



# HUMANIST Viewpoints

## UN International Women's Day

### Also ....

- Darwin Day
- More Positive Humanism
- Blasphemy Laws Around the World

### HuVAT 2014

You are invited to the Humanist Viewpoints Afternoon Talk held 4pm on the 2nd Sunday each month. Please join us and socialise over light refreshments.

- |          |                                     |
|----------|-------------------------------------|
| April 13 | Victor Bien - Existentialism        |
| May 11   | Brian Edwards - Are There Miracles? |
| June 8   | Speaker - Theosophical Society      |

Follow us on our website [www.hsnsw.asn.au](http://www.hsnsw.asn.au) and Facebook



## Special Message from the President

### Make a Donation

This year, please consider making a donation of \$5, \$20, \$50 or whatever you can to protect and sustain the NSW Humanist Society. Your donation will sustain the diverse range of activities the Society undertakes.

### Consider Making a Bequest

Please also remember us in your Will. All bequests contribute to the longevity of the Humanist Society of NSW and Humanism.

Thank You,  
John August.

### Editor's Comments Frank Gomez

#### Book Room

A shout out to the fantastic work being done by Gillian in the book room. I have become an e-book junkie but many members continue to appreciate physical books.

So if you have any Freethought or Philosophic books in your collection then consider donating them to the Society's library. Please call Gillian on 9660 9658 if you would like to donate.



#### Cover artwork

The cover "Women of the world" is by Patricia Languedoc.

#### Save paper by getting Viewpoints electronically

This newsletter is also available electronically as a PDF in vivid colour. Members who would like an additional electronic colour version by e-mail at no extra cost can contact me directly at [frankgomez@me.com](mailto:frankgomez@me.com).

Some members have indicated they would be interested in only receiving the electronic copy for future editions to assist the Society in reducing costs and the unnecessary printing of paper. If you are happy to forgo the receipt of the printed version and just receive the electronic version then please make that clear in your email. It is entirely optional and your decision doesn't affect the manner in which you receive all other communications from the Society.



### Honorary Secretary Comments Affie Adagio

#### MY 70TH BIRTHDAY/IWD FUNDRAISER

I had the most amazing 70th birthday especially that it was a fundraiser and that it was in the lovely garden where I live and people had much fun. There was not a large number turning up because it was early afternoon as in the case of my son, Paul and his younger daughter (Sabrina) who are referees for a school basketball series and also other people were unable to make it at that time.



However, monies are still coming in some in small amounts, some in larger. This means that at this rate the Humanist Society of NSW and the UNAA (NSW) will raise \$1000 each, I am sure, through people's generosity. Every little counts. Whoever I see who was unable to make it gives me the \$20 and I promise they will get a receipt.

I regret that some close friends and even distant family members were forgotten to be invited and I lost count too. I found out when some said "so I hear you had a 70th party"! And as can be imagined it is very hard to explain how they were left off the list when they were on mine.



Life intervenes in mysterious ways. At any rate being born on United Nations International Women's Day and it occurring on a Saturday meant that the IWD Seminar would take place on the

Monday 10th so it was free for me to celebrate my 70th and that was an opportunity to raise funds for both sponsors of UN IWD. The entertainer was Sam Pellegrino and everyone danced twist (see me twisting!), rock 'n roll, and Greek dancing.

Diane and Patricia rocking their socks off! Samba for Silvana and

Victor. It was the best party I have ever had for a birthday. My grand-daughter Talia Nicolitsis whose eleventh birthday was two days earlier sang two songs for us – she is so talented. Talia's mother, Tina is my daughter and we both were two proud chooks watching her and getting goose bumps!



Talia is the one who inherited my late mother's singing talent. Also present was my cousin Harry Polymeris (centre) President of the Hellenic Cultural Assoc. Akropolis (Greeks from Romania of which I am a committee member too) with two other committee



members Michael Condos and Panagakis. The next picture is with the UNAA(NSW) (sponsor) (committee members Lindsay Mell, Diane Sackelario (Greek Romanian late husband), Peter Airey, Patricia Jenkins.



Then we have a photo of the other sponsor Humanist Society of NSW committee: Sturt Duncan, John Levack (ex committee), Silvana D'lapico (Victor's wife), Victor Bien, Brian Edwards, Fred Flatow and dog Coach, Angela Drury and dog Panda with myself and dog Pepi up front in all photos. My

residence is an animal friendly place.



THANKS TO MOLLIE CAMBELL for the sizeable donation for the party, and all other donors.

