

Monthly Bulletin — February 2022

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to this year's Darwin-themed newsletter! February 12th is Charles Darwin's birthday so every year around that date Humanist organisations *naturally* host a *variety* of Darwin Day events for you to *select* from. (I've repeated that description from last year's bulletin to show that it can *survive*). This year, we were very excited to add to the prestigious list of speakers we've been able to bring to the North East for this topic when archaeologist, paleoanthropologist, TV presenter, and stand-up performer Ella Al-Shamahi accepted our invitation to speak. Sadly, this will only be a virtual event, but that does have some advantages for gathering ideas from afar and offering them widely. See below for full details.

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Why We Must Oppose the 2021 Health and Care Bill — January 20th

January's public lecture was delivered to us over Zoom by Professor Allyson Pollock who is a clinical professor of public health at Newcastle University and an honorary professor at UCL. Professor Pollock started by giving us a quick overview of the very complicated history behind recent legislative changes that have affected the National Health Service, as well as the potential reorganisations that are currently being proposed. The short takeaway? There has been a slow and steady campaign to privatise bits and pieces of the NHS for decades. The latest proposals raise alarm bells about provisions of service, costs, and who gets to decide what is covered and for whom. For far more details than we can cover in this bulletin, see Professor Pollock's website, particularly [her page about the Health and Care Bill 2021-22](#).

In a lively and extensive Q&A, Professor Pollock also pointed us to the work of public campaigner Jenny Shepherd and her website [Don't Blow It! Kill the Health & Care Bill](#). Jenny followed up with us after the event and said, "The urgent thing is to create enough public pressure to



motivate the House of Lords to take effective action in the Committee and Report stages of the Bill before it goes back to the House of Commons.” Here are some resources from Jenny to help you do that:

- a) Progress report on House of Lords Health and Care Bill Committee to date: <https://bit.ly/LordsNotLeapingToScrapNHSBill>. (Please [tweet it from here](#) if you're so minded.)
- b) Our briefing to House of Lords at the start of the Committee stage is [here](#).
- c) Other “Don't Blow It! Scrap the NHS Bill” campaign blog posts are [here](#).

The UK is being lobbied heavily behind the scenes by foreign health care companies to make these changes so that others can come in and reap profits from our “market”. This is particularly coming from the United States, which spends far more money for far worse outcomes in their health sector. We do not want to go down that path! So please do consider learning more about this issue and taking action where you can.

Speaking Truth from Faith

A few months ago, we received an invitation to take part in an interfaith discussion called “Speaking Truth from Faith.” Moira and Mike Turner accepted the offer to submit a short video on this topic, which would be presented alongside the views of members from other belief systems. In late December, the video was finally published, which contained:

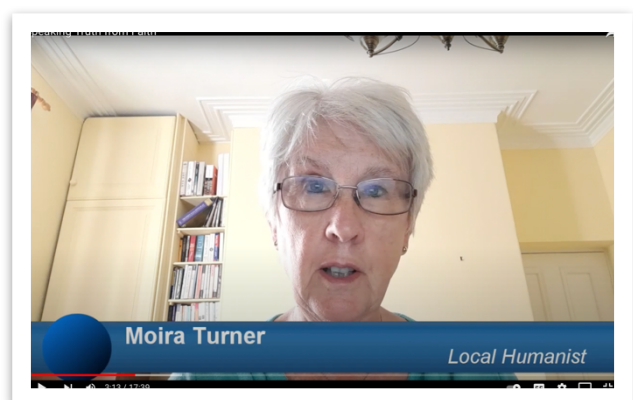
- an introduction from Graham Williams, who is a Voices of Faith committee member from the Roman Catholic Church (0:00 to 2:42);
- Moira Turner’s speech from the North East Humanists (2:43 to 7:54);
- Imam Raza’s speech presenting a Muslim perspective (7:55 to 11:24);
- Malcom Raiton’s speech as a Christian Priest (11:25 to 16:22); and
- a short closing from Graham Williams (16:23 to 17:39).

