



Is Evolution Over?

On November 11th Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics at University College, London, drew a capacity audience of over 350 to the Curtis Auditorium of the University of Newcastle. The event was part of the INSIGHT series of public lectures held throughout the year by the University.

The North East Humanists had previously negotiated the opportunity to arrange joint events with the University, and in this case, we were able to secure Steve Jones to speak on a subject to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth.

He began by explaining that the title referred to the evolution of the Human species and that the answer to the question was YES. He suggested that anyone in the audience who had just come to hear the answer could leave at this point if they wished! But, of course, no one did.

Steve Jones supported his conclusion with a series of arguments showing that the ways in which humans now live their lives are not conducive to the evolution process progressing any further.

For example, he described the very different lifestyle we have today compared with that of our ancestors. There is now a great deal more mixing of the species and, therefore of our genes. For example, marriage partners are much more likely to have been born at a much greater distance apart than were our parents (Steve was born in Wales and his wife in New York). Also, we are more likely to be attracted to someone with similar 'A' levels than with the same physical features such as skin colour.

Another factor is that, as women's egg cells are produced at the outset of their reproductive lives, they are not very likely to undergo changes before they are fertilised. With men, sperm is freshly manufactured throughout the long period of their reproductive lives and changes in sperm qualities are very likely to occur as men get older. However, nowadays, the greater use of birth control generally results in fertilisation ceasing by the time men are around 40 years old and so variations in sperm quality are now much less likely to occur.

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Since the evolutionary process requires selection, mutation and random changes to occur, the fact that our species, on the whole, has become more homogeneous, means that there is now much less opportunity for the evolutionary process to have the necessary conditions to enable it to continue. This is particularly the case in the Western World, but the trend is similar elsewhere.

Steve Jones also dealt with the question of the possible effects of outside influences on evolution, such as the nuclear bombs which were dropped on Japan. Following these horrific events, studies were continued for 60 years to ascertain the effects on humans. It turned out that there was a comparatively low number of mutant offspring discovered (around 30), and that this was very similar to the number that could be attributed to natural sources such as cosmic radiation and to radon gas emitted from certain types of rocks.

It is not possible, of course, to convey the strength of Steve Jones's arguments from these few examples. His lecture was very interesting and entertaining, and it was obviously greatly enjoyed by the audience.

After the question and answer session, NEH provided a glass of wine or a soft drink to all participants in the foyer of the auditorium. This enabled committee members to engage in conversation with members of the public, to hand out leaflets and to show them the display boards illustrating our activities.

We believe that this type of event, as when A C Grayling visited us a year ago, greatly helps with our recruitment drive. Our paid-up membership has now reached 260.

CDs recording Steve Jones's talk are available on request for £1 at our meetings or for £1.50 with post and packaging. Contact: Barrie Berkley at barriebkly@aol.com or tel 01434 632936.

A Philosophy for the C21

In November our member Professor Willie Thompson, who is a historian, was a Communist for thirty years and is now a member of the Green Party, gave us his ideas on this subject. He has written this summary of his talk, which provoked many questions.

The twentieth century is generally agreed to have been the bloodiest on record, but the present one faces even worse perils – the danger to the planetary environment is a threat which puts all other issues in the shade. On present indications (though you can never be sure) the human species as such is probably not in serious danger of total extinction, but the collapse of civilisation could nevertheless be one of the more optimistic scenarios.

Only adherence to and application of scientific principles can hope to save the situation. Most of us are not scientists – but we can sustain a scientific attitude – nor are we mostly professional philosophers, but we need to have a philosophy in the sense of an understanding, a form of commitment of how best to address and confront this reality – in other words our personal stance.

My argument is that the philosophy of existentialism developed by the great French thinker Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is an appropriate attitude to adopt in face of current dilemmas.

Its starting point is an analysis of the nature of individual consciousness, for which choice – and responsibility for that choice – is central. The existentialist foundational principle is that 'we are not what we are and are what we are not', meaning that through choosing, (which we must inescapably do and responsibility for which we cannot evade) we change ourselves from what we are into what we become – it can be understood as similar to the observation that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. What Sartre terms 'bad faith' is a device or dodge to avoid recognition of that reality, though it is necessary to note that choice has to be understood in the *situation* – evidently it can be limited by material or other constraints.