HuVAT Sunday 9th Victor Bien: topic - Charles Darwin Day was an interesting talk and as John was not there to present his part Victor presented the whole session which I will leave to them to report. At any rate we celebrated Viky Potempa's

92 Birthday on that day and she is as strong and adventurous as ever.



For more photos please go to [www.affie.com.au](http://www.affie.com.au)

On the following page is my article on UN International Women's Day.

## CAHS CONVENTION SOUTH AUSTRALIA 9-11 May 2014

### WORLD HUMANIST DAY SYDNEY, STATE PARLIAMENT HOUSE

June 20th 2014 Enlightenment the Roots of Humanism- David Tribe, Meredith Doig - President Rationalist Society of Australia, Emeritus Prof Frank Stilwell, Chys Stevenson, and panel of Humanist State representatives.



John August,  
President  
NSW Humanist Society

We recently saw Pell appear before the Royal Commission into child abuse. He stated that he did not believe the Church should have used tactics such as the use of the Ellis defence (*the legal principle that the Church is not an entity that can be sued. Ed*). We also know that Frank Brennan has said the Church should not hide behind legal defences.

However, it is interesting to note the Newcastle Catholic Church has decided against using such defences, and more evidence is coming up suggesting that Pell was involved in the handling of these court cases.

I think tactics like the Ellis defence are just plain wrong; it is an issue that David Shoebridge of the NSW Greens has been pursuing. It is only with the advent of the recent inquiry that the many more people are aware of the term "Ellis defence"; but in a sense the problem was always there, and Mr. Shoebridge has been pursuing it for quite some time.

This does take us back in history, to the Defence of Government Schools case, where the Catholic Church claimed

## President's Report John August

that the Religious component of Catholic schools was "incidental" at the same time as it promoted the ideal of "a Catholic education for Catholics", and forced a "Trial of Facts" after which it then said the results of the "Trial of Facts" were irrelevant.

I've been looking into a lot of history lately - something that has been very intriguing. One the one hand, you could say the past is irrelevant, and we really only need to deal with what's before us now - but the more I look, the more I see that the shadow of the past is still with us, even given the changes wrought over several decades. It is certainly fair to say Australia is no longer "sectarian" the way it used to be between Catholics and non-Catholics - but the stranglehold of the Church and other institutions remains, and these things are rooted in history.

In the distant past, the actions of the Catholic-influenced Democratic Labor Party were very worrying, involving Archbishop Mannix and B. A. Santamaria. (Who looked like Yoda, but wasn't as smart? Santamaria. Sorry - couldn't help that one ...). While in 1891 the Pope issued an encyclical endorsing private property and condemning socialism, it's not clear how much of that set of views was theologically inspired, displaced Irish nationalism, and an er-yuk Christian/ Catholic morality. Of course, this push was not the whole Catholic

Church - Cardinal Gilroy Archbishop of Sydney challenged some of the more extreme elements. Needless to say, it had a significant impact - and made you wonder where Christian ideals of compassion and equality fitted in. More recently, it was the the DLP-influenced Harradine that forced the then Government to limit support of Abortion in exchange for the Privatisation of Telstra.

When you look closely, you see that both Howard and Abbott followed a "small target" strategy to achieve Government. The difference is, Abbott did not have a "honeymoon period" - people were more willing to believe they'd been sold a dud, unlike Howard, where they were more willing to "give him a go".

There's obviously a lot of unrest about Abbott, as evidenced in the "March-in-March". This has been ignored by Abbott, but there was an outrageously large march against Howard's involvement in Iraq. This was ignored by Howard, who called the marchers a "mob".

I sympathise with the concern over Abbott. However, at the same time, I do acknowledge that the Government did win an election, and unless you want to preach revolution, the approach should be to persuade those marginally attached to Abbott not to vote for him at the next election.

We've noticed the Abbott Government moving against ACT same sex marriage legislation - but, interestingly, in 2006 the then Attorney-General Philip Ruddock overruled the then-ACT same sex bill.

There are many other points of historical interest - I hope to incorporate them into either a HuVat talk or a related course.

I hope the year is treating you well and look forward to seeing you at a HuVat soon.

## UN International Women's Day Seminar Monday 10 March - State Parliament House

Dr Affie Adagio MC/Convenor

**WELCOME TO COUNTRY:** Aunty Joan Tranter, Aboriginal Elder from Jambunna House of Learning UTS Ultimo

**OPENING CEREMONY:** The Hon Marie Ficarra MLC Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier representing the Premier speaking on women's issues including violence.

