

Commensal

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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26th July 1998

Theo Todman

EDITORIAL**New Members**

As usual, we start off by welcoming new members to the SIG. The rush seems to have paused a bit - only three new members this time. Still, a heartfelt welcome to :-

- Peter Conway
- Mr. O. Cover
- Liz Wilkinson

While we're talking about members, congratulations to **John Neary** ! As you know (**C92/18**), he's taking a Philosophy Degree by correspondence with London University from his hide-out in Mozambique (what an international group we are !). Anyway, he's just passed his first year exams, so well done !

Mensa at Braziers

The next *Mensa at Braziers* conference is being organised by Leslie Haddow and runs from 25th to 27th September 1998. The subject is *Crime and Punishment*, so please be thinking about whether you would like to attend. You can book now direct with Braziers, at the address below, as detailed in the following advert that Leslie has submitted to *Mensa Magazine* :-

MENSA DISCUSSION CONFERENCE AT BRAZIERS COLLEGE

Fri. 25 to Sun. 27 September 1998

"Crime, Punishment and Society" to be chaired by Leslie Haddow

The theme of this conference is that the whole problem of crime needs some radical re-thinking. What can the "honest" members of society do towards finding a solution ? Do we need a change of attitude ? Three aspects will be considered:

- Why does our society, through its families, education system, and community, produce so many of its members who go in for criminal behaviour ?
- What should Society, through its legal system, do about those who do ? Why punish ?
- How ready are we to accept them back into the community afterwards ?

The talks will not be by professional criminologists or penologists but by concerned and intelligent lay-people. All participants will be invited to contribute.



The late Eric Hills organised the twice-yearly Discussion Conferences at Braziers for over 30 years, and plans for this one and arrangements for several speakers were well on their way before his last illness. This meeting will now be chaired by Leslie Haddow who organised two of the previous Conferences on Eric's behalf.

The College was founded in 1950 as the Braziers School of Integrated Social Research to study practical ways of living in a group. It now operates partly as a community, and partly as an adult education college. It has a country-house atmosphere, and is situated in its own attractive grounds in the Chiltern countryside

The full fee, including accommodation and catering, is £92, and early booking is advisable. Apply for further details to :

Braziers College, Ipsiden, Wallingford, Oxon., OX10 6AN.
Phone 01491 680221.

I would urge anyone interested in the above topic to apply promptly. I will be there (let this not put you off !), which will allow you the opportunity to lobby for your views on future PDG events, if nothing else ! Talking of which

FUTURE PDG CONFERENCES

As noted last time, the Braziers College setting seems ideal for possible **PDG Conventions**. I propose that the first of these takes place in May 1999.

There follow extracts from a letter I sent at the end of May to the Director of Studies of Braziers, David Allen, asking for guidance on parameters. We had a subsequent telephone conversation & I've edited in the relevant responses ad loc.

At the May 1998 conference, the future of *Mensa at Braziers* was discussed in the light of Eric Hills' death and the advancing age of the majority of the regular attendees. It was decided that Dr. Leslie Haddow would organise the next meeting, already booked for September '98, but that I would organise the meeting for May 1999.

It was agreed that Leslie Haddow's meeting would be along the traditional *Mensa at Braziers* lines, but that mine would strike out in something of a new direction, including the following modifications :-



1. Invitation would be extended to members of Mensa's *Philosophical Discussion Group* (PDG), of which I am Secretary.
2. A core of places (say 6) would be reserved for those members of the *Mensa at Braziers* group who are not PDG members.
3. I would also invite fellow members of ISPE (the International Society for Philosophical Enquiry) - a group similar to Mensa but with somewhat stiffer entry criteria and with the declared aim of using members' abilities for the general good of society.
4. I would invite a guest speaker to deliver a key-note address and join us for half a day (I have Professor Oswald Hanfling of the Open University in mind, though I don't yet know whether he can make the prospective date).
5. The format of the sessions would be somewhat different - we would have fewer, but more formally prepared, sessions.
6. We would replace the "music and poetry" Saturday night session with a retreat to a local hostelry for those who so wished (no rowdies, of course - this is a philosophical group!).
7. Otherwise, the same informality and intimacy of the *Mensa at Braziers* weekends would prevail.

Please let me know what think of the above, and let me know whether it is acceptable [*it was, Ed*]. Also, what dates have you available in May 1999 ? [*The dates on offer are 7th-9th May 1999 & 21st-23rd May 1999 (remember, they're Friday evening to Sunday afternoon), Ed*]. I'm not sure yet what the theme of the conference would be - this would be agreed with the key-note speaker - but I would imagine something like "*What is Philosophy*" for the first of what I hope will be a long sequence of meetings.

As for the number of attendees, I would imagine we could fill as many places, one way or another, that you have available, so I'd be grateful if you'd let me know maximum numbers. [*Response : 20 - 25 people can be accommodated in the main drawing room - more in case of use of syndicate rooms; there are 19 beds in the house - though only 13 rooms, so the number to be accommodated on site depends on the degree of sharing ... partners are welcome, by the way ! There is a good quantity of B & B accommodation within 2 miles of the house*



which is frequently used by attendees]. I will be soliciting firm bookings, with deposits, in August 1998.

For the time being, the PDG meeting would be annual in May, with the *Mensa at Braziers* meeting being annual in September. PDG members would be invited to attend *Mensa at Braziers* meetings, but would not define the focus of the event. We'll see how things work out, though.

This time, a questionnaire actually does appear at the end of this issue of *Commensal* ! Please note that it's open to my ISPE lot as well and that my priority is to fill the spaces, so apply early or be prepared to miss out ! Talking of responding, please do so **ASAP** with the choice of date if this is a concern for you. The *Braziers* prospectus is being published in August & they're bound to be after me soon for the date. If pressed, I'll default to **21-23rd May 1999**. Sorry to rush you - my fault of course !

PDG Mentors

Groan ! Apart from an extensive correspondence with one of our members, I've got nowhere with this one (just too busy !). I hope to progress it in early August.

Next Issue of Commensal

As you will have noticed, I failed abysmally in the "monthly Commensal" experiment. I hope this hasn't mucked any of you about (eg. Rick Street) - ie. because you thought you didn't have time to contribute, you didn't, and then found you did after all ! As far as contributions are concerned, I'm sure we could manage it, but I'm simply too busy to cope with it myself. Whenever my work commitments flare up (as they have done this month and are increasingly likely to do over the next couple of years) that's it as far as *Mensa*'s concerned for a week or so.

So, we'll try for **22nd August** as the closing date for contributions to **C94** - but don't worry too much if you miss it by a week or so. However, please let me know if you're writing something late that must go in the next edition, lest a miracle occur and it miss the boat !

Best wishes,

Theo



2nd June 1998**Peter Conway****COMMENTS ON COMMENSAL 91**

Dear Theo,

Commensal Number 91 was very interesting, although clearly one needs to have been a full member for a little while before one can be fully conversant with the various on-going discussions.

There was, however, one very small general point I wanted to make in connection with the on-going correspondence / discussion with Sheila Blanchard (**C91; pages 33-35**) concerning distinctions between "murder" and "killing".

In a general conversation I was having with a friend about difficulties arising in translations, an interesting point arose in connection with biblical texts. The specific point related to the commandment - "thou shalt not kill".

In Exodus 20:13 (New Revised Standard Version) the commandment is now translated as "You shall not murder". The word "murder" is then annotated and the corresponding footnote gives "or kill" as a possible alternative.

I would assume from all this that the original text is a little ambiguous but that the "experts" feel that it is more likely to mean "murder" rather than "kill".

I just felt that the possible implications of all this rather opens up a "can of worms". Did our creator imply that there were indeed circumstances where the taking of life would be permissible ?

Peter : Good to hear from you ! If you (or any other PDG member) wants back numbers of *Commensal*, I have these as far back as C84. I can let anyone have copies for the cost of postage.

You're quite right about Exodus. The Hebrew is *ratsach* (to murder) rather than *harag* (to slay), *muth* (to put to death) and sundry others. This is carried forward into the Greek of the New Testament, via the Septuagint, by the use of *phoneuo* rather than *apokteino* in Matthew 5:21 and parallels. Not much doubt about the correct translation, I wouldn't have thought. Besides, the Old Testament is riddled with battles & Exodus itself instructs the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites etc. - with Deuteronomy & Joshua describing their (almost) utter destruction. The OT also provides for capital punishment - even of rebellious sons ! It views the world as a battle-ground between good and evil, with no quarter given & no room for wishy-washy liberalism. Not sure what this has to do with modern-day ethics, though !