You may judge for yourself what you think of the other perspectives, but Moira really addressed this topic head on. The script she presented is posted below for you to read and consider. The entire video is posted at: https://youtu.be/z6dxWuR_4yU.

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“TRUTH” by Moira and Mike Turner

We all have beliefs. To believe something is to believe it is true.



As you know, Humanists do not have sacred books. We have many texts, books, essays, videos, and courses as starting points from which to investigate and explore our beliefs, values, and goals. A good summary on thoughts about truth can be found in a MOOC, [a free online course on Humanism](#), which is still available, and we have chosen passages from this relating to the theme of truth to share with you.

But first – What is truth?

The Oxford Dictionary defines Truth in two ways:

1. That which is true or in accordance with fact or reality.
2. A fact or belief that is accepted as true.

But how do we know what is true? All our beliefs are held with some, and often differing, degrees of confidence that they truly reflect the way the world really is, but why do we believe these things at all?

There are different reasons for believing things:

- People may claim they have personal experience of something, for example they have seen it, heard it, or felt it.
- They may believe something based on the authority of others. This could be something someone has told them or that they have read in a book or another source of information.
- Sometimes people claim they have tested their belief through investigation and experiment.
- Some beliefs are held on the basis of logical reasoning.
- Then there are those beliefs based on ‘faith’ - an inner conviction that something is true.

It is important to recognise that whichever method we employ for believing the truth of something, our beliefs can still be mistaken.

- Our senses sometimes suffer illusions or misinterpret information. We can be fooled into thinking that because we have seen something happen once (or even several times), that it will always happen.
- Other people can lie to us, or present us with biased information, or be mistaken in what they tell us.
- Even good scientific experiments sometimes get things wrong.
- A logical argument only guarantees the conclusion is true if the premises are true.
- If we have faith, we may feel things are true, but it gives us no guarantee that they are.

This recognition and acknowledgement of the possibility that our beliefs may be mistaken is an approach to knowledge that accepts we are prone to error and so encourages us to be cautious about what we accept as true.

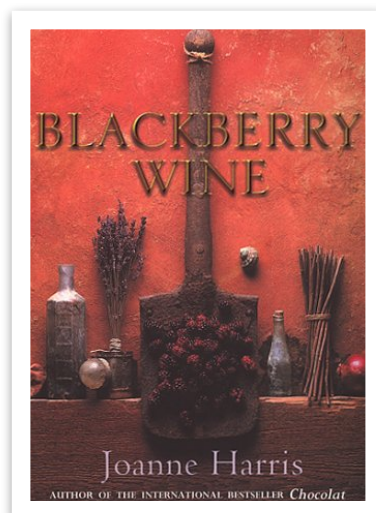
Humanists believe we should always be prepared to ask questions. We should apply the filter of reason to our beliefs – we should subject beliefs to critical scrutiny, not just uncritically accept them. The filter may not be 100% reliable, but if we apply it then there is a good chance that many of our beliefs will be true. Turn the filter off, and there is a danger our heads will quickly fill up with false beliefs. The search for Truth, (with a capital T), whether it is a personal truth, or a universal truth has kept humans occupied for millennia, and it is perhaps even more important today, in the age of the internet and “fake news”, that we take great care to ensure that what we believe is really true.

Virtual Book Club on January 25th by Jan Mole

There were various responses to *Blackberry Wine* by Joanne Harris, our book club members' read for January. Overall, most of us found something to sustain our interest sufficiently to finish the book, and our appreciation of the descriptions of a small French village and the characters therein was unanimous.

We all enjoyed the parts relating to growing plants, initially by Joe in his allotment garden created on a piece of rough open land, and later in the book by Jay as he discovers the joy of cultivating the land that surrounded his French house.

The magical realism element proved difficult for some of us but was embraced and enjoyed by others who liked the 'whimsy' aspect of a bottle of wine as narrator, and also Jay's guide and mentor Joe. The reader was led to assume that Joe had died but he appeared to Jay after he moved to France, talking and advising him as he had done during Jay's boyhood.