UN Ban Ki-moon: Pamela Lemoine read out his message for UN IWD wishing the best for this auspicious day.

**INTRODUCTION:** Valerie Weeks past President UNAA(NSW) shared her story, in her mesmerising manner, of how she gained university qualifications as a women when it was not considered popular. Many of us related to the struggle in her journey.

**GRAMEEN FOUNDATION:** Duncan Power captivated us with slides this organisation has had successes with financing women in need so as to become self-sufficient with small businesses in developing countries.

**ENDING POVERTY FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN:** Sue Conde past President UNWA spoke on Australia's UN topic for this year.

**RESETTLEMENT OF IMMIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA FROM GREAT LAKES OF AFRICA:** Dr Nadine Shema spoke of the difficulties experienced by her people as they settle in their new country, those same experiences all new immigrants have had: language, health, housing, schooling, employment, legal. For me as a person born outside this country and having worked as an ethnic community worker in my earlier career none of what Nadine spoke of was new.

**INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA:** Aunty Joan Tranter, Aboriginal Elder from Jambunna House of Learning UTS Ultimo spoke on the journey of Aboriginal women to empowerment through education including her own battle to achieve her own status as an educated women regardless of her indigenous heritage when she was expected to become a domestic help as a career choice.

Video of speeches can be access from our website at <http://www.hsnsw.asn.au/mtgs.php?tab=4>





PALESTINE and ISRAEL – A WOMEN'S VIEW: Vivienne Porzsolt of Jewish descent and a Humanist, straight from the airport from her visit to Israel and Palestine spoke supporting the claims of the UN as to the inappropriate actions of Israel against the Palestinians while showing slides evidencing these claims. This caused a tremendous outburst from Jewish friends who accused her of anti Semitism so I sent the remarks to Valerie Weeks past President of UNAA(NSW) and she reminded me that UN personnel had investigated the situation and were there attempting to bring a peaceful solution.

Barrack Obama had disapproved of some incidents and given that United States basically supports Israel, the President's disapproval is not a good sign. Nevertheless, as this was a UN IWD Seminar I finally decided Vivienne's viewpoint was relevant. I had also communicated the opposing viewpoints and in the future will hold a panel discussion at the Humanists' HuVAT with both parties on it.



# Guidestones still a mystery 35 years on

The Georgia Guidestones is a monument in Elbert County, Georgia, USA that was erected in 1979 by persons unknown

The 5.87 metre tall granite monument contains a set of 10 guidelines or principles in eight different languages as follows:

- 1.Maintain humanity under 500,000,000 in perpetual balance with nature.**
- 2.Guide reproduction wisely — improving fitness and diversity.**
- 3.Unite humanity with a living new language.**
- 4.Rule passion — faith — tradition — and all things with tempered reason.**
- 5.Protect people and nations with fair laws and just courts.**
- 6.Let all nations rule internally resolving external disputes in a world court.**
- 7.Avoid petty laws and useless officials.**
- 8.Balance personal rights with social duties.**
- 9.Prize truth — beauty — love — seeking harmony with the infinite.**
- 10.Be not a cancer on the earth — Leave room for nature.**

The Guidestones have been mentioned by conspiracy theorists, especially those obsessed with secret societies such as the Illumanti and Rosicrucians, fuelled in part because the person or persons responsible for ordering the monument from a local stonemason used the pseudonym R.C.Christian.

On the left side of the explanatory tablet it describes its sponsors as “ A small group of Americans who seek the Age of Reason”.

The monument is regularly vandalised with graffiti denouncing it as a work of the devil or those interested in a “new world order”



## Words & Music



“Words and Ideas” by David Tribe is available for \$15 for the total benefit of the Humanist Society of NSW. A very popular piece of literature which is selling fast so send in your order with your cheque or money order.



“Love is Born” CD is composed and the lyrics are written by Dennis Morris (past President of HumSocWA). The songs are English interspersed with Zulu, and are highly relaxing.

“You Can’t Stop the Revolution” CD includes chanting and humming by singers performed in 1988 when Nelson Mandala was in prison for 25 years

The \$15 is totally for the benefit of the HumSocNSW so please send in your order with your cheque or money order.

**The** news that 14 people in Pakistan face execution for blasphemy highlights the ongoing use of such laws by illiberal states

From the banning of the upcoming Biblical epic Noah in several Middle Eastern countries, to constantly reappearing charges against musicians in Poland, to mass demonstrations and violence in Bangladesh, criminalising blasphemy leads to a variety of charges, censorship mandates and vigilante attacks all over the globe.