Theo
5th June 1998

Norman Mackie



C92 & FAREWELL

Dear Theo,

Thank you very much for my May edition of our Newsletter, C92.

I am glad that you enjoyed the poem by Morris Rosenfeld, and in a way I am sorry that it had a personal note coincidentally. (You were probably not alone in this respect)

Walking home from the school sports day, earlier today, my attention was drawn to a beautiful ladybird crossing the path in front of me, and beyond that a little beetle, the back of which shimmered with an iridescent green colour. Two thoughts clearly crossed my mind, firstly, take care; do not stand on these little creatures, secondly, what differentiates them and all other creatures from the inanimate world around us?

How strange when I arrived home a few minutes later to read your latest enquiry for clarification of the special quality that can be attributed to life. Pretty close to synchronicity, if you ask me! What is this 'Life-force' that is so incredibly different from those which govern the inanimate? I am sorry that I can offer no definition, (although in the passing mention that my Chambers is the 1993 edition), simply suggest that perhaps this is the point when the Heart (not the organ), the essence of our being, tries to guide the Head. I believe that our Hearts can be aware of things which our minds cannot know.

There is something very special about all life, something wonderful and truly fascinating in the drive for creation in never ending cycles down toward eternity. In ways, like the peace of God 'that passeth all understanding'. Perhaps one day, our world will view all life as being sacred, including when **Graham Dare's C92/20** first moral decision will be reversed. The signs are clearly visible of a significant move in this direction.

Unfortunately this will probably be my last letter to Commensal as I will not be renewing my Mensa membership in July, due to pecuniary difficulties caused by unemployment. Joining the SIG's was the most enjoyable and interesting aspect of my time in Mensa, and for this I am very grateful to you, Theo.

Many blessings to everyone, and hope for the future.

Norman Mackie



Norman : not sure about this business of our hearts being aware of things our minds cannot know. Sounds like an open door for all sorts of prejudices. Also, maybe you could explain the signs that the moral decision to kill is being reversed ?

I'm really sorry to hear of your financial and employment problems. I'll continue to send you copies of *Commensal* & I'm sure we'll all welcome your continued contributions.

Theo

5th June 1998

Kevin Arbuthnot

COMMENTS ON COMMENSAL 92

Dear Theo,

I have, at long last, been shamed by the exchange between yourself and Mark Griffin into making my maiden contribution (at least it is within a year of joining).

The suggestion that I may be a "lurker" prompted me to reflect upon why, when I contribute in an uninhibited way on Internet newsgroups of which I am a member, and also to other Mensa SIG's, that it should be different with PDG and *Commensal*? I have concluded as follows:

- 1). some of the articles are submitted by those who are clearly technically competent in philosophy, familiar with the language and structure of philosophical argument. This results in, what may be held by some to be, "intimidating" articles that would at least demand some research and thought to compose a half-credible reply to. I have no quarrel with these articles as they set a high standard to learn from and to aspire to. (Occasionally contributors have aspired to this category of article but have, transparently, ended up with a long-winded, self-important, set of navel-contemplating padding; this is obvious to the average discerning reader, "lurker" or otherwise, and requires no further comment.) Of articles in this category, some are long and erudite, some short and rapier-like (**Malcolm Burn's, C92/35**, deserves special mention and praise in this category). Some are neither (sorry **Albert Dean, C92/38-48**).
- 2). there are some articles that prompt an immediate response and have one reaching for the nearest pencil with saliva dripping, only for one's enthusiasm to be thwarted by the realisation, a few column inches further on, that you, Theo, have done the deed already, made the pithy point, or rubbed the errant correspondent's nose in his upstart supposition or polemic. Therefore the pencil goes back into its sheath,



unbloodied, waiting for the next sighting of virgin text against which to sally forth.

I do not think that it is practical to hold your comment until a subsequent edition, as by then, often, the trail has gone cold and the immediacy lost. The answer is, however, to hand; the discussion running at the moment on whether or not to have a "web-Commensal", holds the key.

Why not publish Commensal, as now, in hard copy, without immediate editorial comment, and simultaneously post it on the web for (interactive?) discussion. For non-web-denizens, the upshot of the discussion could be reproduced in the next or subsequent Commensal, perhaps when the discussion thread has concluded or petered out?

As I'm here now, I shall offer a couple of general comments.

Graham Dare (C92/21-22). Theo has dealt the first and probably decisive blow, therefore, my comment is a general one about the kind of position held by Graham. One of the things that attracted me to philosophy was that it appeared to challenge unsubstantiated beliefs and moral structures founded on such weak bases, leaving woolly thought to the fields of religion or astrology or something. Nevertheless, we are repeatedly treated to the views of people (nice, decent, intelligent people) who, irrespective of their words, all say the same thing: "I want a nice, cosy, safe world for me, my offspring and all furry animals to enjoy and thrive in free from the threat of rape, murder, famine or naughty words, so don't say anything that would suggest I might be in such a nightmare world".

The fact is, unfortunately, that we live in a world where animals (including us) live on the basis of survival of the fittest, strongest and, often, meanest. Furry animals are nice, but, unfortunately, often taste good too, so tough!

Horror-struck expositions of the evil human condition, such as presented (ignoring the historical cherry-picking and arbitrary snapshots) in hand-wringing fashion by Graham and his ilk, ignore cause and effect. We are here, in this technically advanced and sophisticated existence of ours, because we were the "meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley". We did not "decide between right and wrong and ... (choose) to kill"; we were able to kill efficiently, so became stronger and dominant as a result, and that is the reason why our brains are, despite the softer veneer of modern society, those of aggressive carnivores, resulting in our ability to engage that necessarily ruthless survival mode when necessary, manifested, according to need, as the tendency to hit back if struck rather than run, or press the nuclear button before it is pressed against us. If we were not such creatures by nature, we would not be here today, secure enough to have been able to generally drop our guard and engage in comfortable, surreal pursuits such as religion and moralistic self-criticism. It is easy to identify the victim, the poor, the quarry, as being in some way morally superior, but hypocritical (some would say pathetically self-deluding) to do so.



Stef Gula (C92/31) has summed it up, but the fact is that what he ironically describes is not a state of anarchy, but "civilisation" as we know it behind the thin, but very necessary, veil of the social contract.

I am not in any way anti-religion; it has served well over the millennia as a control mechanism and the glue of various societies has been stronger for it, but in a philosophical discussion group, some degree of honesty in these matters is a necessary prerequisite to constructive debate?

In a similar vein, I would disagree with **Rick Street** (Aquariana, C92/25) when he, presumably tongue in cheek, suggests that the "sceptics" and the new-agers' " views do not mix and should be kept in different debating fora; surely that denies the value of constructive debate. I for one, as a member of the sceptic tribe, do not want to be completely insulated from views that differ from my own, whether political, new-age, religious or whatever. I want to try to deconstruct views if I can, respect the differences in viewpoint where that respect is earned and, from time to time, see those who rely entirely on belief systems introduced to the rigours of philosophical inquiry. Who knows, after prolonged exposure to such belief systems, I too may end up wearing a daisy chain necklace and flip-flops!

Finally, and probably on the same theme, I note **Rick Street's** idea on the genetic approach to crime reduction with interest. However, if the feminists are to be believed, and in this matter they probably are, the solution would surely be to raise the scalpel another inch, changing the sterilisation to castration. Apart from having the desired effect on genetic continuity, it would also be a hell of a deterrent.

Hope that'll do for openers; keep up the good work .

Kevin Arbuthnot

Kevin : Well, it's good that you've stopped lurking. We seem to be somewhat of a mind on most things.

Sorry to "get in first" with the obvious comments ! The editor has to have some fun, and there's usually enough flesh on the bones for others to have a good pick. However, I'll try to watch out for stealing the membership's thunder - if that was causing contributions to dry up, I'd definitely say less.

I'm glad you support internetting. I agree that it would be fun for those on-line if I posted an un-edited Commensal, and then hoovered up the ensuing threads for the next edition. This would preserve the immediacy for those on-line without me stealing all the easy comments. The vast majority would have to wait a couple of months without feedback, however. Also, I think that I wouldn't just be able to print the posts as they were - this really would be taking



endless replies to the extreme. It's OK, just about, with one or two correspondents, but with a network the volume of correspondence balloons alarmingly ! So, we'd be getting into serious editing - and some people object to editors tampering with their outpourings. We'd still encounter Mark Griffin's objections as well.