We talked about our reactions to actions and attitudes which have inevitably changed over the twenty odd years since the book was written, in particular the 'strange' Marisse whose treatment of her young daughter was unconventional in the least and would perhaps, nowadays, be considered almost abusive.

We agreed the book was well researched and written with the two periods of time running together smoothly and thereby easily followed.

For February, Jan suggested [Piranesi by Susanna Clark](#). This is a book that really defies simplistic description, but it won the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction and three people known to have read it recently did so within one or two days!

The NEH Zoom book club meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month at 7:30 PM so the next discussion will be February 22nd. If you are interested in joining, please contact Jan Mole at 0132 535 6029, 0780 466 7390, or janet.mole@ntlworld.com.


UPCOMING NEH ACTIVITIES

Darwin Day Lecture — The Handshake: A Gripping History...and a Biological One by Ella Al-Shamahi on Thursday February 10th

Many declared that Covid had killed the handshake. But the handshake is not just cultural, it's biological, probably embedded in our DNA and at least seven million years old. This is a paradigm shift from the oft-repeated 'origin' of the handshake as being a way of showing that you are unarmed. This lecture argues that the handshake has an actual biological purpose and considers what other pandemics through history tell us about its 'demise'.

Ella is an archaeologist, paleoanthropologist, and Neanderthal specialist. She is a National Geographic Explorer and scientific stand-up performer. She has recently presented on the programmes *Jungle Mystery: Lost Kingdoms of the Amazon*

(Channel 4, 2020) and *Waterhole: Africa's Animal Oasis* (BBC2, 2020). In 2019, Ella presented a TED Talk about fascinating places in the world that scientists aren't exploring which has had over 2 million views. Her book [*The Handshake: A Gripping History*](#) was published by Profile Books in March 2021.




INSIGHTS
VIRTUAL LECTURES

Thursday 10 February, 5.30pm

Ella Al-Shamahi
Palaeoanthropologist, evolutionary biologist
and stand-up comic

Darwin Day Lecture with the North East Humanists:
The handshake: a gripping history
...and a biological one



The lecture will be followed by a live Q&A with the speaker. You can submit a question in advance by sending an email to public.lectures@ncl.ac.uk or during the event using YouTube Live Chat or via Twitter [@InsightsNCL](https://twitter.com/InsightsNCL).

Who: Ella Al-Shamahi

When: Thursday February 10th at 5:30 PM

What: 30-minute lecture followed by 30-minute Q&A.

How: Registration is not required. Simply [watch this event on YouTube](#).

This event is co-hosted by Newcastle University as part of their Insights Lectures series. Anyone is welcome to attend for free. Whilst we do not charge for online events, North East Humanists is a registered charity that you may donate a few pounds to by using [the button at the bottom of our homepage](#). We suggest £3 for these donations but all amounts are greatly appreciated.

Sunday Breakfast Invitation — February 20th

If you like an occasional cooked breakfast without the mess of cleaning up, why not join us for one of the great pleasures in life—socialising over a good meal. With concerns about Covid fading we think it is time to restart our Sunday Breakfasts.

On February 20th we will be gathering between 10:00 and 10:15 at The Wicket Gate, 193 Front St, Chester-le-Street, DH3 3AX. Eating and chatting normally ends about 11:30 and, if the weather is dry, a post breakfast walk in the nearby park is recommended. Please contact Mike and Moira Turner on 0191 272 8376 if you need any more information.

OTHER NEH NEWS

Linskill Centre's Microgrant for a Sensory Room Installation

As we have mentioned in previous editions of the bulletin, our Community Fund has been awarding microgrants for small, local projects. One of this year's awardees — [the Linskill Centre in North Shields](#) — has finished the installation of their new sensory room, which included equipment bought by a £500 microgrant from NEH.