According to the Prisoners of Belief report published last week by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Pakistan remains the “most egregious example” of countries banning blasphemy: currently 33 people are imprisoned for the offence, 14 of whom are facing the death penalty. But Pakistan is not the only country to punish blasphemers: nations as diverse as Ireland, Kuwait and Philippines criminalise the act, and the report expresses concern that some countries are introducing new restrictions.

Since starting our World of Blasphemy series, we have seen a number of widely-reported blasphemy cases. In Indonesia, five girls were charged for performing prayer movements to a pop song; Malaysia banned the use of the word “Allah” by non-Muslims; publishing giant Penguin withdrew an “offensive” book about Hinduism in India; Turkey convicted a world-renown pianist for suggesting that heaven might be a tavern or a brothel; in the aftermath of the Pussy Riot protest, Russia signed in new blasphemy laws; a satirical Facebook page led to a jail sentence in Greece; and an international petition caused an “Allah” pendant to be edited out of a pop video on YouTube. The UK may have abolished its ancient blasphemy laws in 2008, but balancing between freedom of speech and restricting possibly offensive words and acts is a continuous issue here as well: in the past year we’ve seen censorship of “offensive images” on University campuses and TV shows, and a massive Twitter feud about the Jesus & Mo comic.

But the news is not always negative. This year has already seen two blasphemy “offenders” freed: in February, Alexander Aan – imprisoned for 30 months for expressing his atheism online - was released in Indonesia. And in Tunisia, a blogger sentenced to 7 years in prison for posting cartoons that “insulted the Prophet” was freed earlier this month. International rejection of criminalising blasphemy seems to be gaining some momentum as well: recently, the European Parliament passed a resolution which clearly states that it rejects all blasphemy bans, and “recommends that the Member States decriminalise such offences”. The UN has also repeatedly rejected calls for criminalising “defamation of religions”; in fact, the organisation’s top freedom of religion official has stated that all blasphemy laws should be abolished. These of course are merely recommendations, and will not stop countries

holding on to their “defamation” restrictions or other international alliances from grafting their own blasphemy articles.

Criminalising blasphemy and/or religious offence is problematic at its best, and deadly at its worst. It is impossible to clearly define offence or hurt feelings, and vague criminal articles open the door for misuse of power, arbitrary persecution, and oppression of minorities and political opposition. They trample on freedom of speech, thought and expression; and hinder science, art and literature. Moreover, blasphemy laws go against the international understanding of human rights (e.g. the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights mandate freedom of religion, thought and expression) and most often contradict the nation’s own constitution as well. Importantly, a state’s protection of religious feelings will not increase tolerance, but in reality can encourage the zealous to take the law into their own hands.

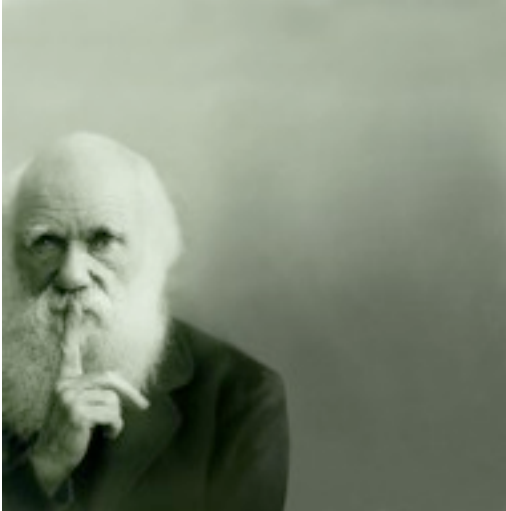
Opposing blasphemy laws is not about wishing to deny people the right to feel offended or to defend their beliefs; these rights should be available for the religious and the non-believer alike. And this is what it finally comes down to: feelings, beliefs and opinions. Most believers would agree that

their God is capable of inflicting a heavenly punishment on blasphemers, so banning religious offence is about sparing the feelings of believers on earth. But criminalising opinions and beliefs has proved to be dangerous and dividing, so on this earth, people must take precedence over hurt feelings.



# Darwin Days 12 years on

## Victor Bien



**We** have been running Darwin Day celebrations since 2002. If I recollect correctly I was personally approached by one of our Humanist friends in San Diego, with whom we have a “sister city relationship”, urging me/us to join this global effort to celebrate the birth of Charles Darwin on 12 February 1809 to push back on the machinations of creationists and to celebrate Darwin's great scientific achievement. The Darwin Day idea started a year or two before that and Richard Dawkins is its honorary president.