Do you belong to the Mensa newsgroup ? I listen in for a few days occasionally and then unsubscribe. The quality of discussion was appallingly feeble (in my view) and the volume was such that if anyone did have anything valuable to say you'd never spot it because of all the dross that had to be waded through each day (about 100 e-mails). ISPE has an excellent newsgroup, though even there 15 or so emails a day is a lot to cope with, especially if you wish to take an active part. Via this forum I've just heard of some Americans wanting to set up an on-line "Philosophers Guild" - I could send you, or other SIG members, some info if you're interested; not that I've had the time to follow it up myself yet, beyond listening in.

With respect to your final comments to Graham Dare, I don't think victims or the poor are said to be morally superior, as such, unless their present situation is the result of moral choice. Clearly, the meek are favoured over the rapacious, but not the passive over the active. Whatever blessings are in store for the oppressed are due to the bounty of God, who is said to look out for them, not anything intrinsic in themselves. There's no virtue in being poor or oppressed in themselves. After all, it limits the amount of good you can do.

Theo

9th June 1998

Michael Nisbet

HUMOUR & MONKEYS

Dear Theo

Shortly after submitting my C92 contribution I came across an English translation of 'Le Rire' in a second-hand book-shop (Henri Bergson: 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic'; London 1911).

He writes: ". . we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing." Having said this, he proceeds to set forth his "central image: something mechanical imposed on something living", explaining how, in his view, it is germane to every level and sort of humour.

It seems to me that behind Bergson's "central image" lies the subject/object dichotomy that bedevils human life. He writes: "What, therefore, incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person" (subject) "into a thing" (object). Laughter, it seems to me, arises when the ambiguous nature of the human being -as both subject and object, living conscious person and thing subject to the second law of thermodynamics etc. - becomes evident, or is alluded to or brought to light in some way. Laughter itself is a partial



release of the chronic unconscious tension that arises as a result of living on the horns of the resultant dilemma.

However it has to be said that humour, as a "living thing", by and large evades the net of my inadequate powers of analysis. I had attempted to examine the ridiculous newspaper headlines that you mention (**C92/12**) in the light of the above, but my efforts fall so far short of the sort of logical cogency so well displayed by Malcolm Burn's contribution on another subject (**C92/35**) that I shall refrain from inflicting my efforts upon the Commensal readership. Instead I shall pass on to a few remarks on Rick Street's macaque dilemma (**C92/23**).

"Monkeys can exhibit sympathy to the feelings of other monkeys" writes Rick. "Would this not require them to perceive themselves as monkeys?" It seems to me possible that a monkey (or any other animal that is not possessed of a fully developed reflexive awareness) -in so far as it is conscious of its own existence at all, perceives itself as 'a monkey that is not another monkey'. In other words, it has a negative perception of itself, rather than a positive one of itself as a discrete entity. When reflexive awareness of the sort that can be demonstrated in primates such as chimpanzees and human beings arises, the negative 'space' begins to be -as it were- filled with that which we call a self. This is so particularly after the advent of language, which arises around the resultant subject-object dichotomy in order to enable a social cosmos to arise from the chaos of individual selves. 'Nature' in this analysis, (and further to your [*ie. "my", Ed*] remarks in response to Norman Mackie (**C92/29**)) is the sum total of organismic functioning, where this is devoid of reflexive awareness, in all the complexity of its ecological inter-dependence.

"It" (the monkey) writes Rick, "must know that it has a face... It knows what another monkey's face looks like and it knows that it's a monkey." But prior to reflexive awareness and the forms of language that reflexive awareness enables, 'the monkey' and 'the face' do not exist in the discrete terms that language implies, and nor does any possible linguistic relation between the two. Despite what I say above - which is simply an attempt to explain in words something that is prior to language - there is no 'monkey' and/or 'other monkey' prior to reflexive awareness, only a matrix of relationships from which these distinctions eventually arise.

Yours sincerely

Michael Nisbet

Michael : it's interesting that you had trouble fitting examples of humour into the theory. Any theory has to be judged on its application to new data : can it explain phenomena not



explicitly used to create it ? If not, the theory needs refinement. I agree with your quote from Bergson: any attempt to define humour is pretty dull in comparison with the real thing.

Theo

10th June 1998

Valerie Ransford

RESPONSE TO C92

Dear Theo,

Thank you for Commensal 92 and for taking so much trouble with my little contribution (page 15).

I was glad you don't intend to treat Christians as a protected species (page 16).

However, I have to point out that theologians use the word and the idea of 'Grace' in a special way. Furthermore, not from Handel but from J.S. Bach (his St. Matthew Passion) I call to mind the great cry : 'Warum!'. I hope I've spelt this properly. Anyway, J.C. believed he was forsaken by God.

Reading the fascinating extract you published about the death of Socrates, I think this episode could be called inspiring, that is, full of grace, too.

I've lost my Californian tract, but you, a triple niner with American contacts, should be able to find someone who remembers it. It was called 'The Shining Stranger' and sent to me by Mensan Mrs. Winifred Babcock of Beverly Hills. The author of *Tropic of Cancer*, whose name I forget [Henry Miller ?; Ed], recommended it. I disagree with much of it.

But, from the gospels, we can read how and when J.C. didn't behave like a prince, prelate or one triumphantly laurelled. A messiah has, or is expected to have, great power : J.C. was poor. Alternatively, a messiah is expected to be a liberator : J.C. told us to 'render unto Caesar' etc. etc. A messiah is expected to make generalisations, abstractions, big ideas : J.C. was concerned about particular incidents and particular things. A messiah is concerned only with good people : J.C. knew traitors and a tart. He also was very unorthodox, on two occasions, in a holy temple; once when he lost his temper, once when he was a child and a great nuisance to his parents.

Sorry about all this, but you did show an interest in this kind of idea.

When I wrote about 'showing' I had, in my mind, the 'TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS'. This, if I may say so, has been of interest to extensive scholars, who will remember that Wittgenstein believed that a proposition shows its sense and that what can be shown cannot be said.



I think we are very lucky to have John Neary's article 'What use is a mosquito' (**page 17**) in the same issue as John Stubbings' 'Art' (**page 9**). How right you are, Theo, to say 'a mosquito's use is simply to be a mosquito'. Similarly, Art is for Art. Who disagrees ?

As for the kids in the garden (**John Neary, page 18**) how am I wrong when I maintain that the gentleman has a right to say he knows that his kids are in the garden until someone or something shows he is mistaken ? It seems to me that all I claim to know is like this. I think I know something until someone or something proves I am wrong. I could, we all could, say 'I believe' instead of 'I know' always, to make certain that I am, or we are, never wrong. But then, 'I believe' would simply mean what 'I know' means now. Perhaps an individual who has really swatted this subject up could give me some guidelines.

I do look forward to Commensal 93. But before that PhiSIGma will arrive. Wow.

Valerie Ransford

P.S. One day I'll get over my techno-phobia and people like you won't earn my undying gratitude for making a fair copy of my stuff.

Valerie : you lost me completely with some of your earlier remarks above - how do these (ie. on Grace & the T L-P quotation) connect to previous discussions ? I presume the remarks on "J.C." link in with him, allegedly, being an "anti-Messiah" - all standard pulpit stuff with which I agree, more or less. I think I'll leave Mrs. Babcock alone if I may. I'm not a "Triple Niner", by the way - the TNS is a break-away group from ISPE, which I'm a member of, but on the same level so I see no good reason to join. I've tried the next one up (Prometheus) but I'm not quite up to it, I'm afraid!

I don't know whether I've really swatted up the subject of epistemology, but I'll have a bash - if only for others to have a bigger target to aim at. If we use "believe" instead of "know", then "know" is spare and "believe" has to do the work of two words. We need both, with one word suggesting a greater degree of assuredness than the other. There is a grey area between certainty and doubt where either word might do. My approach has been to assume that (virtually) no knowledge is certain, but that there is a difference between claiming to know and claiming to be certain - this seems to be the root of the current dispute; ie. I'm not certain my kids are in the garden, so (allegedly) I don't know they are. But, as you point out, as I'm certain of precious little I could thereby claim to know next to nothing.