Moira and Mike Turner went to see this installation recently, and they talked to the manager, Louise Cervantes. The sensory room is certainly the biggest in North Tyneside and one of the biggest in the North East. It really is amazing! As Louise had written in an email:

"We have purchased the dark den and some other tactile resources along with a tunnel and musical instruments. The additional equipment helps us to maintain the Sensory Room, adding additional enrichment for the beneficiaries."

The beneficiaries to date have included:

- *Babies and toddlers who attend with their parents at the weekly community group 'Sensory Stars' – approx. 48 children per week.*
- *Babies and toddlers from our onsite nursery who attend weekly as part of their curriculum; - approx. 50 children per week access.*
- *Saturday Club children aged 8-15 years who have multiple and profound complex additional needs; 12 children per week.*

Learning through the senses is the best way for young children to learn and experience the world. The sensory room provides relaxation and fascinating auditory, visual, and tactile opportunities."

Below, you can see the dark den and the tunnel in this amazing facility.



The NEH Community Fund closed on the 31st of January, 2022. The Management Committee is currently conducting a full review of this project and will report back in a few months. While full details are being gathered, we are very happy to share images and stories like this about the Linskill Centre's sensory room. Thank you to all NEH members and volunteers who help make things like this happen.



OTHER HUMANIST NEWS

An Evolutionary Perspective on the Meaning of Life by Ed Gibney

At the end of 2021, the BBC Radio 4 show [The Moral Maze](#) had a special episode titled “[Meaning](#)” to discuss the meaning of life. This show usually draws from a handful of regulars for their four panellists, but for this show they brought in Will Self, an author and journalist; Bonnie Greer, a playwright, novelist, and former Chancellor of Kingston University; Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury; and Alice Roberts, the President of Humanists UK.



The written introduction to the show is very thought provoking:

“The end of one year and the beginning of another can be an obvious moment for people to set goals and reset priorities. The pandemic, from which we are yet to emerge, has put much into perspective and has doubtless prompted many to ask the question: where am I going with my life? What’s it all about? While none of us can truly know the meaning of life, most of us are meaning-seeking creatures who have our own ideas about what gives life meaning – God, nature, the arts, human relationships, good food, scientific progress. Is meaning essential to a life well lived or do we put too much pressure on ourselves in trying to create it?”

The entire 43-minute episode is worth listening to, but I wanted to share and reflect on the final words from Alice Roberts. Near the close of the program, she said,



"I think that what's interesting is the diversity we've heard. Both amongst ourselves on the panel, but also from the witnesses. I think that what makes human life meaningful, in a much broader way, is all this diversity. So, we've got religious people for whom religion and its tenets are important and may suggest a meaning in life. And then we've heard from a nihilist. As a Humanist, I think I can live an ethical and fulfilling life using my own reason and empathy and my own moral sense as a guide. But I don't think there will ever be just one meaning of life. There are as many meanings as there are different people."

This is a typical response from Humanists, reflecting the humility we have about our place in this universe. We profess no certainties taken from any sacred texts that provide religious meanings for life. As such, Alice provided a good representation of Humanists UK. But without more context, this can come across as relativistic. Who's to say that any of those religious meanings of life aren't proper? Based on many campaigns from Humanists UK, I think it's safe to say we Humanists think plenty of religious meanings for life don't fit the bill. But how do we explain this?

One concept that I think is helpful comes from a paper written by the philosopher Dan Dennett. In a 2009 article titled, "[Darwin's 'strange inversion of reasoning'](#)", Dennett described the way our understanding of the world has been completely turned upside down compared to the way that creationists think about it. Dennett quoted a passage from a contemporary critic of Darwin who just couldn't believe what was being proposed. That critic wrote:

"We may enunciate as the fundamental principle of the whole [Darwinian] system, that, in order to make a perfect and beautiful machine, it is not requisite to know how to make it. This proposition will be found, on careful examination, to express, in condensed form, the essential purport of the Theory [of Evolution], and to express in a few words all Mr. Darwin's meaning; who, by a strange inversion of reasoning, seems to think Absolute Ignorance fully qualified to take the place of Absolute Wisdom in all of the achievements of creative skill."