All our promotional web pages for each year's events are archived on our website and if you can access the internet you can see these pages from <http://darwinday.hsnsw.asn.au>

In the first few years we concentrated on explaining why creationism is unacceptable as science; that it is not science even though it often refers itself as “creation science”; that while it tries to put on itself the trapping of science it is not science but that it is essentially religion.

From the second year, for a few years, we coordinated with the Skeptics to run “outreach” type meetings and in 2006 and 2007 we even held jointly sponsored events including the Australian Museum. I suspect but cannot prove that the religionists were put out by the involvement of the Australian Museum in such a “partisan” activity that they got to the ear of government and had the whole evolution display in the Museum closed down in 2008 or 2009. Needless to say we no longer had the support of the Australian Museum.

In 2005 – 2007 we ran student events thinking that trying to speak to the up and coming generation would be a good idea (which it was/is) but in hindsight we can see that this seriously alarmed the religionists. The students themselves and their teachers who attended our seminars in 2005 and 2006 were appreciative but the overhead politics tightened up such that in 2007 our planned seminar held at the Georges River College Oatley no one turned up! From then on it was impossible to get schools to agree even to allow their premises to host Darwin Days unless we were prepared to include religionists which we were not prepared to do since there is no point debating them.

In those years I noticed our local newspaper The Sutherland Shire and St George Leader carried prominent ads about creationist points (there may have been mention of church events addressing these but I wasn't interested enough to pay detailed attention). Since we have stopped trying to run student events those ads have largely disappeared. So clearly religionists keep an eye on what we say and do and react accordingly. They probably have vigilant members who take it upon themselves to monitor what we or I! say and do. (I was an Anglican and they undoubtedly think I'm a damaging apostate – I tried being a Christian apologist and had to throw it out in 1968).

From 2008 to the present we stopped talking on and on about the invalidity of creationism. It is boring and repetitive. There is nothing new in it and never will be. Essentially there is nothing they say today which is different in any significant way to when around 1800 William Paley articulated the watchmaker argument for a creator. Dawkins of course has written a book entitled the Blind Watchmaker in reply.

2009 was a big year because it was the bicentenary of Darwin's birth and the sesquicentenary of the publication of his famous book The Origin of Species. We didn't have to do so much ourselves because we were carried along by the massive coverage done by the ABC.

Since that time we have withdrawn into our own quarters and celebrate the event in our internal HuVAT series. Basically we present and discuss new findings and lines of thought which further explicate the theory of evolution for our own edification and greater appreciation of how nature and its wonders works. See the website archives to see what topics were covered if you did not attend them. So indirectly we continue to educate ourselves more and more how lacking and sterile creationist notions are.

## Member News

### Membership Secretary

**Welcome** to new member Lynne Parkinson, who has applied to the programme to teach ethics in schools in Wollongong. Welcome back to member rejoining, Zoltan Tarkanyi.

Thank you for generous donations to members Michael Powell, Mollie Campbell and Susan Fayle.

VALE. Sadly we report the recent deaths of long term members Dr Thomas Ong, a generous donor, and Arthur de Munitiz, who contributed in the past by using his computer expertise to assist the editor of Viewpoints. His memorial was conducted by Unitarian minister Rev Geoff Usher.

Membership Secretary [abraxas@tpg.com.au](mailto:abraxas@tpg.com.au)



# Building Positive Humanism

Lyndon Storey

**This** essay responds to Victor Bien's call for discussion of meaning and values, under the banner of Positive Humanism, in the last edition of *Humanist Viewpoints*.

## **The significance of positive humanism; an alternative to religion**

Some sense of meaning is crucial to human life. Most people, even if they rarely spell it out in detail, have some sort of philosophy of life or world-view which provides meaning and guidance. For many people this philosophy/world-view comes from religion.

This is why many people respond to atheistic arguments by saying things like; "life is meaningless without God" or "there is no reason to follow ethical rules without God". Such propositions are completely inadequate as proofs of God's existence. But they are very powerful as statements of the value people receive from religion. In fact it is not unreasonable for people to find unappealing the idea of abandoning a philosophy of life and replacing it with nothing.

For humanism to be seen as an alternative to religion, rather than just a critique, it needs to offer a philosophy of life which is capable of providing inspiration, meaning and fulfilment. Without such a philosophy, and good reasons for believing it, humanism will continue to seem to many to be just another word for atheism, and/or nihilism. If humanism does not offer a path to meaning and fulfilment why should people who have found a path elsewhere be interested in a mere critique of their path?