On a slight tangent, ... I've tried an infinite-valued logic - assigning a truth-value between 0 and 1 to any statement, rather than the usual bi-valued logic. In both schemes 0 implies falsehood (or certainty that X is false) and 1 implies truth (or certainty that X is true). Values in between imply degrees of assuredness - probabilities of truth - and the values would be assigned according to the odds one would be willing to bet on one's being correct (assuming



there were some infallible arbiter who knows the answers !). The motivation behind this was to try to determine the probability of a world-view. Let us suppose that a world view is composed of a set of irreducible propositions $\{p_i\}$ enumerated by the index set I & let each of these propositions have probability (truth value) $P(p_i)$. Then, the probability of the world view is (or is closely related to) the product, over I , of these probabilities, ie. $\prod_{i \in I} (P(p_i))$. Or so I contend ! Nice idea, and if it worked would help decide rationally between different world-views (eg. theistic & atheistic). It does give a good reason for accepting the principle of Occam's razor, moreover, as the more probabilities we multiply together, the smaller the resultant product. Unfortunately, it is difficult to assign probabilities.

Interestingly (and please excuse this tangent on a tangent !) there's an article by Rosanna Keefe of Jesus College Cambridge in this quarter's *Mind* (Vol. 107, No. 427, July 1998) entitled *Vagueness by Numbers*. This article examines attempts to capture the concept of vagueness by assigning numerical values to vague predicates (such as "is tall" or "is red") where 1 is assigned to definitely tall people (say) and 0 to definitely short people, with those of middle height assigned intermediate values. The article, fairly in my view, disposes of such theories (which I believe are even flakier than my own !) on the grounds that the values cannot in practise be assigned.

Finally, I look forward to your days of techno-competence, if only so that it'll reduce the risk of my garbling what you have to say !

Theo

10th June 1998

Albert Dean

COMMENTS AND RESPONSES OF THE VARIOUS KIND

Theo Todman - Editing; C92/8 : Optional Activity Theory says the volunteer can do the work the way they want. In this case that provides the option of the final word, be it sometimes the null word. But, is it necessarily the case the final word is the final word one wishes to use. Does Free Will Theory not mean that in many cases circumstance will oblige one knowingly or unknowingly into using some other final word.

John Stubbings - Art; C92/9 : We have the dilettante, the bodger, the crafter, and the artist. In succession they produce what;

1. fails to serve,
2. just serves,
3. serves in a convenient way,
4. serves in a convenient way and additionally causes attitude.



So, art begins where deliberate provocation towards attitude is introduced. But that point must be before seeking to bring out a particular attitude occurs, so, surely, the latter operation must be a special case of art. And only in such a special case would communication then be implicit. I must admit though, for the earlier stage I can think of only a few very simple examples of intentional non-communicative art; a burst of random noise, the ink blot, and a pile of stones. See Humour below for accidental art.

Michael Nisbet - Humour; C92/11 : Try the above on art for the case of one who can not set out information, one who can but it comes as a bit of a jumble, the script writer who can at least present the details efficiently, and the artist who by presenting the story with style and pace brings out the attitude. Intentional humour seems to be a special case of intentional art. Presumably we insert the missing part of communication in accidental humour, in the same way we do when developing an attitude to a thunder storm.

Anthony Owens - Cuckoos; C92/12 : Einstein had someone else do some of the mathematics of his theories because he found some equations too difficult to set up himself. Branches of mathematics are special cases of mathematics, and mathematics is a special case of logic, and logic is a special case of philosophy, and philosophy is a special case of thinking, and thinking is a special case of something bumbling about in the background of the mind. All these things have their full range of implements, from bulldozers to tweezers. Few need ever master the bulldozer, practically everyone must master the tweezers. Almost everything is done by repeated use of the tweezers. Note: Space, so vast nothing be small enough to fit outside it.

Valerie Ransford - Socrates; C92/15 : Sometimes life or death look like the final game. If Shakespeare or Spielberg had turned up to run him through his emotions with some real thumpers he would have happily logicked his way into paying the fine to be around for more.

John Neary - Mosquitoes; C92/17 : There are 3,000 species spread between the poles. They like damp areas for breeding; soggy tundra, coastlines, lakes and pond shores. The females like sticky fluids so are much more likely to feed on blood and spread infection than the males which prefer more watery fluids such as fruit juices. The females can work along a scent trail for several kilometres at night to find a sleeping human. My cousin's great great great uncle died in Rio de Janeiro harbour in 1852 from Yellow Fever given him by a local mosquito. They will survive until there is no water, as long as the diseases they transmit do not turn on them, which they never will.

John Neary - Epistemology; C92/18 : (1) Test your answer against the question of how do we know when the body is shut down or active. (2 & 3) These examples that turn up in books have usually been cobbled up on the basis that the model person is a gullible idiot who might do or say anything.



The correct approach is to chuck away four billion years of survival experience and give the examiners whatever answers they want. Give the guard dogs a pork chop and they will happily let you go on to rob the world.

Graham Dare - Does The End ...; C92/20 : There is certainly no real case for criticism of humanity before the dawn of the true age of enlightenment, which one can roughly place in the late 18th Century. However, that enlightenment was pretty rough and ready so it would also be unwise to be all that critical of humanity between then and the introduction of reasoned education around 1900. And even with that, criticism for the following twenty five years or so would be on rather shaky ground because it wasn't until about 1925 that the youngsters of 1900 reached positions of authority in their careers. There is some case for some criticism of most western civilisations and Japan from then on. For much the same educational and career timescaling reasons, and because of some global politics, it is only about now that we can start to justify some criticism of some of the rest of the world. Incidental points: Napoleonic losses set the precedent for WWI losses. I can assure you the losses of WWI were justified on the grounds of very much more complex and important issues than whether the line would be moved forward a yard or two.

Rick Street - Monkeys; C92/22 : Over a few days, by my making a noise to a guinea pig like the sound it made when chewing grass, the guinea pig learned to chatter its teeth back at me to show that it wanted more grass. At a guess guinea pigs could probably manage about ten sentence representational words, providing one is willing to work in their language and chatter about what interests them.

Alan Carr - Democracy; C92/26 : The operational difficulties you report are caused by defective People. Switch off the Democracy and refer to the Operation, Maintenance, Repair & Test Manual for Democracies Type I. Perform the tests detailed in the Manual and from its included Diagnostic Chart determine the People affected and the degree of their defectiveness. According to what you find,

1. reprogram affected People,
2. change the Brains in affected People,
3. remove and return affected People to your local Workshop for rebuild, salvage or environmentally safe disposal.

As necessary draw fresh Memories, Brains and People from Stores, program and fit them. Switch on the Democracy and repeat the tests detailed in the Manual. If the Democracy passes all the prescribed tests then, and only then press the Activate button set in its bottom.

Norman Mackie - Life; C92/27-29 : I am inclined to the view that life comes from before the beginning of the local universe.



Stef Gula - Free Will; C92/30 : Playing safe until you know what is going on is a good principle. In defence one would avoid stationing forces where they could be surprised and set out guards to warn of something approaching. And in attack much the same, but with the emphasis more on avoiding obvious traps and using scouts to find the less obvious ones. These are all methods by which command seeks to maintain its capability to make decisions and set the outcome of those decisions into motion. Notice this capability is additional to that necessary to do the other things above and is essential for command to function as command rather than just as a registry of observations. There are other arguments that for command to function properly it must also have all relevant information and controls, the capability to accurately process and direct, and it must also have appropriate forces it can set to carry out tasks. Thus, free will is free when it is concerned only with matters individually and collectively complete and small, within what it alone can deal with and entirely control using whatever amount of power it will have available when action is desired. One might also want to say that command is usually working towards an objective and, depending upon the level, command might set that objective or have the objective set for it. I add that part because my own view is that when we think we have arrived at what we want by exercising our free will, what in fact has happened is that we set or were set an objective we happen to like and managed to reach it. And free will had nothing much to do with our setting off and achieving that objective at all, no more than infinity has anything much to do with measuring the width of this page. Free will and infinity are simply declared terminals, so far off it doesn't matter where they are because we will never reach them nor need to. Dealing with restrictions we do not like and avoiding falling into the null point are probably more important, and the health and safety committee rules in regard to that are what I started with above. After a while in the clearing you will begin to wonder what is in the trees.

David Taylor - Biochemistry; C92/32 : In a recent documentary a specialist in the field said science, in discovery and analysis, presently understands the purpose of only about 2% of what it has so far found in biochemistry. I offer that only to give the figure in case it has not been mentioned.

Malcolm Burn - Is/Ought; C92/35 : The bit about free will above might be interesting.

.....