Why is this of particular relevance for the twenty-first century? Because of the pressure of history and the urgency of the dilemma, the entire world knows from personal experience that the future, however it turns out, will not in the least resemble the present *and the future of the planet is at stake*. An additional insight which we now have and which was not present in Sartre's time, is an understanding of the fragility of life on this planet. That appreciation greatly increases the weight of responsibility

Thus a particular responsibility exists for our present generation, especially a need for clear insight which I would argue that this philosophy provides. One thing the twentieth century has demonstrated is that there are no pre-ordained outcomes to history, we can no more rely on the inevitability of progress than we can on divine intervention. It is up to us to choose.

NEH Charity of the Year 2009 - your chance to choose.....

In the last newsletter, members were invited to send in suggestions for NEH's charity of the year 2009. Only two suggestions have been received and these will be voted on at the AGM in March. If you are not able to come to the AGM but would like to register a choice, please telephone John Hodge at 0191 281 2808, or e-mail johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk

Recyke-y-bike www.recyke-y-bike.org

Recyke-y-bike of Hannington Street, Byker is a well-established voluntary group that accepts second-hand bikes from the public, repairs and re-furbishes them whenever possible, so that they can be passed on, sold to provide income to support their work; or stripped for serviceable parts, with the rest sent for re-cycling.

Recyke-y-bike offers long-term employment to trained cycle repairers, gives training to ex-offenders, provides valuable work experience to a team of volunteers, gives reconditioned and tested bikes to asylum-seekers and refugees to help them in job-seeking, donates dozens of bikes a year to country villages in Africa, runs cycling training and fix your own bike workshop sessions and reduces waste going to landfill.

The Stroke Association www.stroke.org.uk

Every year, an estimated 150,000 people in the UK have a stroke; it is the third most common cause of death in the UK, and the single most common cause of severe disability.

The Stroke Association is the only national charity solely concerned with combatting stroke in people of all ages, and has as its main purposes; campaigning to raise awareness of strokes, advising on the prevention of strokes, the provision of advice, emotional support, and information to people and their families who have had strokes, and the provision of rehabilitation and support services.

The Association also funds research into stroke prevention, treatment and rehabilitation.

Bullying 20 Years On

At our October meeting Dr Val Besag, who is an NEH member and an internationally recognised authority on the subject of bullying, spoke about the progress made in tackling this disturbing and widespread problem.

Bullying is a complex issue. As it is an abuse, disclosure is difficult. It is hidden from those who could impose sanctions and it is a two-way dynamic depending on the intent of the offender and the reaction of the target. A further confusing issue is that most bullies share the characteristics of a good leader. Many bullies are able to read the dynamics of the group and use this knowledge to influence their followers. However, a leader uses a democratic mode whereas the bully is an autocratic force.

Boys tend to use physical means whereas girls prefer verbal modes and social exclusion. Young males form a hierarchy of physical strength by play fighting and continue to reaffirm this by arm wrestling, the pub brawl and the conspicuous display of power and wealth. Many bullies enjoy an audience in order to display their power.

Boys' behaviour appears more competitive and aggressive as girls behave in a more covert manner. The hierarchy of girls relates to their emotionally charged friendships. A high level of wariness, jealousy and close monitoring is often present in their relationships causing the dynamics and membership of their friendships to change constantly. Their friendships rarely change amicably. These behaviours can lead to a higher level of distress than the bruises suffered by of male victims.

The bully is supported by assistants who join in the bullying. Reinforcers encourage the bullies. The bystanders feel helpless, angry and anxious. Many adults retain these feelings about bullying witnessed as a child.

Cyber-bullying is a difficult mode to cope with as it reaches into the home. This should be a place of safety.

Considerable progress has been made in the last twenty years. Then only one book was available on the subject (Olweus, 1978) and that was out-of-print. Since then, the government has funded research into school bullying. This has led to funding for materials and training and eventually the requirement for all state schools to have an explicit anti-bullying policy. The nationally funded Anti-Bullying Alliance has regional anti-bullying advisors available to schools and an anti-bullying week is organised each year. Schools now use a range of approaches with individuals as well as Whole School Approaches. Peer support schemes are encouraged and problem-solving methods used in the community, such as Solution Focused Approaches, Mediation and Restorative Justice, are widely used in schools.

If we do not step in and bring the bullying to a halt, the likelihood is that the child bully, seeing no reason to alter the behaviour, will develop into an adult bully. Bullying is a human behaviour and will always be with us but it is clear that there is much we can do to pre-empt it, strengthen the resilience of the vulnerable and muster the support of the majority to stand up against it.

