

Commensal

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16th November 1997**Theo Todman****EDITORIAL**

As usual, we start off by welcoming new members to the SIG, though not so many this time; so welcome to :-

- Kevin Arbuthnot
- Nina Burton
- Norman Mackie
- Justine Macnab
- Hannah Smith

Thanks to all of you who've contributed to this issue of *Commensal*, especially to the four of you making your maiden speeches. Thanks for your patience to those of you who wrote to me some weeks back and have had to await C89 to receive a reply.

I'm indebted to Vijai Parhar for suggesting a different font for my comments. I've simply used Arial Narrow (rather than ordinary Arial). Not very imaginative, I admit.

The issue of "endless replies" still looms large. I received a friendly letter from one SIG member who said he was somewhat put off by the difficulty of following the narrative from month to month. It's certainly the case that I have an advantage over the rest of you here, in that what I'm commenting on is in the same issue. Incidentally, is there any objection to this practise ? Maybe you'd prefer it if I kept quiet and simply printed what came in; submitting "original" stuff or commenting a month in arrears like the rest of you ? Please let me know if you have strong views on the matter.

Getting back to the form of submissions - one option suggested is that I group commentary by subject matter, rather than leave it in the sequence submitted; ie. comments on the same passage in the previous issue would appear together, irrespective of the commentator. Also, comments should include the kernel of what it is they're commenting on. Another suggestion is that I call "time" on any topic after a couple of rounds of debate.

I'm not keen on formal rules myself, and am definitely not trying to discourage submissions from anyone, but I think it's important that we try to stick to a few basic principles :-

- Commenting briefly on a whole range of items makes it difficult for readers to follow the arguments
- Better one or two substantial engagements than many snippets
- Try to break new ground, or use another's thoughts as a spring-board



The discussion on "Hit Squads" with Mark Griffin (see pp. 7-10) took place by e-mail, a new departure that "just happened". Those of you with access to the Web will find much of philosophical interest. Just do a search on "philosophy" with Yahoo! or any other search engine. A rummage just now picked up the following account of Sir Isaiah Berlin, by David Ljunggren (Reuters), which deserves notice, as below. Some of you will no doubt have seen the BBC2 interview of Isaiah Berlin by Michael Ignatieff on 14th-15th November. Anyway, here's the Reuters notice :-

Focus: Philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin dead at 88

LONDON, Nov. 6 (Reuters) - British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin, one of the century's greatest thinkers, has died aged 88 after a protracted illness, Oxford University said on Thursday.

An official at the university said Berlin, a prolific author and historian of political thought, had died on Wednesday night. Family friends said he had been in and out of hospital since July.

"We are very sad to lose such an eminent scholar, who made such an enormous contribution to philosophy and to the values for which we stand," Dr Colin Lucas, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, said in a statement.

Berlin was best known for his writings on liberty, nationalism and socialism, including such works as *Four Essays on Liberty* and *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*.

One of Berlin's main contributions to philosophy was the idea of "value pluralism", the idea that human beings are so different that there can be no one overall set of human values.

He developed the idea in his essay "Two Concepts of Liberty", where he coined the idea of "negative" and "positive" liberty to make the distinction between liberal and repressive concepts of freedom.

Berlin, an avowed anti-Communist, said negative liberty was the freedom from enslavement by others while the idea of positive liberty could be used as the pretext for abuse.

"It is this -- the 'positive' conception of liberty: not freedom from, but freedom to -- which the adherents of the 'negative' notion represent as being, at times, no better than a specious disguise for brutal tyranny."

He said the work "really came from being maddened by all the Marxist cheating which went on, all the things that were said about 'true liberty', Stalinist and communist patter about 'true freedom'".



Berlin, who was born in the Latvian capital Riga to Jewish parents in 1909 and moved to Britain in 1919 after witnessing the first months of the Russian revolution, was a key figure in the intellectual movement against communism during the Cold War.

"I was never pro-Communist. Never... anyone who had, like me, seen the Russian revolution at work was not likely to be tempted," he told the British magazine *Prospect* in September.

"I realised that the dictatorship of the proletariat meant sheer despotism."

Berlin faded from fashion in the 1960s as other thinkers moved into the limelight but followers say his basic message never lost its relevance.

"He's not a political thinker so much as a moralist who insists on the irreconcilability of goods such as liberty or mercy -- you can only have one at the expense of the other. Every time you choose you lose," biographer Michael Ignatieff said earlier this year.

"Isaiah's emphasis is on conflict, tragedy and loss -- these are very much themes which have a salience now that they may not have had say 25 years ago."

Berlin, who spent most of his academic career at Oxford, inherited his father's love of Russian literature, which inspired him to produce one of his most famous works -- *The Hedgehog and the Fox*.

In the essay, devoted to Russian author Lev Tolstoy, Berlin put forward the idea that there were two kinds of thinkers.

"There exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision...and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory," he said.

"The first kind of intellectual belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes."

Berlin, treasured by friends and colleagues as a modest and warm man as well as a brilliant conversationalist, decided to give up philosophy after World War Two in favour of political thought.

"Philosophy can only be done by very clever people. It's rather like mathematics. To be a second-rate mathematician is no good. I didn't think that I'd ever be good enough," he told BBC radio.



"In the end, I thought it wasn't for me because I didn't lie in bed awake at night thinking of solutions to agonising philosophical problems."

Berlin worked for the British intelligence service during the Second World War and was then posted as a diplomat to Moscow, where he met such famous writers as Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak.

He was knighted in 1957, a year after he married Aline de Gunzburg, the French-born daughter of a Russian Jewish banker.

A suggestion from Alan Carr, also by e-mail :-

After reading your last e-mail it struck me that my first entry in the journal was through the question asked by Roger Farnworth. This provided a gate for me to enter. If a question was asked each issue, would this give new-comers a window of opportunity to join the ranks of contributors ? It did work in my own case. Would it be viable ? Is it too much to expect the "new comers or shy people" to leap in to the deep end of philosophical discussion ?

A good idea. Rather than me set the questions, maybe you out there could submit questions you want opinions on ? After all, it's easier to ask a question than to answer one !

Alternatively, there are several points deserving of comment in the Isaiah Berlin obituary above.

Finally, the closing date for submissions to the January 1998 edition of *Commensal* (C90) is 15th December 1997.

Best wishes,

Theo

September 1997

Justin Bates

SOPHIE'S WORLD

Hello Theo,

This is just a quick note to thank you for the Commensals; you've done a great job of restarting the SIG. However, I'm not just writing to praise you; I would like to make one tiny criticism, if I may.



In C86 you made it fairly clear that you didn't think a lot of *Sophie's World* as a philosophy book. Whatever your reasons for disliking it, I think that you have misjudged it and I believe that SW will go down as the most important book of the late 20th Century.

Let me explain myself. While SW may not give experienced philosophers (like you ?) anything new or intellectually stimulating, it gave people like me a route into philosophy. For the first time disillusioned, 17 year old, middle class white kids are reading a book that can change our lives and our perceptions of the world. For "Generation X" the book is the first one which has made us challenge our preconceived ideas about philosophy and at the same time has made us truly think about our lives. All over the country and indeed the world, you now have teenagers reading SW before moving on to Plato, Hegel, Marx, Freud, or whatever takes their fancy. I guarantee you that the majority of the next generation of philosophers will be those who started with SW.

As a book you may feel it to be a poorly written piece of second rate philosophy, but as an event it will help to shape the intellectual thought of my generation.

Peace.

Justin Bates

Justin : Good to hear from you ! Sorry to have given the impression of wanting to disparage *Sophie's World*. I haven't actually read it myself, though I've had a quick look through my daughter's copy. I read a review of it in the January 1996 edition of *Philosophy*. The review was by a 14-year-old girl, Natasha O'Hear, whom I presume to be related to the editor of *Philosophy*, Anthony O'Hear, professor of philosophy at Bradford University. The review wasn't particularly complimentary, though I've come across a number of people who have been influenced by the book.

I think there's a distinction to be made between "great works" and "influential books". Some books are able greatly to influence their readers if they catch them at the right time of their lives. I was greatly influenced by *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Persig, when it first came out. Similarly, by *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. At one time I couldn't put them down. Now I can't do so quickly enough. A great work, however, retains its influence whatever the situation.

I expect that for many people, *Sophie's World* will indeed be the most important book they read in the late 20th century - as such it will have performed an important service, as you suggest. But I suspect it will be all but forgotten in 10 years time.

Incidentally, the quartet of thinkers you mention has become identified in many minds with all that has been wrong with philosophy. A book that greatly influenced my thinking, and which



does bear re-reading, is A J Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic*. A book of like ilk, maybe, to Sophie's World (though not in the same style) is Bryan Magee's *Men of Ideas*.

Theo

7th October 1997

Mark Griffin

HIT SQUADS

Hi Theo,

Okay, perhaps this is a topic that can be discussed philosophically if that's what the group want. And notwithstanding what the proper definition of a philosophical discussion is, I'll just explain that what I have in mind is that this is not a discussion about current or past events themselves, but the morals my question raises.

