with a hessian sack, which they could keep in exchange for filling it with certain shells for him.

He was a dealer as well as a collector. He endeared himself to scientific patrons by not publishing anything himself, but allowing them to build reputations by describing his finds.

He thought he was dying in 1846. He wrote to the British Museum trustees, asking for £6,000 for his collection of 52,789 specimens from over 18,000 species. They refused!

Both won in the end. Cuming lived for another 19 years, doubling his collection, which the museum finally bought from the executors of his estate - for the same price!



One day, while the British Museum zoology keeper was moving a large part of the shell collection in open drawers through a courtyard, a fierce gale blew up. Many labels were separated from their specimens, and to this day, not all the labels have been reunited with the shells they belong to.

By the middle of the 19th century national collections were supported by acts of parliament. Science was taking over from curiosity. Debates about the age of the Earth and Evolution captured the scientific imagination.

The large systematic museums became entrenched. But the public was not encouraged to visit at first. Ladies with small children were banned due to "an absence of toilet facilities!" In 1840 the British Museum was open "to anyone of decent appearance" but only 10.00 a.m. - 4.00 p.m., and just three days a week.

When a select committee of the parliament suggested longer opening hours so the working classes could enjoy the museum, the Director was aghast, vehemently protesting: "The most mischievous portion of the population is about at these times, the vulgar class would crowd into the museum, including sailors from the dockyards and girls they might bring with them. The more important class of the population would be discontented."

Not until 1879 did they relent and open five days a week. The British Museum now opens seven days a week, free of entry charge, 10.00am-5.00pm, and till 8.30pm on Fridays.

Extracts from the talk given at our Darwin Day event Sunday 10 February 2019 by John August.

Including notes originally prepared by historian Dr. Andrew Simpson of Macquarie University.



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