

VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

August 2010

Volume 49, No. 7

THE HUMAN SCALE



The feeling that comes with opening out our gaze, from the familiar near-at-hand to the heights of the Himalayas or the expanses of Antarctica, we call sublime. A starry night is a wonder which can be cause for perplexity: 'how I wonder what you are.' Our inclination to project meaning beyond the ordinary human world probably evolved from our remote ancestors' being alert to signs of danger in the environment. Omens have long been woven into culture, in the forms of animistic religion, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, the patterns of tea-leaves and what not.

So it comes as a shock, to be tempted to admire the immensity of the universe, only to be rewarded by the horrifying feeling that it cares nothing at all for our human life. Our

precious Earth seems insignificant amongst the billions (so we are told) of galaxies – insignificance being the reciprocal of grandeur. How could anyone care about something as puny thing as humanity? The absurdity of human life featured in the philosophical novel of Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938).

Such an abysmal conclusion comes from transferring our point of view imaginatively way out into space, without tightening our metaphorical seatbelt. It is an unnatural perspective, and it is a mistake to identify with it. A similar kind of transference is required of molecular scientists investigating the nano-world, yet they do not identify with that. Humans have evolved to deal with terrestrial reality on a human scale. Cosmic and microscopic realities are so remote from us that they are not readily grasped by the mind; we have what electrical engineers call an 'impedance mismatch'.

Our talent is to generate purpose, which brings meaning into being. The Australian humanist, Vere Gordon Childe, epitomized that in the title of his book, *Man Makes Himself* (1936). But, however rich and exciting the human world may be to live in, it is always possible to imagine the non-human world as practically infinite in extent and so dwarfing our own. Yet we can regard our lover as a whole person and not fret about the number of atoms composing her being some 10 raised to the 28th power.

The sense of significance, of meaning or caring is essentially a human one; it is inappropriate to extend it to a god, the universe or a virus particle, except in fancy. So ask not whether we are 'alone', cancel your bequest to the Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence, because there is no-one 'out there' who can be relied upon to notice us. And humans are more likely to survive on filthy old planet Earth than on some future space station.

Stephen Stuart, president



Print Post Approved PP 335708/00019

HSV Monthly
Public Lecture

TUESDAY

24 August

7.30 for 8.00pm

Balwyn Library Meeting
Room

336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)



**Dr Peter
Christoff**

(University of
Melbourne),

on

**'Climate change
policy in
Australia?'**

IN THIS ISSUE

Diary Dates	2
Humanist News	3
Submission feedback	4
Discussion report	4
Public Lecture, Janette Poulton	5
Report by Jennie Stuart	
Letter, Charles Mallia	5
Why be moral?	6
Goldwin J. Emerson PM states her beliefs	6

Submission Report

I. Suicide

As submitters to the Senate inquiry into suicide in Australia we received a detailed report (Community Affairs Committee). It describes data collection and consultations with relevant groups, assessments of existing preventative measures, community awareness and attitudes towards suicide and aspects such as stigma and bereavement.

In spite of a substantial number of submissions on 'self, voluntary and assisted euthanasia' the Committee has made a decision not to focus on the issue of euthanasia in this report but to table it in a final report of the inquiry. (The HSV submission mentioned the terminally ill as a group of high incidence of botched suicides in absence of legal, physician-assisted dying.)

The report has 42 recommendations on the following issues.

The need for improvements in assessing the economic cost, accuracy of statistics, reporting practices, police and coroner's involvements in suicide and attempted suicide. Also early notification of suicide clusters, additional resources for training of staff in health and related services on suicide risk.

The need for debriefing and counselling support for staff often exposed to suicides, mandatory follow-up support for persons treated for attempted suicide or those assessed as being at risk of suiciding.

Health-care staff should be obliged to offer prior consent agreements, such as advance health directives and standing medical powers of attorney, to patients at risk of suicide.

A national suicide prevention and awareness campaign utilising all the media and operating for 5 years.

Groups regarded as high risk require special attention in prevention programs. Groups at risk include young people, men, Indigenous people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people.

Projects to reduce access to means of suicide and identified 'suicide hotspots'.

The need for culturally sensitive strategies to prevent suicide in Indigenous and migrant communities.

The national Suicide Prevention Program to research and assess existing strategies to establish best practice. Funding from the Council of Australian Governments, business and the community.

2. In letters to Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, we made these main points.

2A. On the rejection of the Human Rights Bill.

- After a large majority submitted in favour of a national Bill of Rights to the Brennan Enquiry, its summary dismissal is autocratic and inexplicable.
- Our Rationale for a National Bill of Rights is this.
 - a) Inadequate protection for minority groups in our statutes or common law.
 - b) Australia's role in formulating the Universal Bill of Human Rights was notable. The absence of such a bill in this country is therefore embarrassing. It compromises our

efforts to promote and protect human rights elsewhere.
c) Opponents of this bill have their concerns refuted by legal experts and by the success of the State bills in the ACT and Victoria.