We recently saw two Israeli agents arrested in Jordan on a mission to assassinate a leading member of Hamas. There was obviously a lot of political fall-out as a consequence, principally concerned with Israel trying to carry out such an operation on Jordanian soil and using Canadian passports. A few years ago, during the Gulf War, we had a debate about whether America had tried to target Saddam Hussein either for assassination or as a target for bombing raids, and whether it was right or wrong to do so. I have a hazy recollection of having read somewhere that Allied plots to assassinate Hitler were not pursued because it was felt that this was not 'the done thing'. (if anyone can put me straight on that, I'd be grateful.)

So under what circumstances is it right for a legitimate, democratic government to cause the leader of another nation to be assassinated?

I ask because it seems to me a paradox that it is perfectly okay to kill the soldiers of the rival side, however reluctant those soldiers might be about being soldiers, but not okay to kill the rival leader who had created the army in the first place. It seems also, from the examples I've mentioned, that it doesn't matter either that the rival leader is actively using his soldiers to kill soldiers and civilians on the other side - he himself cannot be singled out as a target. Perhaps someone will argue that killing the leader risks enraging his supporters and inflaming the situation. Or perhaps someone will argue that if the populace are really not behind their leader, the onus is on them to resolve the problem. We are lead to believe that the Iraqis are not enthusiastic about Saddam Hussein, and it also seems unduly prissy to me that millions perished in concentration camps while our leaders thought it ungentlemanly to assassinate Hitler.

Clearly, it makes a big difference whether there is a state of armed conflict between the two sides. The case of the Allies v Hitler is different from the



case of Uncle Sam v Fidel Castro and different again from the case of Bulgaria(?) v the journalist who was killed with the poison umbrella.

Perhaps the clincher, then, is whether the leader is causing deaths amongst your own populace. Hitler was, Castro and the journalist were not. Sounds simple, problem solved. But what then about the Columbian drug cartels? Are their leaders legitimate targets? Does the target have to be a recognised national leader? If not, what about leaders of groups, such as the IRA or Hamas, who do regard themselves as at war with another country?

Are there any alternatives? What about a snatch-squad? Would that be more acceptable? I suspect it would be, but see few circumstances in which it would be practical. Should the target be publicly indicted? Should there be a trial in absentia? Where does that leave you if your country does not have the death penalty? What if the judge imposed a community service order instead?

So, hit squads or not?

Cheers,

Mark Griffin

Mark : Thanks for the contribution. I agree it's philosophy, so in it goes !

It's an interesting question. I'd always imagined the predilection not to assassinate one's enemies was an expediency invented by the leaders themselves as a form of self preservation. Some ideas, like the selective use of "nasty" weapons, may lead to a one-off gain, but they lead to long term escalation. For a leader to explicitly endorse pot shots at enemy leaders sets a precedent that makes no future leader safe. Maybe that would be a good thing, but it's not something you'd expect the class of leaders to endorse. The exceptions seem to occur when the opposing faction is denied legitimacy (bunch of terrorists, criminals, ... and all that).

In short, I don't think that, practically speaking, the decision is a moral one (however it's dressed up) but a matter of expediency.

Theo (9th October 1997)

10th October 1997

Mark Griffin

MORE HIT SQUADS

Well I've had similar thoughts, except I cannot accept the notion of these leaders behaving collectively, with an almost herd-like instinct which is the



nearest I can get to describing it. To go further still and describe them as a 'class' is fundamentally flawed, in my view.

If we were talking about individuals who were brought up in the same traditions, maybe, but consider how diverse this group is: Saddam Hussein and the Dalai Lama; Adolf Hitler and Tony Blair, Genghis Khan and Mary Whitehouse; Idi Amin and Winston Churchill; Che Guevara and Pope Paul II; need I go on? (Apologies for any spelling errors!)

The security that surrounds President Clinton may be more the case of not taking any chances, but his security could hardly be much tighter if he did order a hit squad in against anybody. Nor can the worry of maybe jeopardising the future security of some other world leader be much of a deterrent to Saddam Hussein if he breaks some unspoken convention and sends out a hit squad, thus setting the precedent you write of.

The exception that you mention (terrorists, criminals, etc.) is in fact what highlights the dilemma. They have no worries about targeting democratically elected leaders, and they do in fact do so, as we have seen, the Brighton bombing in an attempt to wipe out the cabinet, and the murder of Lord Mountbatten. But democratically elected leaders acting in this way is considered unconscionable. Why? I should hasten to point out this is not a debate about the rights and wrongs about any individual situation, this is about the principle, remember.

Even in the State versus terrorist case, we see the 'footsoldiers' of both sides slogging it out, but while the terrorist leaders have free shots at the State leaders, the State leaders can only attempt to arrest the terrorist leaders and put them on trial. In a State versus State case, both sides seem constrained, so I can't see that it is a case of expediency - how is it more expedient to pursue a lengthy conflict at potentially heavy cost to the populace in lives lost and collateral damage done as an alternative to assassinating the rival leader? It is neither expedient nor moral.

Mark

Mark : These are weighty matters. We'll have to leave it to the wider Commensal readership to come up with new ideas. My point on expediency was that if a world leader is seen to be disposing of others of like ilk, that leader will most likely be disposed of likewise. It's raising the stakes too high. Like poisoning in renaissance Italy - it can all get out of hand.

Do you have an alternative explanation ?

Theo (10th October 1997)



11th October 1997**Mark Griffin****YET MORE HIT SQUADS**

Yes, but I don't agree with that point (on expediency). President Bush was hugely embarrassed by suggestions that some of the bombing missions over Iraq were deliberate attempts to kill Saddam Hussein. Now if Bush's reluctance stemmed from fear for his own personal safety, it doesn't say much for him, does it? That he should say to a soldier "Go to Iraq and die for your country" while sitting at home himself. And moreover, declining to take decisive action that could have reduced casualties amongst his own troops because of the risk of maybe inviting an attack upon himself.

I think it is plausible that an unelected leader might fear retribution if he killed the leader of a democratic country, knowing that leaders of democratic countries are generally hamstrung by their own political processes. If America believed that Saddam Hussein was behind any successful attempt to assassinate President Clinton, for example, that would certainly unleash military might to crush him. Right now, he can get away with anything in his own country.

My point, and the nub of my question to the group, is made even clearer in a hot war. What possible rationale could explain why Churchill, for example, could not order the assassination of Hitler ? Or even Hitler ordering Churchill's? Notwithstanding whether in these cases such orders had or had not been given, this is about the principle, not specific cases. Sorry to bang on about that.

Mark

Mark : It looks as though this one could run and run. Better slow it down and await Commensal. I'll let it bounce around in my subconscious for a couple of weeks. Incidentally - why do you care so much about the question ?

Regards,

Theo (11th October 1997)**12th October 1997****Mark Griffin****ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE STATE**

Hi Theo,

I don't understand your question ? Aren't we supposed to raise topics for debate? This is something I see as a glaring anomaly, but I am more concerned about the Persistent Vegetative State issue that was almost completely ignored when I raised it.



Another topic I would like to explore is attitudes towards 'State'. You mentioned the 'class' of leaders earlier, other people are strident anarchists (assuming you're not!) who see it as their mission to oppose all manifestations of state structure and ordering. Several people I have met in Mensa while I was SIGs Officer found it very hard to relate to me because they had a hang-up with dealing with people 'in authority'. That isn't wild supposition on my part, that is what some of those same people have told me. I had a hang-up with that, to be honest, because I don't see myself as any different before I became SIGs Officer, while I was SIGs Officer, or now that I am not. I'm still the same 'me' as I ever was, though hopefully a little wiser.

So I don't have a particular opinion to promote, I would just like to see what other members think of when they think about 'the State' and what is right or wrong about it, and maybe learn something.

BTW, doesn't it strike you as odd how well organised anarchists are ?

Cheers,

Mark

Mark : Of course we're to raise questions; but, given how many possible questions there are, the questions we choose to address say something about us.

I have no knowledge of the organising skills of anarchists. Anarchy seems to mean "without a leader", at least, of course, the Greek root does. There's a well-known Biblical proverb "The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands" (Proverbs 30:27; AV) which illustrates that organisation can arise spontaneously if each individual does its bit. The expression "descent into anarchy" is presumably a caricature put about by the archons of what anarchistic programmes inevitably lead to.

Theo

29th September 1997

Norman Mackie

COMMENT ON C88

Anthony Owens (C88, p28) : We are definitely on the same wavelength with regard to the element of chance. One person can receive life imprisonment for murder after shooting someone, when his less accurate friend receives probation for an assault with a deadly weapon. This seems to be a very bizarre form of quality control. However, 'identical' is a word that can rarely be applied to human experience. Two siblings growing up in the same house with the same parents will have widely differing experiences upon which to build their lives; friends, school, workplace etc. Therefore come the day when any two individuals are faced with equally tempting, desperate or



threatening circumstances their reaction may differ in the extreme, from murder on the one hand to suicide on the other.

As a novice in matters philosophical please excuse this partial quote, probably from one of the masters, "civilisation will not progress until either our philosophers become politicians or our politicians become philosophers". With this thought in mind whilst reading 'Yes to a Global Ethic' by Hans Kung I was impressed by these words by Joseph Bernardin, the Archbishop of Chicago, "Ethical governments, ethical corporations, ethical religious organisations, ethical businesses and trade groups - all can make a powerful contribution to the human community."

Would our PDG members consider, in our experience / opinion, where in this world at present is the 'best' country / region / city / town or community and why or how can it be considered to be 'ideal' ?