1. Evil is that which you can do. Killing is evil. Therefore you can kill.
2. Breaking the law is that which you can do. Killing is breaking the law. Therefore you can kill.
3. Doing what all else say you should not do is that which you can do. Killing is doing that which all else say you should not do. Therefore you can kill.
4. Ought we say "might be" rather than "is" ?
5. Are evil, a breakage of the law, and what all else say you should not do, all exact equivalents ?
6. Are the three acts of doing equivalents ?



7. Are the intents associated with the three acts of doing equivalents?
8. To judge is to take into account what is done, the way it is done, and the reason it is done.
9. A judge sets the ought in its proper position between must and must not.
10. If there are two or three oughts is it implicit that in all cases there need be two or three judges, or one judge who makes two or three judgements.
11. What sort of two or three branch phasor structure should one use to assess the overall penalty to be imposed ?
12. Should we introduce a double or triple penalty system ? Plays havoc with the language doesn't it. And a job for Theo.
13. Is checkmating a rule of chess or an option of chess strategy ?

Vijai Parhar - Endless Replies; C92/36 : On *Endless*. It is said that in the beginning the chicken or the egg came first. In the end will the question or the answer come last. On *bees*. I have thought hard about this and think the initial question must be on whether the bee begins in sin. It has been said that only a creature which has sensed sin and risen to sense purity can sense the pain in the purity of beauty, and hence fully appreciate beauty.

Theo Todman - Scrolls; C92/38 : I said the scrolls sit in a minefield of contention. Taking your points in order Theo :-

1. I don't think I actually ruled out pre-1991 books on the subject, but perhaps that got lost in my recommendation to also look at works from after that date to pick up lots of things not mentioned before then.
2. On *Roland de Vaux*. Well, he seems to have been the one who created and kept going for forty years or so the idea Qumran should be viewed as something like a medieval monastery in form and function. And several people whom I can only assume to be authorities are said in the last ten years to have pointed out glaring religious bias in his interpretations and called for a complete review of his work for that very reason. Their criticism does not seem directed at all at his archaeology, they seem to regard his descriptions of what was found to be well done. But they do seem to question almost all his interpretations of what was found. And it is in that area, the one of presenting interpretations to those who are not expert, that surely there is the greatest responsibility on the specialist to give as complete a picture as possible. In that regard one might ask to whom was De Vaux addressing his works, if only to other specialists then certainly he was at liberty to set out whatever interpretations he wanted, on the basis of equals to equals. Meaning that authors do not necessarily have to present all the truth and nothing but all the truth in order to be honest writers. But, if he wrote for the interested world in general, then perhaps he did not set things out properly, perhaps he should have taken a broader view and not written out other interpretations he knew were being set forth but did not agree with. Hence, the fact you have books which look all right does not necessarily mean they are. Taking an



example of the problem from another place. There are many excellent write ups of Pompeii and I doubt if either of us would question the correctness of the actual descriptions of the finds in the more serious ones, indeed we probably wouldn't find much cause for criticism of the descriptions in more or less any work on Pompeii. But, what do we have with Pompeii, well, only that recently a volcanologist seems to have demolished a great deal of the historically "correct" interpretations of those descriptions. So much so that every book and film on Pompeii which does not mention pyroplastic flow must now be treated with extreme caution in regard to whatever it might say about what happened there. Except, curiously, Pliny the Younger's account. His previously inexplicably partially "incorrect" description of the eruption as he noted it from across the bay, now, after two thousand years and a volcanologist's efforts, seems to be entirely "correct" in every detail. Isn't that strange. And doesn't it leave us with a huge library of suspect venerable works. With your third comment on sects. Well, tricky, but only because you stuck in a qualifying "that can be" and don't say which sect, leaving me neatly in the starting gate with no idea which way to run.

3. On *Blitzkrieg*. A strange usage of the term for describing a fifty year campaign plan I agree, but I did think on it and I came to the conclusion that for most people it would probably carry my meaning adequately, it goes with ideas of planned assault, technological warfare, timetables and so forth, which all seem within the war scroll. Non-snidely by the way, should you use snide as it means pretended.
4. On the *Damascus issue*. The question is really whether it is true that in places the writers of the scrolls called Qumran by the name Damascus. If that is true then the trip to Syria might be the forced version. There is no way I can answer you on the point though as I have no idea as to which interpretations are right and which are wrong. All I can go on is things like someone said no one argues that Qumran was not called Damascus. From that base writers launch off into all the sorts of standard history revisions I indicated. But I will happily go along with you about Paul setting out more than just some of the message, I certainly failed to show that. To a considerable extent likewise on the 1910 "Damascus Document" find you noted. It was so "included in" in what I read of the Qumran finds that I didn't notice to render its particular story properly. But then I am not sure you did it justice in your note either. As I understand it the "Damascus Document" of c.1910 was not one of the Dead Sea Scrolls but two generated documents, which today we might call virtual documents, worked out backwards from what seemed to be fragments of two slightly different 900AD dated documents found in Cairo in 1896, which fragments were worn out Synagogue working copies of earlier lost copies of unknown date. At the time no one knew which of these virtual documents, if either, might prove to be a perfect copy presenting from an assumed single original, especially as nothing was found to fill in the central part of the texts. It turned out that numerous pieces of the real Damascus Document turned up at Qumran, they dated from around two thousand



years ago and addressed then current matters to prove that. It now seems these pieces of the original text pretty much confirm what had been largely supposed around 1910. But it took a long time to find that out because de Vaux's team didn't publish them and up until at least as late as 1989 flatly and rudely rejected any other scholar's request to see them. So, what we have seems to be a two thousand year old original and a couple of one thousand year old copies, and infilled translations and opinions from one hundred years ago and from today, which say that in those documents Qumran is called Damascus, with the implications already mentioned. Logically, to preserve free will, a rapid retreat from the scrolls and the acts is the best option because it is obvious neither need then decide what is done next. But the trouble is we are not logical creatures, and the next issue might show retreat is not yet possible because it is not yet possible to disengage.

Albert : In general, I haven't got much to say on your long contribution above - you did give me the option to cut bits of it, but we have space this time & I see no reason to wield the knife. The discussion on Qumran has no real place in this newsletter as we're not really raising philosophical issues. So, unless some other members want to take it up, we must let the subject die, interesting though it is. I did appreciate your responses to John Stubbings and Alan Carr, but (and maybe I'm thick), failed to see the point of some of your other remarks. Maybe the respective authors you're engaging with will better connect with your chain of thought. I do have a couple of points to raise, though.....

Firstly, I think your point 13 in response to Malcolm Burn is valid - in chess, the "rule" to checkmate if possible is of a different sort to the rules on how to move the pieces. This rule gives the point of the game, the others only the mechanics. There is an unwritten rule in most games - "you must want to win and not want to lose". The checkmate rule tells you how to do it. Games such as social bridge need to be played for money, else people don't mind losing & the game degenerates into a farce.

Secondly, on words ... back to blitzkrieg ! The whole original idea behind Hitler's blitzkrieg - "lightening war" - was to do away with the stodgy trench warfare of WW1. The idea was to get things over with quickly. I dare say it always had overtones of "irresistible force" and "carefully planned tactics" - which was why it was 'lightening'. I maintain that long campaigns are not blitzkriegs, though they may use blitzkrieg to force a tactical advantage. 'Snide' was evidently a 'new word' in 1964, since it's consigned to the *Supplement* of my copy of *Chambers Dictionary*, which gives, "sham : counterfeit : base : mean : dishonest : derogatory in an insinuating way : showing malice." No doubt it's moved on a bit since then, and has become softer. Picking someone up on their vocabulary (a dangerous sport as it leads to retaliation as we've seen !) can be understood as *derogatory in an insinuating way* (and even as *showing malice*), so my use of snide is valid. But, I wanted to avoid the harshness of such an understanding by pre-empting such a misinterpretation by my very use of the word "snide", which is habitually used tongue in cheek. Evidently without success. And who cares ? Still, philosophy is mainly to do with words, and the muddles they get us into.

Theo



5th June 1998

Anthony Owens

ART, NEEDLES, AND MONKEYS

Harking back to a comment in **C90 (page 14)**, **John Stubbings** mentions cave paintings. These have been variously interpreted as evidence of creative urges; ritual magic; or religious worship. An argument against creative urges was put forward by Joseph Campbell in '*The Masks of God, vol. 1, Primitive Mythology*', when he asks why anyone should crawl "*on his belly through a tube forty or fifty yards long to relieve a creative urge*". He refers specifically to the painting of the "*Sorcerer of Trois Freres*", a human like figure apparently wearing an animal head, in a particularly inaccessible part of a cave near Lascaux. Campbell assumes the artist was there voluntarily: but what if he had been incarcerated there for some ancient misdemeanour, or in hiding?