Can Humanism provide a platform for a philosophy of life? I believe it can. Not a precise detailed set of rules of course, but some key overarching concepts.

It is humanism as a philosophy of life which I call positive humanism.

## **What is positive humanism ?**

The key idea I support here is the idea that happiness and purpose in life come from realising our best human potential, from human fulfilment.

To fulfil something is to realise the potential inherent within it. Fulfilling our best potential is a natural path to happiness and a sense of satisfaction in life generally. We all know the satisfaction that comes from developing our inherent talents and skills to the best of our ability. This sense of fulfilment is one of the deepest and most reliable paths to satisfaction and happiness available to humans.

An approach which sees the best things in life; including, a sense of meaning, a sense of morality, a sense of fun, and so on, as coming from realising our best human potential rather than from an external source, whether religion or otherwise, is an approach which is inherently "humanist": It sees these things coming from our humanity. Likewise it is inherently "positive" as it sees these things as a positive endowment we have as humans; something that can give direction and purpose to our lives. It is a positive affirmation of humanity.

This can be contrasted with a hypothetical negative humanism which denies God, but otherwise sees human life as inherently direction-less. This negative humanism combats the falsity of religion. But in its place offers either nihilism, or the view that people must seek something else beyond our humanity to satisfy the craving for meaning; Nationalism,

Rationalism, Consumerism, Marxism, and so on. This can be called a "negative humanism" because it merely rejects one framework; religion, in favor of either nothing or subordination of humanity to some other ideology.

Positive humanism is the positive affirmation of the human. Any approach to life based on enhancing our ability to realise our positive human potential can be called positive humanism.



## **Some specifics; empathy and ethics**

There's no space to tease out all the possibilities here. So I will offer one specific example; empathy and its role in ethics.

Empathy is, in a nutshell, the ability to feel something as though from the other's perspective. Empathy is the initial sensation of the same feeling, not the subsequent stage where compassion, often based on empathy, is felt for the other. A simple example is when fans at a football match involuntarily groan or gasp when they see a player go down with a terrible injury. The initial instantaneous response where people seem to almost feel the pain they see is an empathic one, later feelings of sympathy may build on empathy.

There have been many scientific studies showing the human capacity for empathy. This has supported a recent flood of books and articles arguing that human beings have an innate capacity for empathy. Perhaps the two most well known books are Jeremy Rifkin's "The Empathic Civilisation" and Frans de Waal's "The Age of Empathy". These works include excellent summaries of much of the extensive scientific research into the human capacity for empathy.

So it is not controversial to argue that humans have an innate potential for empathy. Cultivating our potential for empathy is a way of cultivating the human potential.

Cultivating the potential for empathy can provide a path to a framework for ethics. If we feel a sense of empathy with others we can experience both their pain and their joy. It only requires a small logical step from this to argue we share something in common with them, and that it is better to minimise the pain and promote the joy. This can be the foundation for an ethical system; minimise harm, increase happiness; respect other sentient beings.

This is a foundation for ethics based on realising our human potential. It provides a starting point in developing ethical ideas;



empathy with others and the consequent need to treat them with dignity. It also provides a strong positive incentive to accept the ethical approach; accepting it is part of fulfilling our own humanity and therefore a path to happiness. It provides a starting point and a positive incentive for ethics, it is not simply an assertion that without God we will still somehow be ethical.

I have barely scratched the surface of the empathy argument. It has been made many times before. Just one example the Confucian philosopher Mencius (C372 – 289 BCE) developed an ethic based on empathy (Rifkin p. 217). A host of others around the world at different times have made similar arguments.

The point is not to build the whole case around empathy, but to use it as an example of a “human fulfilment” approach.

I am also not arguing that our only potentials are positive ones, but that acknowledging and cultivating the best of our positive human potential can be the path to a happy fulfilling and meaningful life. It can lead to a positive humanism which is a genuine alternative to religion.

## Conclusion

Victor's article called for consideration of other sources of positive humanist ideas. I have gone outside the Enlightenment in pointing to Mencius as an influential example, who is a pre enlightenment thinker, although I certainly don't advocate the complete adoption of his philosophy. I'll conclude by emphasising two simple points. Firstly positive humanism offers an alternative philosophy of life, based on accepting our best human potential, not just a critique of religion. Secondly that wherever people have tried to observe and find the best of the human spirit, from ancient China to the contemporary world, there may be sources of positive humanism.