Finally, this little thought from Gurdieff reached me recently, "your level of Being attracts your life".

Many blessings to you,

Norman Mackie

Norman : Welcome to Commensal ! I don't understand the Gurdieff aphorism - could you explain it ? There's an interesting presumption that there's a relationship between being a philosopher and acting ethically; also, that an ethical stance always leads to good. There was a thread running recently on QVNet (ISPE's closed discussion group) as to whether Hitler, Himmler and the SS acted ethically according to their own (to us) perverted ethic. Himmler's speech to the SS mid-way through the Final Solution has a sort of crusading zeal about it. See also Rick Streets' thoughts later in this issue.

Theo

22nd September 1997

Philip Lloyd Lewis

COMMENTS ON ISSUE 88

Theo Todman (C88, p. 2) : Format is not irrelevant, even in a philosophical newsletter. The medium is (part of) the message. For Commensal, I think that the format should basically reflect the editor's aesthetic sense (and editorial experience), marginally modified by readers' suggestions.

No one wants "endless replies", but discussion and comment are as important as the original articles or observations. It's up to the editor to decide where to draw the final line.



(C88, pp. 7-8) : 'Unsupported' philosophies never die. They simply fade away, and (if recorded) lie dormant - perhaps for centuries - until the right Prince Charming comes along and kisses them back to life... Even Greek philosophy, on which Western culture is largely based, had to be 'rediscovered'.

- Being "willing to go along" with an idea implies a measure of agreement with it, but I don't agree with Theo's idea of 'agreement' here. Two-Tier Reality is so called because it postulates two tiers/levels/norms of reality, primary/objective reality and secondary/subjective reality, so to say that "reality is one" is inaccurate and misleading in this context. TTR further postulates that primary reality is one-and-indivisible, which means that it cannot be "chopped up". However, I am happy to agree with Theo that "all scientific theories are provisional and subject to correction" - or to refutation and abandonment, I would add.
- What I reject is not "the scientific enterprise" as such but Theo's (and others') restricted concept of "the scientific enterprise". A form of science based on an act of faith, whether religious or more broadly metaphysical, is a handicapped science, a science which has failed to free itself from its partly irrational origins. The old religious influence is all too evident in, for example, the current pseudo-scientific theorising about the 'creation of the universe'.
- The only form of reality "out there" (and simultaneously "in here") which is "open to investigation" is secondary/subjective reality. Primary reality is not open to (scientific) investigation.
- Scientific theories do not "ever more closely approximate" to some mythical system of immutable laws decreed by God or Nature. All 'natural laws' are cultural artefacts. Einstein's picture of the Universe is not 'a closer approximation to reality' than Newton's picture; it is a new Paradigm based on a quite different way of treating space, time, matter and energy.
- Scientific theories do not always "make correct predictions". Science is largely a process of testing theories to determine whether they "make correct predictions". Whether they do or not is of course a matter of (subjective) judgement. Some people think that the Bible makes correct predictions. Others swear by Nostradamus or astrology. The capacity of the human mind to deceive itself has always been unlimited.
- Of course, "decision between statements isn't just a matter of persuasive talk". My point was that such decisions are



often/partly/largely influenced by "persuasive talk" - in science as elsewhere.

- Mathematical statements have no mystical inherent truth or falsity independent of (fallible) human judgement.
- Theo, like most people (including most scientists), wants to believe that, in a confusingly fluid and dangerous world some external element is and remains fixed, certain, eternally true. Whether this mythical element/entity is called God or the Laws of Nature (or whatever) is of secondary importance. We must try to outgrow this psychological need to cling to a Rock of Ages, by developing faith/confidence In ourselves and learning to swim in an inescapably fluid and uncertain world.

Michael Nisbet (C88, p. 16) : Proverbs are terse statements which (claim to) contain a kernel of truth despite (usually) an element of paradox. They are not generally meant to be taken at face value. For instance, whoever coined the proverb ,”One man's meat is another man's poison” did not Intend to assert (the overstatement) that all types of meat/food are (potentially) poisonous. My assertion (quasi-proverb ?) that “one man's belief is another man's delusion”, being obviously modelled on that proverb, should be assessed in the same spirit. However, if Michael declines to grant me my quasi-proverbial rights and insists on a literal interpretation of my controversial statement, then I am forced to point out that it refers specifically to just two men and one belief-cum-delusion, from which it can be deduced only that the set of beliefs and the set of delusions have a (minimal) common subset.

Michael can, of course, try setting his alarm clock an hour earlier

Anthony Owens (C88, p. 27) : If “subjective” and “objective” are used in their TTR senses, then I have no idea of what the question might mean. All I can say is that events are part of secondary/subjective reality - but then what ? If Anthony is using “subjective” and “objective” with non-TTR meanings, then I must ask him to define them in the context of his question. But even if he does that, I doubt whether I shall be able to follow his argument well enough to comment usefully. Perhaps we should just accept that our thought processes do not mesh?

That's plenty for one issue. I shall comment on reactions to the “Science and Pseudoscience” article in C90 (D. et Ed. V.). Theo has made a number of interesting points which I should like to deal with at some length.

Philip Lloyd Lewis



Philip : As usual, so much to comment on ! I guess we will just have to agree to disagree on many issues, to save boring our readers by repeating the same arguments and assertions. You don't ever seem to have addressed the success of science. Maybe you deny this success in a culture-free sense, in which case I would ask you to what you attribute the success of the technological application of scientific results. Now on to the detailed points ...

Firstly, more on science. I don't hold the view that the laws of physics are "out there" like Platonic forms, but I do assert that the universe, ie. that which the currently accepted laws of physics attempt to describe, is out there and that the scientific paradigms do increasingly approximate to an increasingly accurate description of (aspects of) the universe. Maybe there are two elements of scientific paradigms that get muddled up. One is their attempt to explain how things really are. The second tries to relate sets of phenomena so as to deduce other phenomena. The first provides the intuitive background for the second, and is more likely to throw up discontinuities as paradigms are replaced. Some paradigms (eg. phlogiston) have been just plain wrong, and have been jettisoned. Others have prior paradigms as limiting cases or as crude first attempts. I don't claim that science is a certain route to all truth, but do claim that it's made real progress. The scientific enterprise is an attempt to investigate "how things are" and therefore needs to assume that this programme is not a forlorn hope; that is, that there is no fundamental inaccessibility of the underlying data nor any pervasive deception in the way they are presented to our senses. The justification for this approach is again in its success. Of course, it recognises that some parts of reality (in the scientific rather than the TTR sense) are hard to get at, on account of factors such as time, distance, size or energy.

What is pseudo-scientific about the interest in origins ? This is different from "creation", which seems to imply a creator; creation is only one possible solution to the problem of origins. The interest arises from Big Bang cosmology. If we crank back the expansion, we are left with a singularity. It is fair to ask what initiated the expansion. There are at least three alternatives. Firstly, that getting behind the singularity is impossible in a scientific sense, and so is a scientifically meaningless quest. Secondly, trying a "no boundary condition" solution along with Hawking and making the problem go away. Thirdly, introducing a deity into the act of creation. I look forward to your comments on "pseudo-science" in the next issue.

There's also a question of when the scientific process ends. When a paradigm is being developed, critical tests are put to it; especially to discriminate between rival possibilities. Once scientific consensus is reached, a theory is put to daily use, and it is only when it fails to predict physical outcomes successfully on a daily basis that it is called into question. As is often pointed out, the mathematical predictions of special relativity & quantum mechanics are tested every day in particle accelerators & detectors throughout the world. Even if a paradigm fails to work in a new domain, or is found to have second order errors in its primary domain, any replacement theory has to explain why the first worked in the domain it did.

Some mathematicians (maybe most) have held a Platonic view of mathematics - that mathematical theorems are out there waiting to be discovered. I don't take that view myself, but rather believe that mathematical theorems are true solely on the basis of a correct application of rules of deduction to the axioms. Any connection between mathematics and the real world is by the application of mathematical models. Mathematics itself says nothing about the world. The "unreasonable effectiveness" of mathematics in describing the physical world



does require explanation, however. So, I agree that there is no mysticism involved here, but would say that a great many theorems are true (in this context) beyond reasonable doubt.

Incidentally, how do you know what my (or anybody else's) motivating factors are for believing things? If you don't want me to exercise my editorial privilege by the application of gratuitous abuse, please don't attribute disreputable motives to other SIG members. As it happens, I don't hanker after ungrounded certainty. I believe that all statements are only probably true (or probably false) but that it is irrational to doubt (or believe) many of them.

Theo

20th September 1997

Michael Nisbet

COMMENTS ON C88

Dear Theo,

First, thank you for the opportunity to air my views, which, jejune as they may be, have been knocking around in the confines of my head for far too long. I began by dreading criticism, but now I feel that any criticism that can break or modify a way of thinking that threatens to become fixed and rigid should be welcomed. Ultimately it's not so much what we think as our willingness to communicate that matters.

Having delivered this homily, I shall pass on to other matters.

In response to your remarks on my last contribution (**C88, p.17**): No, it's not as cut and dried as religion or science, in what I take to be their basic stances, seem to imply, and presumably this is what both are coming to admit in their various rapprochements. The subject-object dichotomy that each relies on in its own way is the creation of human reflexive awareness. Once this is realised both religion and science can be put in their proper context.