As Dennett makes clear, this intended criticism actually turns out to be a wonderful description of what is going on in the world. There has been no "Absolute Wisdom" from on high designing the world in a beautiful, top-down fashion. Instead, Darwin's "bubble-up theory of creation" explains very clearly how life has found its way forward through myriad trials and errors conducted in "Absolute Ignorance". In exactly the same way, there is no singular, top-down "Meaning of Life" that comes booming down to us from on high. Instead, meanings are also built up through trials and errors. Over the millennia of human culture, we have discovered some that survive better than others. And we are still testing others out, which is why Alice was right to say, "There are as many meanings as there are different people." Only some of these meanings, however, lead towards more survival and flourishing for life on this planet. And that is what we can use our reason to try and figure out.

For much more on this topic, I highly recommend the work of philosopher John Messerly. He wrote a book in 2013 called [The Meaning of Life](#), and he published a synopsis of it on his website called "[A Philosopher's Lifelong Search for Meaning](#)."

Uganda Humanist Schools Trust Update by Chairperson Steve Hurd

I should like to give heartfelt thanks to every one of you who supported us in our efforts to get the Humanist Schools through the enforced school closures of 2021. We succeeded! On January 10th, 2022 schools in Uganda were allowed to reopen and children are returning as parents find money for school fees. The latest information is in [the news blog on our website](#).

As they return to their main task of bringing inclusive, liberal, and humanist education to children, the Humanist schools are feeling optimistic and so are we. Our schools were doing well before Covid struck and we are determined to restore and improve on the high standards of education and welfare they were achieving.

The growth in Uganda of Humanism and of Humanist Schools is unique in the world. We are delighted that the BBC's Panorama team has arrived in Uganda to document this development for the World Service TV Series [Africa Eye](#). None of this could have happened without the ongoing commitment of supporters such as you.



Latest Issue of Humanistically Speaking



North East Humanists are affiliated with *Humanistically Speaking*, which is a monthly magazine that has been published since 2019 by members of the South Central England Humanist Network. You can subscribe to this free magazine and view all previous issues at [their website](#). Their latest [January](#) issue focuses on issues of war and peace and includes features about Richard Norman; Steven Pinker; a Humanist in the Falklands War; War, Peace, and Sex-Strike; Humanism in Africa; Climate wars; Poet's Corner; and your letters.

ALWAYS LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING

Tune in to our Darwin Day Lecture to see if this is the future of handshakes.



CONTACT US FOR MORE

North East Humanists

All of the latest information about North East Humanists is available on our [website](#). You can also follow us on social media via [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Interacting with us there is a great way to help spread the news about Humanism so we can grow and accomplish even more.

Please consider a membership with us if you do not already have one. You can join NEH for as little as £6 per year by visiting [the membership page of our website](#). Our fees are very low, but they really do support so much local grassroots work, as we hope you see in these bulletins. This month, we are excited to welcome Lynn Farrington to NEH!

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. If that's more of a commitment than you can make, just [sign up to our email list](#). For NEH members without email, the bulletin is printed by Mike and Moira Turner and sent by post. Contact them at 0191 272 8376 to arrange this if you need it.

Durham Humanist Group

This local house group is run by Susan Walker. Contact her at 0191 384 1432 or susan.humanist@gmail.com if you would like to attend events here.

Teesside Humanist Group

If you would like to join this group, please [contact us](#) for more details. You can also follow them on Twitter [@Teeshumanists](#) or like the [Teesside Humanists Facebook Group](#) run by Terry Waites and Ben Collier.

Humanist Funerals, Baby Naming Ceremonies, and Weddings

Anyone who wants advice on how to organise these should contact Les Milne at 0795 267 1533 or go to www.northeast-humanists.org.uk/ceremonies.html.