Taking advantage of the fact that no-one really knows why such paintings were created, can I suggest that they might have been part of the local university. Hunting was a matter of life or death; and there was no nearby hospital if you got it wrong. It would presumably be vital to be able to recognise the various animals and to hone your technique with diagrams rather than with two tons of bovine muscle bearing down on you. Perhaps the "*Sorcerer of Trois Freres*" was the tutor, rather than shaman or god; and the artist had failed his finals, during which the tutor dressed as a deer or ox so that the students could demonstrate their newly acquired skills in a role play exercise. Features of such paintings are their apparent haphazard fashion and the fact that the animals are drawn with more accuracy than the humans. The caves were in use over some twenty thousand years. It's hardly a mystery if they're 'exercise books' in something of a jumble, and wouldn't it make sense if the animals they were learning about were drawn with more accuracy than the humans, about whom they already knew. Where simple hand-prints occur these could be the equivalent of doodling in the margins.

What has all this got to do with Art : apart from my having used it as an excuse to jump on a hobby horse ? Well, I could ask, "Are cave paintings Art?" Undoubtedly, because nowadays they have no purpose. Something which has purpose is an artefact. What we have been discussing is whether they were Art when they were painted (you didn't know that, did you?). Of course, something which has purpose can be Art as well. The Art content is usually in inverse proportion to its amount of usefulness, yet we often place a higher value on it. This helps to answer **John Stubbings** question in **C91 (p.10)**. Great Art is always 100% useless and can be identified the moment some nutter pays six million for it.

The Eye of a Needle: I cannot agree with **Graham Dare (C91/20)** that religion was the third use of man's brain. Doesn't the Bible itself say that



Adam and Eve knew God and took instructions from Him, even though they disobeyed them.

Other decisions have to do with human self-preservation; or the provision of a sufficient surplus of food, wealth, or land to serve as insurance for future human self-preservation. Perhaps the highly subjective point at which this surplus becomes greed is the point at which the end can no longer justify the means. If we assume that a person's end is to share heaven in the presence of God then this will represent an extremely low point: a point at which someone might well give his entire wealth to a dying beggar; or a point at which camels could pass through the eye of a needle.

Monkey Business : I don't think that **Rick Street (C91/22)** gives sufficient weight to Natural Selection. Picking out each other's fleas is beneficial to all. I don't know whether this behaviour comes from their genes or from copying their mum; copying itself being a useful trait, and almost certainly inherited. The way is open for a monkey to have a go at picking fleas off other animals; but as soon as it tried this on a lion its breeding potential might become limited. Self-awareness is always an unnecessary assumption. I recently caught sight of the top of my head in a mirror. Perceiving a large bald patch my first reaction was, "Who the hell's that?". So you see you can't be all that sure about me !

Anthony : Not much to comment on this time. Evidently, speculation is king in the kingdom of cave painting, where so little is known ! I take your point about the eyes of needles. Without a heavenly (and infinite) rewards structure, much of true Christian altruism becomes too onerous, and a more "selfish" game-theoretic structure of ethics seems more appropriate. This doesn't rule out altruism altogether because of the need to preserve societies for the mutual benefit of their members, apportion jobs efficiently, avoid rebellions etc.

Theo

12th June 1998

Stef Gula

COMMENTS ON C92

Back to taking cheap pot shots at me elders and betters this outing - as ever points arising from last issue (**C92**) first.

Rick (C92/25.2) : " . . . And BAT is also one species ! ?

Not unless "species" has been drastically re-defined recently it ain't. If your mastery of statistics matches your apparent grasp of simple biological terms maybe you ought to get someone to re-do that " *statistical evaluation* ..." of yours for you. Sorry, but there you were being all gloatingly smug (if for all the



"wrong" reasons) and you go and spoil it with a basic factual error. I'm disappointed Rick, really I am.

Anyways I reckon we've about played out the "bats 'n' stats" thingy now. So unless you're one of those annoying twerps who takes being offered the courtesy of "having the last word" as a sign of victory by default I defer to your authority as to what you meant (as opposed to what you seemed to be saying) and "leave it with you" (if'n y' want it).

Theo (C92/3) : SIG on the Web ?

Great idea. Unless you don't have access to the Web that is. Could this be where two-tier membership begins ? I think David Taylor has already made a similar point somewhere, so 'nuff said on this one.

Incidentally I had the "comic poet of Colophon" ("One God is All") fair in mind last outing.

John Neary (and Theo; C92/18-19) : I don't know if this is relevant or helpful (given my track record it probably isn't) but as a "lucid dreamer" I found your joint comments on dreaming vs being awake especially interesting, so, if I may, a couple of points ...

In answer to Theo's question as to whether we "...ever know we're *dreaming while we're dreaming, or only once we've woken up...*" my own experience is that I am aware that I'm dreaming, while I'm dreaming - but, of course, by the time I've woken up that "knowledge" has become a memory, and thus retrospective - part of the dream as it were.

I'm vaguely suspicious - for no good reason I hasten to add - of John's definition as per part 1 of his missive. Perhaps it works best as a general rule, for those who aren't aware of when they're dreaming ?

My own test is to see if I have god-like powers - full wakefulness being like unto Kryptonite in this respect. It's not 100% reliable, but if I can't "change the script" then either I'm awake or I've temporarily lost control of my own dreamscape and am trapped in a somewhat dreary nightmare. (Which, thinking on it, seems itself a fair description of being awake.)

Anthony Owens (C92/13) : Picture if you will a sadly not hypothetical enough example. A twelve year old becomes pregnant as a result of a brutal gang rape. And you'd be the one to tell her that as well as everything else she must also endure the risks and rigours of carrying the pregnancy to term ? For the sake of something which might or might not qualify as a human life at that point?

Perhaps you should find something else to be "provocative" about - as is you just seem to be digging an ever deeper hole.



Nice idea about a "licence to populate" though. Not sure why "being married" should be such an "obvious" qualifying criteria however.

Norman Mackie (C92/28.2) : “ *What is so unique and distinct about human life that the power which creates and regulates it is excluded from the laws of Nature, or rather our limited understanding of them ? . . .* ”

Nothing whatsoever, Norman. Strange question. Still, glad to be of service.

And to round off, a little idle musing

Now, let's see if I have this straight.

Before some fifteen or twenty billion years ago there was nothing. Not even really a "before" as "time" didn't "exist" "yet".

Then existence just sort of happened out of somewhere less than nowhere.

Since then the Universe has grown from rather smaller than an atom to something of the order of at least a trillion light years, forming complex structures within itself along the way. All for no good discernible reason.

And the subtle irony is that none of it may "really" be "real". Summing up all the positives and negatives, and taking into account wherever the Universe came from and wherever it's supposedly going, gives a grand total of zero.

The greatest joke of the Cosmic Liar - the Universe ain't there and never has been. Nor us. But, of course, being equally non-existent, we're as (un-) "real" as the rest - thus, relatively speaking, "real".

So, in what sense are scientific "Creation Myths" an "improvement" on religious ones ?

"Divinity" and "Reality". Same shit different boxes.

Stef Gula

Stef : The gang rape issue is a complex one that, not being involved, we do well not to pontificate on. I agree that, if we get away from the mystical aspect of human life being inviolate at all costs and at all stages of development, we end up weighing the good / harm done to the girl and foetus. If we abort early enough, I can't see how we harm the foetus as it isn't sentient. We might harm the girl even so, depending on what her beliefs are. "Doing what's best for her" - whether to abort or not - is another rape if her own decision is not sought. But, if it does come down to her decision, as it would for an adult, isn't that another burden too difficult for her to bear ? A difficult issue, very case-dependent, I suspect. Any role



for the girl's parents in all this; after all, her belief-structure may still owe a lot to them at that age ?

Incidentally, I've just made the following dangerous posting (20:00, 24/7) to the *Unofficial Mensa List*. A thread on the issue of "what is life" and the consequences for abortion has just started :-

Some dangerous thoughts for you

Isn't the attempt to define "life" simply a throw-back to the old vitalist days, when there was supposed to be some extra essence - a life force - that divided animate from inanimate matter. If there is no such thing, then are we chasing after a definition of something that does not exist ?