I look forward to hearing the results of the question in New Scientist that you mention (**C88, p.24**): "When an animal looks in a mirror does it realise it is looking at itself? Which, if any, animals successfully make this connection?" Of course, this question has been looked into before by various researchers. My understanding of the position is that the apparent ability to recognise a reflected image has only been observed in humans and the "higher" apes. Of course "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" but what has been observed is e.g. a male blackbird attacking its own reflection in a pane of glass, and injuring itself in the process, in the belief that it was confronted by another male of the species. This sort of thing seems consistently the case for all species, including monkeys. Only apes have a sufficient degree of neural complexity to permit recognition to arise. This is discussed in 'The Ape's Reflection' by Adrian Desmond (Blond & Briggs, London 1979). Even



in humans the ability is not present from the start. On p.171 of that work the author states: "In the months before the self strengthens in a child he sees a mirror companion, and in the months when it disintegrates in a schizophrenic the person may stand and stare intently in the mirror, progressively losing all powers of self-recognition".

With reference to Rick Street's remarks (**C88, p.19**) I would point out that in my earlier contribution (**C87, p.5**) I used the term 'reflexive awareness' rather than 'self-awareness'. The latter term seems to imply that there is, prior to the advent of reflexive awareness (the realisation that the eye that is seen is the eye that is looking: which is more than just the "understanding of reflective surfaces", as Rick puts it), a self is ready and waiting to emerge into awareness. Indeed the above quote from Desmond indicates that the self must have a certain integrity before reflexive recognition can occur. I would argue, however, that the act of reflexive recognition actually constitutes the formation of a self. Prior thereto, the organism has no notion of itself as object, and therefore no notion of itself as subject either. It has no concept of itself as a *discrete entity*. An animal without reflexive awareness is not aware of 'its own' existence because it has nothing relevant to refer its awareness to: its awareness is wholly directed towards the fulfilment of 'its' needs (the maintenance of the homeostasis of the organism), consciousness being part of the organismic process whereby those needs are fulfilled. But they are not strictly speaking 'its' needs. They are not 'selfish'. They are integral to the totality of the environment of which that organism forms a part, and constitute part of the 'web of life'.

The birth of a self through the act of reflexive recognition involves a partial withdrawal from that totality, and a partial disidentification of the nascent self with its body. The self is caught in a quandary: that of the subject rendered object due to its subjection to bodily existence, and it may attempt to escape that quandary by denying that it is grounded in the body and in bodily existence generally, with the potentially disastrous consequences to the ecosphere that are becoming increasingly apparent.

Once the self is born all action and perception is referred to a subject because to an individual embarking on the subject-object dichotomy there is no other explanation for anything happening. It therefore seems to me that it is not quite the case that, as Anthony Owens puts it (**C88, p.26**) "gods and spirits were invented to fill the role of that which must be responsible for those events for which our ancestors could find no explanation". It is not a question of looking for explanations. The world is conceived initially in terms of the action of subjects visible and invisible. This is the 'participation mystique' of which I believe Mircea Eliade writes. The idea of an impersonal cause, or of any cause that will supply 'an explanation', is a relatively recent development. It is interesting to note that the first recorded use of the word 'fact', in the sense in which it is commonly used today (of something objectively established) dates, according to the Oxford Dictionary, from as late as 1632. A very interesting book in this context is 'Before Philosophy:



The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man' by Henri Frankfort and others, Pelican Books 1949.

Those puzzled by all this might try resorting to 'On Having No Head' by Douglas Harding (although this might of course make their predicament worse). There is a certain mental trick or gesture whereby the perspective of an unselfconscious organism can be in part regained. Once it has, however fleetingly, the non-dichotomous ground of experience becomes evident.

Lastly, prompted by Dave Botting's contribution (**C88, p.4 paragraph 1**) I would like to throw in a few thoughts, in edited form, that first appeared in a letter of mine published in the February 97 issue of Mensa Magazine in response to an essay by Victor Serebriakoff:

It seems to me that all moral and ethical systems have this in common: that their intention or tendency is to create or facilitate a coherent society, 'some kind of unified human community, lifestyle or culture' to quote Mr Serebriakoff. In other words, we call that moral which tends towards coherence among persons, or between persons and their social and natural environment, the basic moral proposition being that all persons are akin to ourselves and should be treated accordingly. Such systems differ, however, in the way that they define the person. The more extreme the system, the narrower and more rigid the definition. To the Nazi only the 'Aryan' properly falls into that category (others are 'unmenschen'). To the religious fundamentalist 'those who are not for us are against us', mere 'vessels of wrath'.

It is interesting to note in this context that, as I understand it, many tribes refer to themselves by a word that translates as 'the people'. By implication, if you don't belong to the tribe you're not quite human.

It follows that the most adaptable form of morality will be that with the broadest definition of the person. Rigid and narrow definitions ultimately become extinct, along with the moral and political systems that they underpin.

Michael Nisbet

P.S. I have a book entitled 'Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity' by Sydney Shoemaker (Cornel University Press 1963). Chapter One opens with the following sentence: "What we mean when we assert something to be the case cannot be different from what we know when we know that thing to be the case." If anyone with a knowledge of the work of this philosopher can explain what the hell this means, I would be grateful.



Michael : Not much I can add to the above. Do you have any thoughts on moral or ethical systems that are primarily aimed at perfecting the individual (however that perfection is conceived) or are aimed at improving the individual's relationship to the deity ? Such systems may, or may not, have incidental knock-on good effects for society as a whole; just as (moderate ?) capitalism may. Cohesive communities can arise spontaneously from individuals selfishly, or even mindlessly, doing their thing (consider ants). Dysfunctional societies or ethical systems are more likely to arise where some visionary has a utopian scheme that only works if all members of the community are coerced into acting their appropriate parts, or else eliminated if unwilling or intrinsically unsuitable.

On Shoemaker, I have no knowledge of his work beyond what can be gleaned from *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. I imagine he's saying that an assertion is a claim to know. I.e., if I say "Smith lives in Watford", I'm claiming to know that Smith lives in Watford, else I'd have said "I think Smith lives in Watford", or some such, which is merely a claim to know what I think (as only I can).

Theo

20th September 1997

Anthony Owens

REPLIES TO C88

To Philip Lloyd Lewis (88/6) : My point was that if you accept that there is a "raw material" of objective reality" (86/14) then it smacks of inconsistency to claim that there are "no objective truths" (ibid.).

I fear that I edited out a necessary qualification before sending my reply to C86. At first I wrote "once a physical law is writ upon the universe", meaning that those patterns of universal behaviour to which we can find no exceptions, such as gravity; and which contribute form to the evolving panoply of events which form our world, are not open to us to "revise" or "reject". We can, of course, revise our models of them.

To Theo's reply to PLL (88/6) : On the assumption that you are not claiming that all scientific theories make correct predictions then are not all proven scientific theories bound to make correct predictions - e.g. Fact: apples fall to earth; Theory: gravity causes things to fall to earth (note that the term gravity here is no less metaphysical than God, merely more focused); Prediction: oranges will fall to earth. Wow !

O.K., I'm guilty of outrageous over-simplification. Looking at the obvious and reflecting on its implications (in the above case that the moon is a big apple) is fun. I am a fan of scientific investigation, but its postulates, hypotheses, theories, and laws can only ever prove themselves. I think you're getting into hot water by claiming "the measured universality of the speed of light". The Michelson-Morley experiment merely failed to find the ether that it was



designed to detect, as I am sure you know. Can I reserve further comment for my reply to Rick Street.

To E. Ron Kermode (88/13) : I hope that I wasn't being "*holier than thou*" in opposing abortion. I used to be a member of S.P.U.C. but left because I could not agree with their over-emphasis on making abortion illegal. I could not reconcile the implied belief of many religiously motivated S.P.U.C. members in a God-given free will with their enthusiasm for taking it away. I felt that the only religiously legitimate way to combat abortion was in ways such as that currently promoted by Cardinal Winning - offering counsel, practical assistance, and funds as uncritically as practicable.

To Michael Nisbet (88/17ps) : Quite ! I've always puzzled over how Brahma counts the thousand years he sleeps between creations. However, if time is relational then the time between longer spaced events measured by the shortest spaced events is a multiple of zero and time does not exist. Is this a problem which demonstrates faulty thinking; or faulty mathematics ? The only number which relates fully to any real situation is one. There exists no thing which is two or more; and zero is as unlimited as infinity, both being basically nonsense. Thus all mathematics is imaginary, which must be some comfort to anyone struggling with *i*. Does this mean that any scientific theory which relies on mathematics must be flawed ?

To Rick Street (88/18) : Having seen the documentary in question, I'll back you up on the photons, though I think they were tunnelling through the metal (wormhole stuff, you know), rather than breaking the speed limit, and I think there is some dispute as to what was actually being measured. As I interpret the postulate of the speed of light it is the imposition of a fixed reference upon the universe - a measure to which other variables can be related. Its advantage is that it enables more events to be added to the model. It may not be true but to question it is to miss the point. Who is to measure the measure?

In the matter of abortion the unique DNA evidences the individuality of the fertilised egg; and the lack of independence extends even beyond babyhood. If the state, representative of the majority, wants to legalise murder - fine - but why not call it what it is ?

Hatstand ? Adminiculum ad pilea ? - sounds like "keep taking the tablets" - quite appropriate really - how about KT3, Ed.?