2B. On a new policy for asylum seekers

- Public opinion is often swayed by irrational and emotional responses to problems or perceived dangers: e.g. for a time after a gruesome murder many would want the death penalty reinstated. After years of John Howard's campaigns of fear and vilification against the asylum seekers, many overreact to the slightest increase of recent arrivals and would deny them help.
- Humanists believe that the nation's leaders must establish high ethical and civilised norms and a rational, evidence-based approach to policies. The current wave of fear must not cause another dark period in our history.
- We quote the PM's statement that the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat is very minor, less than 1.5% of permanent migrants each year, and ask government, therefore, to adopt a more generous and compassionate policy towards desperate people fleeing from well documented persecution in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Halina Strnad

Discussion Report

Members at the Sunday 11 July discussion made the following suggestions on the subject of, 'What should we be doing better? Ideas to publicise and promote Humanism and HSV.'

- Appoint a publicity officer.
- Cite Julia Gillard's atheistic beliefs and that she took an affirmation upon being sworn in as Prime Minister.
- Use Facebook to advertise Humanism and HSV.
- Send letters or maybe our newsletter to Labor and Greens parliamentarians.
- Try to use the success of Atheist Convention as a way of promoting Humanism.
- Don't get hung up on 'god' thing. Many believers would agree with our Humanist values and maybe join us.
- Place adverts in paper, buses and/or trams.
- In letters to editor mention Humanism and Humanist.
- Develop online information, petitions and polls of opinion. Reasons behind this suggestion were that the younger generations are not joiners and there was an increased number of women in workforce with little time to be involved, but they might log on to our website, especially if interactive.
- Support the kindred groups in universities, as students active in these are likely HSV members in the future. Maintain reciprocal arrangements with kindred organisations.

Further suggestions from members welcome. Send either to HSV Secretary or VH editor.

Rosslyn Ives

Implications of the national curriculum on the teaching of values

HSV public lecture by Janette Poulton, of Philosophy in Schools, on 22 June 2010 at Balwyn Library.

Report by **Jennie Stuart**

At present Australian schools do not follow a national curriculum. The model being developed is closest to that of the Victorian Education Department. It is likely to be ready for trial in some schools by 2011. However, there is still an opportunity for community groups, including HSV, to have input.

The national curriculum is being developed initially within *four core areas*, namely, English, history, mathematics and science. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, see www.australiancurriculum.edu.au) has proposed the following *ten capabilities* which should be addressed in each area of learning:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Information and communication technology
- Thinking skills
- Creativity
- Self management
- Teamwork
- Intercultural understanding
- Ethical behavior
- Social competence

Interwoven will be *three cross-cultural dimensions*, namely, indigenous history and culture, a commitment to sustainable living and Asia (including Australia's engagement with Asia).

The national curriculum will set the minimum requirement for government schools up to grade 10 level.

Within the proposed framework each school, and ultimately each classroom teacher, will be able to adapt the curriculum to their context and cater to the varied levels of students' abilities. Advisory panels have been set up to examine equity and diversity, especially for students with disability and those for whom English is a second language.

The Victorian Association for Philosophy in Schools (VAPS) made a submission to ACARA* recommending that philosophy be formally endorsed as a non-core subject. They argued that philosophy has the potential for contributing to the development of almost all of the general capabilities, but especially thinking skills, creativity and ethical behaviour. For example,

philosophical enquiry enhances the capacity for developing arguments, as well as analysing and criticising them. By its very nature it stimulates creativity, requiring open-mindedness and the ability to see situations in new ways. Finally, it facilitates ethical reflection and increases understanding of the division existing within society about ethical values. However, it seems more likely that geography, LOTE (language other than English) and the arts will be given priority instead.

As HSV is interested in all children being able to receive a moral education, Janette asked the audience, on the spur of the moment, to collate a list of aspects which would be incorporated. The suggestions were

The greatest good for the greatest number
To live peaceably with others
To sympathize with others
To learn the value of the principles of honesty, freedom, compassion and justice
To become an independent thinker
To become a critical thinker
To oppose intolerance
Restorative justice
Consideration for self and others
Responsibility

As discussion, debate and disagreement built up, Janette attempted to deflect it in order to foster the flow of ideas. She explained that, when teaching philosophy to children in schools, the first aim is to encourage a range of opinions. Then, as a secondary task, students begin to evaluate the ideas, categorize them and offer a critique. †

* A case for inclusion of philosophy in the national curriculum', www.vaps.vic.edu.au/nationalcurric.htm. □

Letter

Dear Rosslyn,

Thanks a million for editing the *VH* for so long and so well. I hope you can continue for ever, as your comments are well thought out and considerate.