Does the distinction not turn on the difference between conscious & unconscious organisms ? This is maybe even harder to pin down than the old definition of life, given that we can't get inside the head of other humans, never mind other organisms - but we proceed along the lines of analogy with a layer of common-sense added to take account of possibilities or limits imposed by neurological complexity or simplicity and adding a bit of "benefit of the doubt" lest we commit atrocities ?

Getting back to abortion, for me the critical time for the foetus would be when it's aware of what's happening to it. Viability has nothing to do with it - babies aren't particularly viable on their own in any case, and what is viable varies with the amount of money & technology we have to throw at it. Who knows, one day we may have Brave New World style artificial placentas & nutrient soups with viability pushed back to conception - this is only a technological problem, not one of principle. Whether the foetus is "alive" has nothing to do with it, nor, at this stage does potentiality - this only arises when an entity becomes self-aware. Once the foetus is aware (not necessarily aware of self), its needs and fears need to be taken into account, though they don't necessarily override those of the mother.

In case I'm misunderstood, I'm not advocating lack of concern for living but unconscious entities - ie. ruling out the plant kingdom as worthless. Nothing has a right to exist - it's a big struggle for existence after all - but that doesn't mean the end of conservation. The world would be a poorer place for us (humans) with half the biosphere missing. We can confer rights, insofar as this is within our power, but these are not natural rights.

Nor am I advocating all manner of enormities that might be deducible from filling in the gaps in a complex position not fully fleshed out above.

Theo Todman
SIGSec, Philosophical Discussion Group
SIGSec, Physics SIG



.... new members welcome !

Stef : getting back to your contribution above ... I don't go along with you at all with your "creation myth" idea. I'm not saying that the current model is correct, but if it is proved incorrect it will be because certain quantitative predictions persistently come out wrong, not because some of the concepts seem extraordinary to the likes of you or me.

Theo

16th June 1998

Alan Carr

Theo,

Alan here again. It didn't dawn on me to send one letter with both replies on it. In hindsight it was nonsensical to hold back on the Northern Ireland article. It isn't going to create peace is it, but anyhow !

A NORTHERN IRELAND SOLUTION : A DIFFERENT APPROACH

The people of Northern Ireland, represented by their politicians, are at present trying to reach a negotiated agreement which should, as we have been told, bring peace to this troubled land. Both governments' spin-doctors have led us to believe that the troubles can be solved by talks between both sections of Northern Ireland society: Catholic / Nationalist and Protestant / Unionist. But all sides are watching and waiting for their collapse. The real problem, it could be argued, is one of a lack of common identity between the two opposing groups. Northern Ireland's society is polarised between two poles: "Britishness" and "Irishness". This polarity is focused in to the Identity of both sections, Catholic / Nationalist and Protestant / Unionist. The tragedy of this situation is that the psychopathic mass killer and the pacifist politician both hold and cherish the same heritage and identity and this is the core of the problem in Northern Ireland. The mind-set is promoted on both sides by the politicians who in the current talks are not talking about peace but about what happens to Northern Ireland territorially, with peace supposed to be a by-product of the agreement reached. The promotion of this "us vs them" attitude, polarising both communities, solidifies their strength at the talks process.

Accepting the above commentary, the core problem in Northern Ireland can be identified as having two parts. Firstly, the lack of common identity with each community polarised into the British or Irish mind-set. Secondly, that the violence is mainly against innocent civilians from both communities and the people do not identify with the "innocent civilians" as strongly as they do with their "heritage and beliefs" which is also shared by those who commit the atrocities against the innocent civilians. For peace to occur in Northern



Ireland, there needs to be an evolution of morality and ideals towards non-violence and more importantly intolerance towards violence and those who commit those acts. What is being proposed here is that if the silent majority from both communities were to embrace each other and create a new Ulster, a new identity, an independent society, Northern Ireland would have its best chance for peace. This would be based on a voluntary sacrifice of the "mind-set" which both communities have. But this new identity would be opposed by the established forces. Both governments, the paramilitary groups and a majority of the political parties, have promoted the mind-set as it is the basis of their power but a Northern Ireland society independent of both Britain and Ireland, could be the only way for peace to flourish.

The formation of Northern Ireland society in the entire twentieth century has been based on the "us vs them" mind-set and it needs to be recognised that the effort each individual would need to change is enormous. The religious institutions, while making calls for tolerance and understanding, have no intention of sacrificing any part of their identity, which might dilute their power; and so are a hindrance to peace. While not being a major hindrance, their intransigence needs to be recognised. For Northern Ireland to find peace, all communities must be willing to shed their identity in order to form a new one in a new Ulster.

Who, one could ask, would stand up to lead us in to a new Ulster? A brief examination of the politicians on both sides would reveal a deep seam of anger and hostility. This needs to be left behind if peace is to be found. However if one has had friends or relatives assassinated by paramilitary or even military, then the anger and hatred from this need to be dealt with. Politicians calling for paramilitary disarmament are well justified but they have to disarm their anger also.

An issue of contention for years has been the role of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Acceptable to the Unionists but not the Nationalists, this issue could be resolved in the context of evolving towards a new Ulster. The police force in Northern Ireland should be remoulded into a fairer balanced institution with each community proportionally represented in the RUC. Each community could be policed by members of its own but this would have to evolve to where each officer's identity was irrelevant and justice was non-discriminatory. A remoulded RUC would have to earn the respect of all citizens in order to take back the power given to paramilitaries. The RUC would have to have the backbone to stand up to both communities simultaneously. For instance if there was a stand-off in Drumcree this year and, say, the Garvahy residents are beaten off the street then the Orange Order should suffer a similar fate. It could be argued that a member of the GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association, Ed] or the Orange Order shouldn't be admitted to the RUC. But perhaps a GAA-playing member of the Orange Order might be allowed to join the RUC ! [Note : Alan provided the following background to explain this piece of Irish wit Ed. : "the GAA holds a monopoly over all the native Irish sports (hurling, Gaelic football, handball etc. It could be considered a sporting Orange Order for the nationalist



community. Members of the RUC are not permitted to join"]. But again, Northern Ireland would need to evolve to where persons' political and religious affiliations were their own beliefs. Of course, all institutions would have to undergo a similar metamorphosis, breaking the bonds of sectarianism.

The main failing of this new approach is that the power-brokers in Northern Ireland, Dublin and London wouldn't allow this situation to flourish as it would mean that they would have to let go their power and accept that their roles and identities would have to change, that is if peace was the goal ! The main failing of the current process is that those who are hoping for peace are looking for it in the current talks, which are isolated from Northern Ireland society, and not in their own hearts, homes and communities.

That's it Theo. I hope to get back to you with more soon.

Alan Carr

Alan : I have to ask myself, important though these issues are, what have they to do with philosophy ? You do touch on the issues of how important cultural or national identity is. Do you think these should be such as we identify with or sign up for, or things that we can observe or enjoy from the outside. Eg. can we enjoy the Welsh (say) cultural heritage without Welshness being what makes us us, and without which we are nothing ?

On your specific proposal, and I admit you understand the situation better than I do, why does your proposal rely on a patched-up Ulster - which does seem to be what's on the table at the moment in any case, or am I missing something subtle ? Excuse my ignorance, but isn't Ulster in its 6-county rather than 9-county form a fabrication of partition ? If we're going to do away with traditions, why not go for a united Ireland and have done with it ? If not, why not a more radical partition, involving population movements as has been the case in India / Pakistan or the Balkans ? Otherwise we're forever stuck with tribalism as in many inappropriately partitioned African countries.

Theo

15th June 1998

Sheila Blanchard

KILLING AND MURDER (C92/13)

May I say that I did not intend my remark about abortion not being murder if it was legal for publication ? I gave Theo permission to quote from my letter to him, but I didn't expect him to use that bit as I'd said I didn't want to discuss abortion. I think it is too serious a topic to be used for provocation, and I



would not attempt to discuss it now because my knowledge is probably out of date. I may return to it later after more research and thought.

However I was taught that in philosophy it was important to define one's terms ; and I don't believe that means rewriting the dictionary. Anthony now says that he believes the state commits murder. The same definition applies, if it is not unlawful it is not murder. In addition I think there may be a case for arguing that murders are committed by human beings, not by abstract entities like the state; but I don't feel inclined to pursue that just now.

So perhaps I may return to what I meant to comment on in the first place, which is when, if ever, we might be justified in killing a human being. I think the best way to tackle this is to consider in what circumstances, within our own experience or hearsay knowledge, killing human beings has been considered justified in the past, and analyse the reasons.