To Theo's reply to me (88/27) : Your "*somehow*" sounds like your search for consciousness within the brain gurgling down the plughole of despair.

Ditto (88/29) : "Boo" could be interpreted as normally acceptable behaviour and thus fail to constitute an offence of violence on the grounds of implied consent. Is there such an illness as kleptomania ? Confirmed cynic that I am I strongly suspect that it was invented by some trick cyclist to get a wealthy



client out of a potential jail sentence, though mental illness could be a defence, given compulsory treatment.

To assist the apprehending of four-pointers perhaps a capsule of a suitable drug could be incorporated into the trackable device and released remotely.

To Alan Carr (88/31) :

It's suggested that we're clever, so the ideas that we devise must be the best there's ever been, until others these revise; when then we come to realise: replies can make us wise.

Anthony Owens

Anthony : Well, you do at one point admit to "outrageous oversimplification". The point of scientific predictions is their quantitative and non-trivial nature. "Gravity & apples" is altogether too much of a caricature. Newton's law of universal gravitation has nothing to say about what gravity "really is", though General Relativity does, treating it as a curvature of space-time. Action at a distance was a mystery to Newton. What his law does say is that all bodies attract one another gravitationally with a force that is proportional to product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between their centres of mass. This, together with Newton's three Laws of Motion, explains quantitatively the observed motions of the planets, as recorded by Tycho Brahe and summarised by Kepler's "this is how it is" laws. The Newtonian laws allow competent individuals and their computers to calculate how to get explorer vehicles to Jupiter (or wherever) by using the "sling shot" effects of close approaches to other planets on the way. It is just such calculations that actually work and achieve their ends - and go way beyond the data the laws were deduced to explain - that leads to the almost mystical tingle that anyone who has any understanding of these things feels on first appreciating being a step closer to understanding how things are. This is amplified by the realisation, given the jumble of experience, that underlying reality is simpler than we have any right to expect.

Getting back to PLL, while Newton was a product of his culture, and the modern appliers of his laws are products of their's, these laws are in a sense culture-free. They work when competently applied in any culture. When the Russians launched Sputnik, the Americans couldn't just write it off as a Russian cultural event that couldn't happen in America or that could be denied as a bit of Russian propaganda; it happened in the public domain for all to see. Similarly, Hitler might reject Relativity and Quantum Mechanics as "Jewish Physics", but, if he'd been around at the time and an atom bomb had been dropped on Berlin, he'd have been forced, if only briefly, to revise his views.

I don't know how tongue-in-cheek your response to Michael Nisbett was, but the suggestion seems to be a variant of the various paradoxes of Zeno (eg. "Achilles & the Tortoise", etc.) designed to show that change is impossible. All fail because they fail to see that infinite series of infinitesimals can sum to values that are finite, zero or infinite depending on the terms in the series (and their signs). What are you on about in your brief foray into the reality of



numbers ? Incidentally, let no-one be deceived into thinking that imaginary numbers are "imaginary" any more than that quarks are "strange", "charmed" or "coloured".

The speed of light isn't constant by convention by the way, though it may superficially appear so. Since this fact was discovered, it has been used to redefine the meter, defined in 1983 as the distance travelled by light in vacuo in $1 / 299\,792\,458$ seconds. A recent edition of *New Scientist* (Issue 2106, 1st November 1997) had a series of interesting articles on time, by the way. One of these pointed out that the second was redefined (in 1967) as the time taken for 9,192,631,770 oscillations of the resonant frequency microwave radiation required to cause a hyperfine transition in a ground-state electron in caesium-133. Hence, it now makes sense to measure how long a second lasts (and this has now been done to 1 part in 10^{17}) !

I think it's premature to despair in the search for an explanation of conscious events as brain events. It's a hard problem, after all.

Thanks for the practical advice on how to track down our desperate, if invalidly-clinicalised, kleptomaniac. As Stef Gula points out later in this issue, a bit over the top [OT2; or should it be OT²], isn't it ?

Theo

10th October 1997

Mike Rossell

Is War Justified ?

Dear Theo,

Much as I enjoy reading the various debates currently running in the Newsletter, I thought that for my first contribution I had better start a completely new topic. (Although this could have some tenuous connection to Dave Botting's comments on cannibalism [C 88, p4].)

Is War Justified ?

Aggression is a normal part of human behaviour. Indeed, it is a 'natural' feature of all (thinking) animals. Yet to claim that the mass murder caused by war is simply an extrapolation of 'domestic violence' on a global scale is, I think, unacceptable. (Cf. Dave Botting's comments on moral relativism.)

Most (all ?) wars are caused by political disagreements which (apparently) cannot be settled peacefully. But why do the politicians concerned think that it is right for them to stay in their bunkers, and send out large numbers of people - who may very well disagree with the politicians over the ends in



question - to kill each other ? It is interesting to note that, following his own experiences beginning with the siege of Sebastopol, Tolstoy claimed that a better way to fight "would be for each army to exchange men, one-for-one, until one or more of the armies had only one man left [and then] let the war be decided on a personal fight between those few men only" (paraphrasing slightly).

[Tolstoy, tr.1889, "My Religion"]

So, when the next war arises, why not force the politicians out of their cubby-holes, to fight themselves ? Why not let the Northern Ireland disputes be settled by a boxing match between Tony Blair, Ian Paisley, Gerry Adams and Mo Mowlam ?? Is it not true (now paraphrasing Plato) that many, if not most, citizens are only concerned about political disputes when the disputes start to interfere with the citizens' personal lives ? and, if so, surely politicians who order mass conscription are doing no better than the Nazi leaders who presided over the gas chambers?

[The quote of Plato is taken from Joad, "Teach Yourself Philosophy", Everyman University Press]

Looking forward to replies !

Mike Rossell, Middlesex University

Mike : thanks for this contribution. As you probably anticipated, it's rather a juicy morsel just waiting for someone to take a bite at ! But, I'll leave this to someone else !

Regards,

Theo

11th October 1997

Alan Carr

REPLY TO C88

Hello Theo,

Here are my contributions for the next issue :-

Ireland (C88, p.14) : peace will occur when both sides are accommodated. This is practically impossible. The current situation is similar to the Sunningdale scenario a year ago. The unionists (DUP, UKUP) have pulled out of the talks knowing that any progress will be towards the united Ireland end of the spectrum. The old mantra of "we will not talk to terrorists" has been continuously employed for years, for the simple reason that once the unionists meet with Sinn Fein, they will have no excuses left for not talking.



Any talks will have to accommodate nationalists/republicans and unionists perceive this accommodation as a step towards a united Ireland.

In the mean time expect the UUP to come under severe pressure to withdraw

from the talks process, and if they continue in the talks process Dr. Ian Paisley will organise huge unionist / loyalist marches / strikes / protests / boycotts to wreck the talks process.

I accept that this outlook is pessimistic and that I could be wrong and I do sincerely hope that all the people involved will find peace but time will tell. This has been written on the 04/10/97 just in case any of this happens before publication date.

Population (C88, p.14) : Having read the opinions on population in Commensal, I felt there was a question going unasked : what about reincarnation ? : if it occurs how many of us have lived in the past ? Does it affect individual consciousness ? The question of how many people have ever lived has more exotic conclusions. I'd prefer everybody to think about this question than read my opinion on the subject. Enjoy your thoughts

Crime Prevention (C88, p.28) : while reading Anthony Owens' proposal for penal reform I was reminded of an old saying "prevention is better than cure". It struck me that his solution was more of a cure than a preventive measure.

How can we cure crime ? Well straight off I don't have the answer. The motives of a criminal will have to be looked into. For the sake of presenting a philosophy I will give three archetypal motives :

- **NEED :** the commission of a criminal act due to need for self or others, ie. family. It could be said that all of us would commit crime to provide for ourselves and loved ones. There is a fine line between need and greed which most criminals do cross over, but need as a motive must be acknowledged. The need motive also holds sway over drug addicts etc. whose motives aren't part of the main thrust of this argument so I won't go there. How can we cure need in our thriving capitalist society ?
- **GREED :** I have no need to explain greed to anybody reading this. Is it a crime ? It is the pedestal of the pillar of capitalism and is morally acceptable in our times.
- **EVIL :** there are individuals in our society who take pleasure from causing pain, loss, injury etc. to others or fulfil a perverted need at any cost. This explains some of the more psychotic acts of our time and arguably it is these people who should be in our prisons. The acts are usually caused by past events and their reactions to these events : say for instance a child with abusive alcoholic parents releases his tension and anger in school and gets expelled. He looks for a job and being uneducated gets one of those sweat-shop type jobs where he is exploited. He then releases



his tension and anger on his employer and ends up in court and receives a prison sentence where he is abused by both prisoners and guards. He is released and when harassed by two cops because, say, of his appearance he kills them.

Which crime should have been prevented and how many would it have cured ?

It could be argued that two of these motives are by-products of capitalism : need and greed. Need caused by greed. Western society will not try to prevent crime because this will mean a questioning of its founding principles. Society will try to cure crime by prisons and fines.

I hope that I have presented my points clearly and I did not intend to advocate communism; but crime prevention has a distinct difference from crime cure.