## References cited

\* De Waal Frans: The Age of Empathy, Harmony Books, Kindle edition 2011.

\* Rifkin, Jeremy: The Empathic Civilisation, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin New York 2009.

# News in Brief

## Homeopathic Recall After Real Ingredients Found

Homeopathic products (the term remedies implies they might re-mediate something) have been recalled overseas because of impurities. However, in a delicious irony, it has turned out that the impurities might be antibiotics – that is actual medicine, albeit inappropriate for the conditions for which they are advertised.

Homeopathic company Terra-Medica voluntarily recalled batches of certain products in liquid, tablet, capsule, ointment and suppository form as a result of US Food and Drug Administration findings that these may have contained penicillin or its derivatives.

Normally the only harm from homeopathy is to the wallet, or through failing to take medicines that actually pass testing. However, in this case the media release notes, “In patients who are allergic to beta-lactam antibiotics, even at low levels, exposure to penicillin can result in a range of allergic reactions from mild rashes to severe and life-threatening anaphylactic reactions.”

The FDA does not assess whether homeopathic products achieve their stated goals the way they do for actual medicines, but they do check for impurities or failures to include the claimed ingredients. Homeopathic manufacturers have been issued with FDA warnings before. Ensuring the “active ingredient” is actually included is not always a priority when the ingredient isn't actually that active.

Michael Marshall, vice president of Merseyside Skeptics told Wired UK “It's funny to see homeopathic products recalled because, for a change, they actually contain some real ingredients.”



For those wondering why scientists are so contemptuous of homeopathy, it's not just that they have consistently been found to work no better than placebos it is also that the theory on which they are based contradicts everything we know about chemistry and a good part of physics and biology as well.

The original principle of homeopathy, that “like cures like” so that diseases could be treated by substances that produce similar symptoms is dubious, but not inherently ridiculous. However, the founder Samuel Hahnemann advocated diluting these substances to the point where many of the “remedies” offered contain not a single atom of the original product.

Supposedly they leave their “essence” behind, which somehow gets more potent the less there is of it. The odd thing is that when water evaporates from the ocean we don't seem to

get the trace energy of the salts, pollutants and even fish it was in contact with beforehand. According to homeopathy advocates this is because the energy is only maintained when the water is tapped against a leather saddle stuffed with horsehair, and that its strength increases the more the original mixture is diluted.

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## 1 in 4 Americans unaware that Earth circles the Sun

In a recent survey of more than 2,200 people in the United States conducted by the National Science Foundation, one in four were found to be unaware that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

Ten questions about physical and biological science were on the quiz, and the average score — 6.5 correct — was barely a passing grade.

Just 74 per cent of respondents knew that the Earth revolved around the Sun, according to the results released at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Chicago.

Fewer than half (48 per cent) knew that human beings evolved from earlier species of animals.



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## Child removed from NSW public school after prayer vote

Kersten Tuckey withdrew her daughter from Kororo Public School on the north coast after parents voted to retain the school prayer last year.

"We're not anti-religious, we just think a public school should be inclusive for all kids," she said. "If they want to have a religious prayer it should be said in scripture or prayer groups, but not during a core school activity like assemblies."

Department policy says children of parents who object to school prayers should be supervised in another area of the school.

Ms Tuckey moved her daughter to a neighbouring school that does not have prayers because she did not want her to be "kicked out of assembly for the next five years".

"I'm more than happy for our daughter to learn about religions but we don't want her to be taught what to believe," she said.

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## Uganda passes anti-gay laws

Ugandan activist Frank Mugisha was traveling outside his country when the notorious anti-homosexuality bill was signed into law by President Yoweri Museveni late last month. And now he's not sure if he will be arrested and imprisoned upon his return, or thrown out of his home -- or both.

"I've heard more than 50 cases of violence and discrimination," Mugisha, who serves as Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, said in an interview.

"People who have been evicted from their homes. People who have been disowned. People who tried to commit suicide. People who have lost their jobs. People who have lost friends. People who are fearing to go back to their homes and are now staying with friends. Offices of gay and lesbian community organisations have been closed down.

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## Danes ban halal and kosher slaughter

A ban on halal and kosher slaughter without prior stunning of animals has come into effect in Denmark. A similar ban is already in force in Sweden and Norway, as well as other European nations. This decision follows previous debates in Denmark about halal slaughter and the marking of halal slaughtered meat, and has stirred deep controversy among Muslim and Jewish groups both within the country and beyond.