There was a lively debate after the talk, showing that bullying is an issue that affects us all as bully, target or bystander.

Quiz and Fun Night

Peter Warburton writes

On 21st November, 37 NEH members and their friends defied the cold and frosty weather to create their own warmth and fun at what has become a highlight of the NEH Calendar. The questions set by George Bell proved varied and brain-teasing, and the outright and worthy winners were well ahead of the runners-up. At half-time we all enjoyed a splendid buffet, after honouring the customary privilege of 'vegetarians first'.

This year, the proceeds for the evening of £248 go to NEH's charity of the year for 2008, the East Area Asylum Seekers Support Group, and we were pleased that a team from "Common Ground" was also able to join us.

Our grateful thanks go to the Bridge Hotel for the convivial venue, to Tony Wild and his charming assistant Kate for asking the questions in a good humoured way; and to our worthy compère, Chris Haine, for steering us through the whole proceedings.

Darwin's Birthday

This year marks the bi-centenary of the birth of Charles Darwin. There promises to be much media coverage of this event, so look out for radio and television programmes and articles in the newspapers.

First Tuesday Dining Club. *Ann Ball reports* that 10 people met for the special Xmas-fare menu at the Washington Arts Centre on 2nd December. The food was good and the company even better. A good time was had by all.

Hundred Club Winners

The draw takes place once a month at the start of our meetings at the Lit & Phil. Winners for October, November and December were:

JAMES WILLIAMS (No.59)
CHRIS HAINE (No.42),
ROGER McADAM (No.10).

The prize in each month was £46.

BHA Group Representatives 2008 Meeting

Margaret Jones and Marjory McNaughton, standing in for injured committee members, went to London on Saturday 15 November to attend the Group Representatives Annual Meeting (GRAM) which was held in the Conway Hall in Red Lion Square. There was large attendance with few empty seats. The coffee that awaited us was very welcome as there were no hot drinks to be had on the train.

The first speaker, Steve Hurd of the South Cheshire/North Stafford group, gave an enthusiastic and stimulating talk on Humanist Schools in Uganda with emphasis on the very new Humanist Academy. This school was opened in February 2008 with 40 pupils in Senior 1 class with equal numbers of boys and girls. It is on a hill top (the land up there was cheap) in Mpigi, a rural area between Kampala and Masaka. Its aim is to provide secondary education to the children in this deprived area, with an emphasis on science and community service.

Local adults are invited to join practical skill classes on bee keeping, fish farming, tree planting and crop improvement. A cake making project has just been introduced.

As is always the case, funds are needed for all areas of the school: teachers' salaries, scientific equipment, books, pictures, even chalk and, of course, food. On a recent visit to the school Steve asked the children what they thought was lacking in the school. One small boy said, "Sir. My dad says all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Can we have a football?" This item is now top of the priority list!

A more ambitious project is to raise money to install electricity and a pump so that water can be supplied to the school. At the moment cans of water are carried up the hill daily and then boiled to make it fit for drinking. This provides only one cup per person a day clearly quite an inadequate amount in that climate.

Keele University is participating in a fund raising scheme for the school and so far has raised quite a few pounds by fining any science student who forgets his lab coat the sum of £1!

Other agenda items including fund raising and recruitment were discussed and suggestions such as a presence at street stalls, local festivals, fetes were made. It seemed to us that the NEH is doing these things already.

Raising awareness was another discussion item. Letters to the press, taking up local issues, and looking for ways to engage with local authorities were suggested methods. The Norfolk group have volunteers who liaise with equality officials and local government officers.

One group suggested having business cards printed giving contact details so that they can be whipped out of the pocket at a moment's notice when a likely convert looms into view (NEH also has these).

One delegate asked what Humanists were doing for deprived areas in their own regions, and whether they should be concentrating on these rather than schools in Uganda.

The Bedford group have recently conducted a survey on organ donation. On five Saturdays they spent several hours in the town centre asking members of the public their views on organ donation. If any of them seemed sympathetic or ready to chat they told them about humanism. They questioned over 200 people and handed out their entire stock of humanist literature. They followed this up with letters to the press and generally considered this to have been a worthwhile operation.

This was the first such meeting either of us had attended and we found it most interesting. We were able to compare notes with other groups. We learnt that attendance at meetings in Surrey had increased considerably once they moved from the Quaker Meeting house to the Café Rouge. One group increased their numbers when they held their meetings on a Sunday morning. Many seem to meet in each other's homes and the back rooms of pubs is clearly a popular venue.