Alan Carr

Alan : Thanks for the above. I think we may be straying a little into the preserve of a debating society with the comments on Northern Ireland. Interesting thoughts on crime prevention - focusing on the motivation for crime rather than on prevention merely by reducing the opportunities along the lines of "neighbourhood watch" or "more police on the beat". What long term impact do you think Tony Blair's three priorities (3 x education) will have if seriously implemented ? More debating, of course, but one might as well be hung for a sheep as a goat. It seems to me that planned economies have planned crime (perpetrated by those in power) while free economies have anarchic crime. Also, maybe the balance between need, greed and evil may change, but the aggregate of crime not, or at least not for long ?

Theo

October 1997

Vijai Parhar

Miscommunication & Free Will

Dear Theo,

As my first letter to your SIG I am examining the philosophy of language. The context of my examination is the culture of writing letters to a SIG. An example of this is this letter that I am writing.

Words are fuzzy objects. Each word has a different meaning to each reader and their meanings are different to different extents. There might be more agreement on what 'scanner' means than on what 'curmudgeonly' means.



When we write sentences down that use words we express our thoughts in a very personal way. That expression is not 100% faithful to the original thoughts and the amount of 'loss of meaning' varies from sentence to sentence. When a reader reads the same sentence his interpretation is very personal. It is very likely that the reader fills in gaps where he doesn't understand or indeed he may intentionally misunderstand if the misunderstanding makes better sense to him. The reader necessarily draws on his past experiences and imagination in the act of reading. Different readers will perform different 'loss of meaning' on the same sentences.

What is the upshot of all this? Well we never get accurate communication. This is further illustrated by replies to the author which often show up the degree of mis-communication. Does this mean no-one should ever talk to anyone else ever again? No, because partial communication is better than no communication (this is a fuzzy proposition and therefore is not always true). Also this 'fill in the gaps' way of acting has parallels in our other perceptions. The human brain deals with fuzzy objects all the time and seems to do it very successfully even though we like to think of the world as being non-fuzzy which it clearly isn't.

I once came across the idea of 'scripts' in a psychology text book. Apparently everyone goes round following scripts all the time. You have a different script for each different situation. Eg. there is a script for eating at a restaurant, a script for walking down the high street, a script for visiting the dentist etc. So the question is 'How much of my free will really is free?'. If we are all just following scripts then there is no real originality of behaviour. The use of scripts is beneficial though because it creates order in our lives. You don't see a nude streaker when you are in the High Street because it is not scripted. If there is no originality of behaviour then it must all be superficial behaviour.

However this does not seem to be a problem since people seem to be quite happy following scripts - it is analogous to a fish that is happy when it is in water but not very happy when it is out of water. The debate about free will has been going on in philosophy for a long time. Personally I think everything is determined and there is no free will. One way out of this is to say that although there is no free will, there are so many parameters involved it might as well be viewed as free will. The analogy would be throwing a dice. It should be possible to theoretically predict its outcome but the maths is so complex that we just give up and view it as being a random event.

Another way out might be to accept the uncertainty elements of quantum mechanics.



How about doing your replies to contributors in a different font ? This would make the newsletter much less confusing.

'till next time,

Vijai

Vijai : Welcome ! You've taken the wind out of my sails a bit by writing something I mostly agree with. On scripts, some people do seem to invent scripts & the trend setters may be the first to act them out. The first streaker wasn't following a script, though subsequent ones were. I would also add that we can add chaos theory and the sensitivity of non-linear systems to boundary conditions to your list of randomisers.

Theo

October 1997

Stef Gula

Various on C88 & Before

But for Theo's **C88** editorial comment that "*there are a few of you out there whose first thoughts have yet to be heard...*" y'all might've been spared mine a little longer. As is, I can but apologise if, through having missed a point developing, I manage to grab the wrong end of anyone's particular stick. As a relative newcomer to the SIG I'd been biding my time - trying to get the gist of things. With the bulk of correspondence consisting of replies, replies to replies, etc. it's a bit like butting into somebody else's conversation. But I never could resist an excuse. So, in no particular order.

Is the "rename Commensal" contest still open ? How's about "Ringpiece" ? Not that I'm implying anything. Unlike Theo's hypothetical "friend" (**C87** ish).

Quality is a bonus. As I see it there's nothing wrong in telling someone you think they're chasing the wrong doggie. But to quibble about how they express their opinion - as opposed to holding a different one yourself ? Enough said, methinks. Dwelling on the matter'd be like slagging someone off behind their back. Either they don't get a chance to defend themselves, so it's unfair. Or they never get to know, so it's pointless.

I can't help but wonder though if the real reason for not joining was fear of being unable to make the minimum standard ?

Moving on, albeit inelegantly as links go. A few points arising from **C88**.



Philip Lloyd Lewis may be right in suggesting that assigning "probability of truth" is - at least to some extent - subjective for probabilities falling between 0 and 1. But what about 0 and 1 themselves ?

Take someone for whom the statement "X is dead" describes them to a tee - ie. has a "probability of truth" of 1. Does it matter how good a talker they were? Likewise, if they say anything at all, no matter how badly they phrase it, that'd seemingly assign the statement a "probability of truth" around 0.

Whilst on the probability of being dead. Isn't there already a perfectly good word to describe INVOLUNTARY euthanasia ? "Murder" ?

Much as I sympathise with much of what E.Ron Kermode says about euthanasia, the "slippery slope" brigade do have a point. No matter how well-intending I don't much like the thought of anyone but me deciding what I might or might not be inclined to volunteer for.

Not that I much like the present system whereby I am denied the right to choose, as far as possible, the time and manner of my own demise. Nor that someone who cared enough to help me should I be incapable of being the instrument of my own volition would face punishment for complying with my wishes.

I'm sure it was lack of space that led E.Ron ("E" ? "Ron" ? "Mr. Kermode" ? - preference ?) to omit mentioning the importance of "living wills". That way, of course, everyone concerned knows in advance what an individual considers to be "VOLUNTARY". To protect the rights of those who'd prefer to die in miserable ignominy, all that'd then be needed would be to assume that if it weren't covered it weren't wanted - ie. no statement: no euthanasia.

Still on the subject of killing people. Does Anthony Owens proposed points system take into account the severity of an offence ? Or just the fact of it ? I may not be too squeamish about, say, executing somebody with four points for violence gained for killing a couple of people, who then went over the limit in the course of chalking up victim number three. But topping somebody for nicking a Mars Bar on five separate occasions seems a bit drastic.

Assuming, of course, you'd got the right person. Maybe in the interests of crime prevention / detection we should all be fitted with these tracking devices ? After all what have the innocent to fear from Big Brother simply knowing their whereabouts at all times ? Only the guilty need have movement restrictions imposed.

Incidentally, I don't know what street Anthony lives on, but I'd reckon it a fair bet drugs are more readily available there than in most prisons. Not that I'd dispute the ready availability of drugs in many (most ?) jails. Just that Anthony may have under-estimated how widely available they are generally. After all,



drugs in jails have to be smuggled in from somewhere don't they ? Perhaps I've lived in some worse neighbourhoods than Anthony.

I did wonder why he mentioned drugs at all though, since his definitions of "crime" don't seem to include them. Assuming users "consent" to the risks involved it ain't violence. Nor does it appear to be "theft". As opposed, of course, to the methods users may employ to finance their habits, or what they may do whilst under the influence.

Now, I'm not particularly "pro-drug". Anything you can over-dose on has to be a bad form of entertainment. But I've nowt against someone killing themselves. So, within reason, who am I to deny others their enjoyment of things I may not be inclined to partake of myself ? Of course anything that renders somebody a danger to others can't rightly be allowed and shouldn't be tolerated - be it driving stoned out yer box or attacking passers-by under the drug-induced impression they're Satan's little helpers come to get you.

But much the same could be said for alcohol. Perhaps "soft drugs", like cannabis, that don't carry a significant risk of killing the user outright should be classed along with alcohol (which can). Then come down hard on the hard stuff. But whilst at it I'd see the laws concerning the use of alcohol tightened up.

Or, perhaps simpler, ban alcohol as well. That way everyone is equal - nobody would be able to get out their face legally. Which, considering the amount of alcohol related crime might be no bad thing. There again I'm a teetotal, non-driver, irregular light smoker (mostly passive), generally clean living righteous sort, so I would say that.

Finally. Wittgenstein ? "probably" the most famous philosopher of the twentieth century ? Shouldn't that be "arguably" Theo ? Russell ? Koestler ? Popper ? Santayana ? Sartre ?

Admittedly all of them would probably appear on most lists of famous twentieth century philosophers - the actual position being a matter of preference - but dammit Theo. "... This is Mensa...". If we can't argue about semantics what point is there in any of it ?

Stef : welcome to the show. You're another of those slippery customers who say things I agree with ! However, I think you're excessively sanguine about the motives of Big Brother watching us.

In a society that provides "free" healthcare, is someone who knowingly incurs illness by risky activities like drug-taking actually committing a theft ? There seemed to be a debate recently about whether "dangerous sports" (like hill-walking !) whose practitioners consume public resources being rescued or otherwise patched up should be covered by extra insurance.



I can't have you persuading philosophers to abstain from alcohol. You don't need to be a Monty Python fan to realise how central it is to the discipline. Plato's admiration of Socrates seemed partly to rest on that ancient sage's renowned ability to down a bucketful at a symposium without having his thought-processes befuddled. I've always found alcohol rather inimical to clear thought, which is, after all, half the attraction. It allows you to escape those troubling thoughts that go round and round in your head. It's the way the whole world subsequently seems to go round your head that's the problem.