Regarding the *AH* (No. 98) on the Convention, I remarked to my wife, a very private Christian, that the content of the newsletter was one for the best. She believed that all the articles must have been in accordance with my philosophy. Actually, the opposite is the case. As an agnostic humanist, I believe in live and let live. I do not support the idea of so many people who are intent, and make it their life mission, to alter another's view. That to me is fundamentalism, and it matters not if it applies to a humanist or to a religious person.

Charles Mallia, Balnarring

Why be moral?

by **Goldwin J. Emerson,**

Summary by Rosslyn Ives.

Humanist Perspectives (Ottawa), Issue 172, Spring 2010.

The author, a retired professor of philosophy of education, begins with a general discussion about moral behaviour and what motivates it. Noting that some religious thinkers concede that it is possible for 'non-believers to act in morally correct ways', he then poses the question asked by theologians and others, 'but *why* would they [non-believers] act morally?'

In offering a Humanist response to this question, he begins the more interesting section of his article with, 'Science offers some interesting answers to this question.' He comments that social Darwinists, like Herbert Spencer, in drawing on the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, 'over-emphasize the competitive nature of the human species'. He then points out that higher mammals which live in social groups develop a 'dependency-reciprocity' relationship as part of their survival mechanism. He cites an early source of this view as Russian geographer, Peter Kropotkin, who in 1902 wrote *Mutual Aid: A Force for Evolution*.

Emerson goes on as follows.

Experiments with primates and with herd animals such as elephants, convinced social scientists that within the animal world and especially among animals that live in families, groups, tribes and social groupings which develop dependency relationships for food, procreation, defence against predators, and for the rearing of off-spring, that there also develops a social reciprocity.

Consider for a moment the case of a herd of approximately thirty elephants being guided by their matriarchal leader to a new feeding ground over two hundred kilometres distance where the leader remembers that food and water were more abundant some twenty years earlier. As they proceed along one of the young mothers is about to give birth. Rather than continuing without her and exposing the new mother and her offspring to the risk of falling prey to predators, the matriarch stops and the whole herd gathers around the mother. They behave as though they sense the importance of this event to the survival of the herd. After a few days, when the matriarch observes that the newest offspring can walk along at a reasonable pace beside its mother, the herd continues its search for new feeding grounds.

Of course, within the human species this dependency-reciprocity relationship is more highly developed and better understood. Recently a Canadian anthropologist, Harold Barclay, suggested that our facility with language and with higher order abstract thought

enables us to develop rules, social norms, laws and moral codes which arise out of basic survival mechanisms of our distant past. That is, we are not so far away from other animals in our behaviours as we might think. While competition is still an important motivator, there is within us the drive to follow understood ethical codes that enable societies to work in safety and in harmony. This is especially true of humans who see other humans as part of their own group or their own family. Ideally, we can learn to encompass a much larger group of fellow humans including those of different racial origins, religious preferences, and geographical areas. If science can help us to take a broader view of those whom we will accept as part of our group, or our tribe, or our family, morality will have taken a giant leap forward.

Emerson concludes his article as follows.

Let us return to the original question of 'Why be moral?' The answer is that while we have a certain competitive nature within us, we also have within us a basic nature to be co-operative, to develop codes and norms and morals that are even more basic to our nature and more important to our survival. □

PM states her beliefs

Report of ABC's Jon Faine program, Tuesday 29 June, in *The Age*, 30 June. Faine was interviewing Julia Gillard.

Faine: Do you believe in God?

PM: No, I don't Jon, I'm not a religious person.

Amazingly, the radio station was not struck by lightning.

Ms Gillard hastened to add she was brought up a Baptist, attending the Mitcham Baptist Church. Why, she even won catechism prizes for remembering verses from the Bible.

'But during my adult life I've, you know, found a different path,' she declared. 'I'm of course a great respecter of religious beliefs but they're not my beliefs.'

Quite. But was she worried about the Christian vote, Faine inquired? 'Look I'm, you know, worried about the national interest, about doing the right thing by Australians and I'll allow, you know, people to form their own views on whatever is going to drive their views,' Ms Gillard replied.

It seemed likely to have some of the devout falling to their knees to pray for the salvation of Ms Gillard's soul. The more hard line may have been struck with a vision of hellfire. An unmarried woman ... and an atheist to boot?

The last Australian PM who dared to express doubts about an Almighty was Bob Hawke, son of a Congregationalist preacher. But even he couldn't bring himself to declare himself an atheist. Hawke was agnostic. It sometimes seemed possible that the booze-challenged, womanising hell-raiser figured no deity could compete.

He became, however, Labor's longest-serving PM.

The Labor faithful will be praying for a repeat. □