Why Don't Humanists Sing?

This question was raised by a delegate at the GRAM meeting. This had occurred to him whilst watching the TV programme 'The Last Choir Standing'. He saw singing as a way of building celebration into groups. Two or three people said they did occasionally have a sing along at the end of their meetings.

Is there anyone out there who can sing and would like to form a choir? Maybe the ability to sing is not strictly essential!

A LETTER FROM A FORMER CHRISTIAN

Dear North East Humanists

When you have dealings with people who hold a religious faith, please treat them seriously and gently. We regard their beliefs to be mistaken and would be glad for them to realise that. But the journey from a deeply held religious conviction to a clear realisation that they had been mistaken can be a long (in my case 15 years) and an agonising one, going through confusion, doubts, questioning and uncertainty. It was another 28 years before I found the Humanists. I wish I had found you sooner.

Gwen Curnow, Spennymoor

Forthcoming Meetings

Tyneside Humanist Group

Meetings are held on the third Thursday of each month at **The Literary and Philosophical Society**, ('Lit & Phil') 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle.

Tea/coffee is available at 6.45 pm for a 7.15 pm start.

We are now able to remain at the Lit and Phil until 9.30pm which allows us more time for discussion and informal conversation

February 19th **Face to Face**

An evening of discussion in small groups on a topic to be decided

March 19th **Annual General Meeting**

This is an opportunity to learn about what the group is doing and to make suggestions about future activities

April 16th **Young People, Society and Crime**

Roger Statham, former Chief Probation Officer, Teesside

Teesside Humanist Group

For information on meetings and social events please contact: CHARLIE McEWAN Tel. 01642 817541

Cumbria Humanist Group

Meetings commence at 7.30 pm on the third Wednesday of each month, in Carlisle (Morton Community Centre, Wigton Road) or Penrith (Eden Rural Foyer).

21st January **Annual General Meeting**. (Penrith)

18th February **Film : 2500 Years (& more) of Free Thinking. A History of Humanism.** Followed by discussion. (Carlisle)

18th March **Humanist Themes in Music and Literature.** *Michael Travers* (Carlisle)

15th April **Dispelling the myths: the Church in higher education** *Professor Chris Carr, Vice-Chancellor, University of Cumbria*, (Penrith)

For further information, please contact Chris Allen on 01228 810592

or see Website: www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk

Ceremonies - For information about Humanist Wedding, Baby Naming, Affirmation and Funeral Ceremonies, please contact John Hodge on 0191 281 2808

or email johnhodge@blueyonder.co.uk

Christian challenges atheist bus advert

Atheist adverts are now on 800 buses in London and other cities, including Newcastle, with the slogan

There's probably NO GOD, now stop worrying and enjoy your life

www.atheistbus.org.uk/

This has prompted Stephen Green of Christian Voice, to complain to the Advertising Standards Authority calling for the adverts to be withdrawn. Mr Green has challenged the adverts on grounds of "truthfulness" and "substantiation", suggesting that there is not "a shred of supporting evidence" that there is probably no God.

A.C. Grayling observed,

"The evidential basis for God is the same as for believing there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, and if you don't believe the latter, you shouldn't believe the former,"

and Hanne Stinson Chief Executive of the BHA said

"I pity the ASA if they are going to be expected to rule on the probability of God's existence."

Welcoming guests at NEH meetings

NEH would like to enhance the welcome it gives to newcomers who attend our meetings. We would like to recruit a few members who would be prepared to come to meetings half an hour earlier and meet guests as they arrive and make some initial introductions.

If you would like to help please contact

Peter Warburton tel.0191 410 6669
or email peterwrb2@tiscali.co.uk.

RAFFLE PRIZES

The monthly raffle draw at our meetings at the Lit and Phil contribute a not-insignificant amount to NEH funds over the course of a year, and add a certain frisson to proceedings.

Offers of raffle prizes are always sought and if you can ever spare a bottle of wine, box of chocolates or something much more imaginative, please pass them on to John Hodge.

Have your say.....

We welcome letters for publication of around 150-200 words; also longer articles by arrangement with the new editor:

Margaret Jones
5 Albany Mews, Newcastle upon Tyne
NE3 4JW 0191 213 1013

email: daisy2502@talktalk.net

The deadline for receipt of material for the next newsletter is 20 March

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in articles and letters are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the North East Humanists.

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Visit our website for more information
www.northeast.humanists.net