You're quite right - you've caught me out being snooty. I should have said "influential", or "most quoted", rather than "famous". Russell is probably the most famous philosopher of the 20th century, though not, I suspect, for his philosophy. At the risk of becoming a repeat offender, didn't we join Mensa in the hope of conversing with people who think quickly and know things ? Shouldn't we provoke one another to do so ?

Theo

1st October 1997

Rick Street

Dear Theo,

Tavermuch for another storming Commensal. Enclosed is a contribution for the next one, printed in the largest, clearest NLQ font that my humble little printer can manage. I trust your scanner can digest this with relative ease. This covering letter however is printed in draft mode which takes half the time and uses half the ink. Would it be OK to print subsequent contributions in this mode or will your scanner object ? Keep up the excellent labours.

Rick Street's Four-Pen'rth

Count Dave Of Transylvania (C88, pp. 4-5) : Wow ! A whole 2 pages just pour moi ! I'm touched ! ... and please, call me Rick.

You say that "relativists say that what is considered morally right IS morally right and therefore that moral values vary from society to society. If this is true then I hereby disassociate myself from this bunch of barking weirdoes because my whole point was that there is NO actual right and wrong, there are only individual opinions interacting to form an approximate consensus within any given society, and the fact that "moral values vary from society to society" is observable rather than extrapolated from a meaningless premise.

I think perhaps in my haste to make my own point about morality being a social construct I may've possibly overlooked the subtle irony of your vampire analogy to some extent and I do agree that intelligence is no criterion for granting moral rights within one's own belief system. However I don't agree at all with your alternative criterion, namely autonomy. After all a bacterium is



totally autonomous and a human slave is totally not. You seem to be advocating slavery and deriding hygiene. Although my suggested criterion of social participation may create the dilemma of where to position the boundaries of society, I believe this dilemma to be more resolvable than its originator ie. who has the greater right to life.

History has judged the Nazis to be "wrong" in massacring millions of Jews because now the consensus is that all humans belong to the same society but at the time the Nazis believed that the Jews were not a part of their own society but a parasitic infestation to be exterminated. I'm not trying to defend Nazi ideology but I do think there is more to be gained from understanding the reasons behind even the most abhorrent behaviour than there is by simply dismissing it as evil.

And as for the art / engineering question, let us first re-centre on my original point. I believe that humans are more important than all other life forms because I am human. Many people seem to agree that humans are more important but find it necessary to concoct meaningless excuses for their prejudice such as sentience or self-awareness or divine right. And now we have a new excuse ... art ! We are not the only animals which make things, but this is not in dispute. The question is therefore whether or not there is something very fundamentally unique about art as opposed to engineering that puts us on a whole different evolutionary level to all other animals. Dave says that non-art is merely functional, it either works or it doesn't. Whereas art is evaluated subjectively and can therefore be good in one person's eyes and bad in another's. But if this were the case wouldn't everyone drive the same car ? Cars are engineered, their purpose is functional and yet they are clearly evaluated subjectively. Each person has their own evaluation criteria. Likewise each female bird has her own subjective ideas about good and bad nests. What it comes down to is that nothing is ever evaluated objectively. And as for the idea that engineering is different from art in that it's functional; that implies that art has no function and if that were true then why does it exist? Its function is to stimulate thought and conversation. Of course that's just one of my many subjective opinions which I also use to evaluate cars, bridges, word processors and all other human creations.

Philip Lloyd Lewis (C88, p. 6) : Yes, I am indeed confusing objective truth with objective reality, and I now think I understand the distinction but let me just check. There is an objective reality in which God may or may not exist but we can never know for certain. And 5 billion subjective realities in which God does definitely either exist or not according to the opinion of the individual. The statement "God exists" is always subjectively true because God does exist in 3 or 4 billion different subjective realities and the opposite is also subjectively true because of the 1 or 2 billion subjective realities in which God definitely doesn't exist. However the statement "God exists" is never objectively true (or false) because it is always made subjectively. Only an objective statement can contain objective truth and there are no objective statements so there is no objective truth but there is objective reality in which



we are independently subjectively agreed that I do objectively exist. That's reassuring.

(C88, p. 7, para 5) : What makes you think that "objective reality is one and indivisible"? Surely its indivisibility is just your subjective opinion.

Theo Todman (C88, p. 7) : At the risk of sounding pedantic I'd prefer to say that scientific theories are subject to "improvement" rather than "correction" as the assumption that they will ever be totally correct is as mistaken as the assumption that they are already. But I do agree that there is value in trying to approximate our subjective realities to the objective even if only for the sake of social unity.

(Science And Pseudo-Science; C88, pp. 8-11) : I think it's true that science often crosses the boundary into pseudo-science by claiming proof of unprovable theories and it's always worth remembering that nothing is absolutely true anyway, but I'd like to add an observation of my own to the discussion. Ironically, a significant failing of science is the very dedication and expertise of its exponents. Dogmas are bound to develop due to the awe in which great scientists of the past are rightly perceived. For example, who am I to suggest that Einstein made a mistake in his theory of relativity? To suggest such a thing would be to claim that I'm smarter than he was. Its all very well to criticise dogmatism in science, but realistically how can it ever be eliminated?

(Bertrand Russell; C88, p. 10) : If there is no absolute motion then how do you explain centrifugal force? Surely the rotational speed of an object is calculable by measuring the centrifugal force it generates? And that rotational speed is not relative to anything. If rotational speed can be absolute then why not linear speed?

E. Ron Kermode (C88 p. 12-14) : Yeah, I suppose I can see how someone could believe that they have a right to medical care based on the amount of tax they've paid. This is a valid point but personally I take the view that my income is my income after tax. As I have no control over how much tax I pay or how public money is spent all I can do is hope that our elected representatives are acting in the overall best interests of society. That may sound rather naively complacent and pathetically submissive but it does allow me to appreciate what society provides instead of futilely demanding that it provide more.

Suicide may not be a criminal offence, but that's only because it's unpunishable. The anti-voluntary-euthanasia argument is that suicides shouldn't happen and if making it illegal to commit suicide would stop suicides from happening then we should make it illegal. However someone who's trying to kill themselves clearly isn't going to be deterred by a possible prison sentence, so all we can do is make it illegal to assist someone else in ending their life. Having said that, though, I do agree with you completely. A life of suffering is indeed a fate worse than death.



There is a major difference between a yard full of coal and the entire history of a species. A yard full of coal is only three dimensional and you are able to move and see in all three of those dimensions. The history of the human race is however very four dimensional, so unless you can go back in time, you have almost nothing to base any estimation on. And anyway, who's to say there wasn't a flood? Or even two or three? Or five hundred? Do you see my point?

Nice idea about page references. A convention I think we all should adopt.

Michael Nisbet (C88, p. 16) : "Belief" and "delusion" are indeed interchangeable terms for the same set, ie. delusions, which being a sub-set of beliefs can be referred to by either title. I see no contradiction.

You also pose the question (if only rhetorically) "How do I know that I'm not a bat dreaming that I'm a human?", to which I would say that you don't. You could quite possibly be a sleeping bat and I don't see why that should be any less likely statistically than the equally one-in-several-million possibility that you really are human. So are we complacent in assuming that we're not bats? If we are then this implies that we can in some way prepare for that moment when we awake and realise that those five years at university spent studying structural engineering were a complete waste of time and we should have been studying airborne moth hunting and echo location instead. Well this is clearly taking the boy scout motto of "be prepared" substantially too far but acknowledging the possibility is, I think, not without value because a person who is too convinced that he's definitely human will be totally unprepared psychologically for that moment of waking, should it ever occur. Personally I believe that I'm human but I also believe that I'm as well prepared as I can be for the unlikely eventuality that I'm not.

Theo (C88, p. 23-24) : Another fragment of quantum physics from a BBC2 documentary to add the super-photon debate ... Stephen Hawking reckons super-photons are a spontaneous random occurrence which enables black-holes to "leak". He also says that others have named this "Hawking Radiation" but he himself would prefer it to be called something else. I suspect that my earlier reference was to a physicist trying (and apparently succeeding) to prove Hawking's theory.

Although I agree with you that inflicting flagrantly unnecessary suffering on sentient non-human beings is obnoxious, imagine that I didn't agree. You claim you can rationally justify your opinion but so far your rational argument seems to be "well it's obvious". To you and me it is, but not to everyone. I can and have made a rational argument against undermining one's own society but you are only able to fall back on emotional ideas of empathy and hypothetical situations, which our animal torturer could simply dismiss as a figment of your imagination. I wish you were right. I wish there was an argument I could use to convince sports hunters that what they are doing is



wrong but unfortunately it isn't wrong, its just that I don't like it and why should my opinion be more important than theirs?

I don't see any reason why young children shouldn't be able to understand reflective surfaces when adult members of other species cannot. After all young children do have a unique ability to assimilate language. Understanding is about intelligence rather than experience or education. Age matters little.

Anthony Owens (C88, p. 27) : The phrase "something is happening" is neither subjective nor objective. It is non-specific and therefore cannot be categorised without appreciating its wider context. This does however beg the question, is there a conceptual "ether" between Philip's two tiers of reality? And if so have we lost anything more important in it?