The ban was called anti-Semitic by Israel's deputy minister of religious services; similarly, the Danish non-profit group Danish Halal decried the ban as a clear infringement of religious freedom. The issue is also expected to put severe strain on bilateral trade with countries such as Saudi Arabia.

In announcing the ban, the recently appointed Danish minister for food, agriculture and fisheries, Dan Jørgensen, referred to a Danish animal protection law that allows the minister to make the decision like this without first taking it to the Danish national parliament. Jørgensen once served as president of the Animal Welfare Intergroup, which advocates animal welfare and conservation issues, and he has been widely cited as arguing that the imperative to legally protect animal welfare trumps religious liberty.



## Bio-Genesis Mystery

John August

Victor Bien recently gave my "Origins of life" talk at Darwin Day; here's a few of the ideas if you weren't there.

I've been puzzling over the chemical origins of life for some time; while we still don't know the full story, I think there's some interesting things you can say, things that reinforce the idea that life arose naturally, quite apart from that the chemistry is something that seems interesting - at least to me, anyway - and hopefully to you too.

In order to understand early life, we need to understand how current life generates information bearing chemical chains- and then consider how might early life have done this.

A lot of current life relies on catalysts which notionally speed up reactions towards a lower energy state. In fact, catalysts as much change the relative concentrations of the resultant chemicals; rather than just speed reactions up. This is because there are multiple possible reactions without catalysts; catalysts speed up a small proportion of the total, and so increase the concentration of those product chemicals.

One of the issues of life is that it makes proteins from amino acids, and DNA chains from the base pairs. The problem is that these resultant molecular strings have higher energy than the individual components. So, you can't just "catalyse to a lower energy state".

In order to get over this hurdle, not only do you need "catalysts" in the regular sense, you also need energy-bearing molecules to "drive" the reaction. As far as the WHOLE reaction is concerned, you are lowering the total energy - it is just that the energy of the base pairs or amino acids increases while the driver molecules lose more energy.

The energy-bearing molecule the cell uses to facilitate this reaction is the ATP molecule, or the adenosine triphosphate molecule. People talk about DNA and protein being important in the cell; I think that ATP is equally important. Carbohydrates like sugar store energy; but molecules like ATP do the "heavy lifting" in the cell - the energy is in a form where you can make higher-energy molecules.

If you heat something up, you can push some of the molecules into a higher energy state. Problem is, other molecules will be destroyed along the way. ATP means you can make higher energy molecules without heating up the whole.

Of course, the question of how you make ATP is its own issue. I speculate that you can heat up the ATP precursors separately, make some ATP and then bring it into a cold area where you can

use it to make more complex molecules without destroying the ones which have already been made.

The primordial environment could have been sterile, nutrient-rich and ready for life in a way that we can barely imagine today. We can define "proto-life" or "early-life" as "the creation and maintenance of information-bearing molecules". We could have had a situation where proteins were catalysing the formation of other proteins - protein directly storing information.

Then, before DNA settled on its current use as the store of information, single strands of DNA might have assisted the catalytic process, sharing in the creative process leading towards more complex life as we know it.



## Dolphins' habitat shapes DNA

Frank Gomez

Bottlenose dolphins who use sponges as tools experience changes to their genetic make-up as a result, research shows. Researchers at University of New South Wales observed and analysed the DNA of dolphins in western Shark Bay, north of Perth.

Some of the dolphins put marine sponges on their beaks while looking for food on the sea floor – a non-genetic skill believed to be learned from their mothers.

Researchers, led by Dr Anna Kopps, found dolphins who lived in areas where sponges grow had a particular type of genetic makeup. Those who lived where sponges didn't grow also mainly fell into a certain genetic group.

This is the first study that has shown a link between how social experiences and habitats shape genetics within a single animal population.

The implications correlate with the growing idea in the past three decades that there may some yet explained mechanisms of inheritance.

This is in stark contrast to the 20th century orthodoxy that the possibility of 'soft' or 'Lamarckian' inheritance, whereby traits acquired during an individual's lifetime could be passed on to its offspring, had been firmly refuted by the 1930s, and the discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953 was its 'death knell'.



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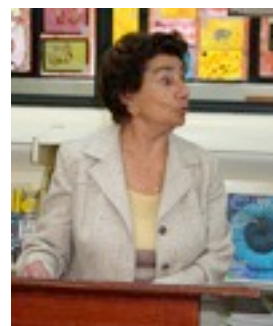
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