Theo (C88, p. 27) : Why does everyone always assume gods are infallible? I'm no expert on Hindu deities but if they're anything like those of Greek mythology then Mr Ramanujan could well've been correct.

Alan Carr (C88, pp. 30-31) : Science doesn't ignore the soul. Science breaks all of reality down into little chunks and then assigns different people to study each piece. Obviously most sciences ignore the soul because all sciences ignore almost everything. The science that studies the soul is called psychology and studies nothing else. As for religion ignoring the body, I would say that the whole notion of religion is a modern construct. To ancient Jews for example Judaism wasn't their "religion" it was simply the sum total of their understanding of reality. It is only now that the cultures of the world are intermingling that we need a collective name for all belief systems other than our own. I see the word "religion" is simply meaning "ancient belief system" and inevitably these are going to vary in what they do and do not contain.

The standard is NOT "low", debating and philosophy are inseparable, and if you want to "read, digest, learn and move on" I suggest you get a book. Vive la P.D.G. !

ADDENDUM ON WAR AND EMPIRE

After recently watching part of The Nazis - A Warning From History, I came to perceive Nazi Germany in a whole new light which fits in very nicely with my opening remarks about morality as a social construct and the problems of identifying the boundaries of a society. Allow me to elaborate ...

In this modern world of international communications, package holidays, United Nations Peace Keeping Forces and space travel, people generally consider the idea of one country trying to conquer the world to be utterly abhorrent and cite Hitler as the very personification of evil. However from a historical point of view this is extremely hypocritical. The British spent 300 years building an empire which we still possessed much of, at the time when Germany began to follow suit. Likewise the French, Dutch, Portuguese,



Spanish... Even the Jews, who were so victimised by the Nazis, openly admit to having conquered the land of Canaan and renamed it Israel. The point is that perceiving the whole human race as one society is a very new idea and one which has only happened because of recent technological advances. Nazi Germany was simply the last nation to attempt to do exactly what every other nation had done previously.

So why is our judgement of Nazi Germany so harsh? I think the key is in the technological developments of the twentieth century. Once upon a time wars were fought by soldiers and soldiers wanted to fight. But now when a nation goes to war it does so as a whole. Guns need ammunition, tanks and planes need fuel and spare parts, coded radio communications need to be decoded, and all these support components of the modern war machine are valid military targets. And now the weapons exist to annihilate those targets utterly. All of a sudden war has become dangerous. At the start of the First World War this was not fully appreciated by anyone. The idea of a German Empire was born of an age old tradition that had worked fine for thousands of years. It is only with hindsight and obliviousness to historical context that this idea now seems so utterly abhorrent. Technology made war a bad thing and from 1914 to 1945 Germany proved it to us all.

Rick : more like 20 quid's worth, it seems to me ! Seriously, the second interview with Isaiah Berlin had something to say about moral relativism. Berlin seemed to be saying that there were no moral absolutes, but that there was more to it than simply taste - such as whether or not one took sugar in one's tea. Hence, he rejected the epithet "moral relativist". He seemed to think there was some mileage in pursuing those moral principles that were universal in all societies. Unfortunately, I lost track of the argument a bit at this point (well, it was late at night and his accent is very difficult to follow ... OK then, I nodded off).

I suspect that the only moral absolutes are those needed to maintain any meaningful society; but even granted that there are no such absolutes, there is such a thing as consistency, as I've said before. Maybe a conviction of the rightness of consistency is one of the moral absolutes. If a person accepts the need to be consistent in moral judgement, then a meaningful moral discussion can take place. For instance, the Nazis didn't consider it right for other countries to oppress German minorities (indeed, this was their main pretext for declaring war on their neighbours) so they were being inconsistent in using self-determination as an excuse for oppressing their own minorities, such as the Jews. Of course, then they had to invent silly racial theories to the effect that the Jews weren't really human. This leads to another area where moral judgements are open to criticism, where they depend on alleged matters of fact. If there were valid reasons for concluding that the Jews were sub-human, or non-human, these reasons would have to account for why the Jews were genetically so similar to humans and why they were over-represented in the arts & professions; and "world conspiracies" are rather feeble reasons for this since many of us are willing to concede (as ought the Nazis) that the Jews have been noted for turning out the occasional competent scientist or musician, as judged by the impartial observer.



There is an interesting article entitled "‘Is’, ‘Ought’ and the Voluntaristic Fallacy" in this quarter's *Philosophy*, in which Oswald Hanfling tries to argue against Hume and his modern disciples who hold that no statement of fact entails a statement of value, and therefore - allegedly going beyond Hume - that all moral values are matters of choice rather than being part of 'the given' (belief in which proposition he dubs the Voluntaristic Fallacy). I think he's wrong on all of this, in that his arguments are muddled, but more on that next time, I hope.

I think you're way off the scent with suggesting that the function of art is to stimulate thought and conversation ! It may be so for art critics, but doesn't most good art simply give pleasure ? The high treble in Allegri's Miserere is more likely to stimulate an ecstatic tingle than a thought. I would suggest that the reason scientists, or at least physicists, are unassailable by the general public is less to do with the awe in which they are held than because of the inaccessibility of the subject matter. After all, Aristotle was held in about as much awe as the Bible, but was overthrown by Galileo & Newton, as was Newton himself (though not to the same degree) by Einstein. This had nothing to do with one being cleverer than the other - Newton is still held by many to be the greatest scientist that ever lived (and one of the top three mathematicians, along with Archimedes and Gauss, as well). It is just that science is a difficult subject that takes people a lot cleverer than you and I a long time to get to grips with, let alone do ground-breaking creative work in. The main reason for most of us to be dubious about taking issue with Einstein is that, most likely, we'd be wrong. Maybe, as you suggest, nothing is absolutely true; but, in mathematical physics at least, there are rather a lot of ways of being absolutely wrong, as anyone who's had exam questions marked will know !

The difference between linear motion and rotation is that the latter always involves acceleration, as I said, whereas the former does not. Unaccelerated motion is relative, accelerated motion is absolute. Otherwise, I agree with you.

I think your attitude to tax revenues is a healthy one. I've listened enough to right wing Americans ranting on about their "tax dollars" being wasted on no-goods (usually equated to single mothers and unemployed non-whites). Interestingly, *Philosophy* has an article entitled "Equality and Desert" by one Louis Pojman - Professor of Philosophy at the US Military Academy at West Point - a likely position if ever there was one, akin to "spiritual advisor to the Spice Girls" in my view. I feel another competition brewing ! To be fair to Professor Pojman, I haven't read his article yet, but I did notice that "tax dollars" featured in it as expected.

I didn't understand what you were on about with respect to beliefs and delusions. You seem to be saying, though maybe not meaning, that all beliefs are delusions. Also, do you really think it's just as likely that you're a sleeping bat than that you're a human ? We seem to be back to the same old contention that, just because everything is to some degree doubtful, therefore everything is equally doubtful, or credible for that matter. I can think of a few propositions less doubtful than that one, but I won't bore you with them all now.

I didn't watch much of the Hawking series. What I did see seemed very simplistic and confused (not Hawking's fault, I would imagine). I'd thought that Hawking Radiation proceeded as follows. Particle / anti-particle pairs spontaneously arise in the quantum vacuum surrounding the black hole as they do everywhere else in the universe. Because of the extreme gradient of the gravitational field in the proximity of a black hole, a negative energy particle gets drawn into



the black hole while the positive energy particle escapes, thereby looking as though it has been emitted. Or so says Chapter Seven of BHT. Nothing about super-photons that I remember.

Incidentally, I've volunteered for the job of SIG Sec for Physics SIG. Anybody else a member ? Some of the discussions above sound like useful material for PhySIG.

A good point about fallible gods & goddesses. However, I'd suggest that part of the grammar of claims to revelation is that the revelation itself be in some sense true.

Thanks for the vote of confidence in PDG ! I do, though, think we have a duty not to make life unnecessarily difficult for our readership.

Finally, on war and empire. You make some interesting points, but I'm not sure all of it's historically accurate. The real problem with the Nazis was that their "philosophy" was consciously archaic - for instance, looking back to the Teutonic Knights for inspiration. The enigma was how could such barbarism have arisen in one of the most cultured countries in Europe, rather than say in Russia or China which had never known democracy. Professional armies playing war games hasn't always been the case. OK, the Romans were good at it, but they were defeated by population movements - populations at war - the Huns putting pressure on the Goths putting pressure on the Vandals (or something like that !). I think war has mostly been dangerous to the losers - what with all the rape and pillage, whole populations annihilated or sold into slavery. The Nazis weren't just the last Europeans to try this on, they did so centuries after the rules had changed (at least in Europe for Europeans). As such, Goebels' "Total War" speech signalled the final descent into barbarism, however stirring and galvanising it might have been. Technology merely made things worse in that it was possible for a gang of lunatics to cause more damage to more people than hitherto. Our objection isn't so much against the German army (the Wehrmacht, that is, rather than the Waffen SS). There's a degree of respect accorded the Rommels & U-boat commanders, for the skill with which Blitzkrieg was conducted as against the mindless trench warfare of WW1; even for the stoicism of the armies bogged down in the Russian mud and ice. The outrage is against the Nazis' oppression & liquidation of peaceful and unarmed people.

Theo