It doesn't seem all that long ago that capital punishment for murder - death by hanging - was taken for granted in this country. The justification was threefold:

- i) As punishment for the crime;
- ii) To prevent the criminal killing someone else;
- iii) To deter others from committing similar crimes.

The main objections to capital punishment were:

- i) It was an inhumane and cruel death;
- ii) That it forced someone else, the executioner, to become a killer;
- iii) That the executed person might not have been guilty after all.

Another obvious example of killing that was considered justified happened during the war. There was no doubt that killing by the armed forces in war-time was legal; and most people thought it was justified because:

- i) It was in self-defence;
- ii) It was necessary to prevent the conquest and enslavement of everyone in the country;
- iii) It was hoped that it would put a stop to suffering in countries which had already been conquered, and prevent others being attacked.

In spite of this some people still believed that killing human beings was wrong. The strength of their feeling was recognised by allowing them to register as conscientious objectors. Those who had been brought up in pacifist traditions had to make a choice, knowing that if they stuck to their principles they would probably be called cowards and treated with contempt.

When the time came for me to stand up and be counted I had already chosen (I thought) a career in farming, so I joined the Women's Land Army. I think the war was over by then, anyway. and I probably gave better service to the



country and humanity in general by milking cows than I would have done by learning to operate a searchlight or something; but I always felt a nagging suspicion of guilt that I'd evaded the issue and taken the easy way out. I found out later that this feeling seemed to be common also to many people who hadn't been allowed to join the armed forces because their normal jobs were more important to the war effort. It was not so much that they had avoided the danger - nothing could guarantee safety from off-course bombers unloading their bombs at random - but that by keeping themselves free from sin they had avoided their share of the communal guilt.

Not everyone took it as seriously as that, but for a good many people in those days, to kill or not to kill (or be associated with killing) became a serious choice in real life, not just a romantic spy-story speculation.

It is much more unusual for people to be forced to make such a choice now. Though Anthony may like to consider whether the state misleads people by advertising joining the army as a way of learning a trade, seeing the world, enjoying comradeship etc., while ignoring that the main purpose of army training is to teach people to kill human beings. But I think most people don't need to have that explained.

One incident which was widely reported some years ago shows that it is possible to be confronted with a difficult choice unexpectedly, perhaps even now. A man was walking along a quiet country road when he found a crashed vehicle. The driver was alive and conscious but trapped in such a way that the walker couldn't pull him out. The vehicle was starting to burn and the driver begged to be killed to save him from the agony. The driver was an ex-commando so was trained to kill with his bare hands and did what he was asked to do, before hurrying away to find a phone. Was he right or wrong?

I think the court decided that the walker could not be convicted of murder or manslaughter because there was no proof that the victim was dead and not just unconscious before the fire finished him off. But the walker believed he had killed a human being and that he had made the best decision he could at the time.

What these examples all illustrate, I think, is that sometimes people may have to make an individual moral judgement about whether to kill a human being. If there can be a general rule applicable to all circumstances, I suggest that it might be something like: "Killing of human beings can only be justified if it prevents more suffering than it causes." I don't know whether it's necessary to add that the killing should be as humane as possible, or whether that is implicit in the phrase as it stands.

I'm aware that I'm probably only scratching the surface of what could be said, but I regard it as a starting-off point and present it, tentatively, for your consideration.



Sheila Blanchard

Sheila : Oops - must have lost the plot slightly. Apologies for printing what I shouldn't have !

As a general aside (not directed at Sheila) might I just apologise to you all for not, in general, corresponding with you individually over your *Commensal* submissions. I'm just too busy at the moment (and, knowing me, will continue to be so until I retire ... so you've only got another 10 - 20 years to wait for the personal touch !). So, if you can phrase things so that they can be imported into *Commensal* that would help me a lot.

Back to Sheila : you raised some interesting issues & I'll leave the creative bit of building on what you've said to others. There were a couple of points you made that I thought were a bit odd, however.

Firstly, surely your point that "if it is not illegal it is not murder" is a disastrous notion ? Wasn't this the Nazi's defence in the light of the charge of genocide at Nuremberg and the various de-Nazification courts ? The Nazi genocide was state-approved, indeed state-driven, (as were those in Stalinist Russia, Maoist China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, ... etc.). So, these state-approved mass-killings were not the paradigmatic mass-murders they're made out to be ? I can't imagine for a minute you mean this, but this is what your definition implies. That is, unless you're saying that national law is over-ridden by international law. This might be fine, but I don't think the international law was in place prior to Nuremberg (which led to some complaints that the victors were creating the law retrospectively to punish the vanquished, the major legal discomfort here being felt in the prosecution of military commanders). It is true that the state doesn't kill, but orders, encourages or allows its citizens to kill. But Nuremberg demonstrated that obeying the state is no defence where "crimes against humanity" are involved. Also, that those who are responsible for setting up the state to command such things are especially culpable. Whether killing is murder is governed by a higher authority than the law, though I don't know what that authority is (assuming it not to be divine). Whatever murder is, "taking the life of another for no good reason in cold blood and against their will" must be murder whether the state allows it or not; and no doubt numerous other killings fall into the category of murder whatever the State says.

With respect to capital punishment, isn't the main objection that to your point (iii) ? That is, that capital punishment doesn't deter ? This has been demonstrated empirically, but the logic behind it is that "professional" killers don't intend to get caught and "amateur" killers, who kill on the spur of the moment in a fit of passion, don't care about getting caught until it's too late. The only people deterred by capital punishment are those never likely to murder anyone - which is what gives deterrence its popular appeal to ordinary people - and it's this sort of person that occasionally ends up on the wrong end of a miscarriage of justice.

I think you're a bit harsh on the armed forces. It's like saying the purpose of police training is so policemen can whack people with their truncheons more efficiently. Often, the show of force is sufficient, which is what "peacekeeping" forces are all about. But, you're right that any show of force must be backed up with a willingness to use it if necessary.



Finally, I thought your definition of when killing human beings is justified was somewhat hair-raising and open to all sorts of abuse. As it stands, it'd allow a vigilante to empty a few hospices and exterminate a few million Ethiopians; or worse, depending on one's view of the quality of life in "this vale of tears".

Theo

7th July 1998

John Neary

COMMENTS ON COMMENSAL 92

Re : Art (C92/9). Is not **John Stubbings** perhaps confusing "an art" with "art"? I suppose then one could consider torture etc. as "an art" without offending the sensibilities. There is even an art in making a phone call.

Killing (C92/13); Until our society changes its attitude with respect to children and takes away the responsibility for them from the producers there will always be people who, for one reason or another, justified or not, will want to terminate a pregnancy. If on the other hand all children produced were the property of the state the problem would not arise; but then again who would want to live in a "1984" society ? As for compulsory sterilisation this is practised in China - on the men ! Once a man has fathered 2 children (I think) he is compulsorily sterilised by the State as a means of population control. The Western world condemns this as a deprivation of human rights. The problem seems to be that too many people want their rights without the attendant responsibility.

Apropos of that and crime and punishment I have often thought that crime is a refusal to accept the rules of society. Societies are formed for mutual benefit and protection and to gain those benefits one has to observe certain behaviour rules so that the other members of the society can also benefit. People who commit crimes are therefore not accepting the rules so perhaps there should be a place where they could be banished to so that they could form their own society and rules. Anyone know of a spare uninhabited planet? Australia was a failure simply because the authorities still tried to maintain their social rules instead of letting the transportees get on with it. I wonder what kind of place it would have turned out to be if they had.

Graham Dare (C92/20) : I think Graham is imputing far too much sophistication in his survey of history. As I see it man being curious probably tasted some flesh and decided he liked it. (In this I am reminded of Lamb's explanation for the existence of roast pork in "Elia"). As for wars with neighbours I think that it was far more likely that having been in a war there was all sorts of goodies lying around afterwards that he just decided to appropriate. With religion I think that maybe Graham has put the cart before



the horse. I feel that it is far more likely that Leaders wanted to do a bit of plundering and pillaging so they whipped up the enthusiasm of the army by appealing to religion. As for the World Wars, the reasons for them are far more complex than lebensraum. Economic and social factors played a very important part. In fact I seem to remember reading somewhere that a leading economist felt that when certain economic conditions prevailed war was inevitable. As for telling the truth always - a nice conceit but hardly workable unless you want to be a society of one. Surely diplomacy and even a little flattery are the lubricants that smooth the progress of society. Even Jesus was not above using a bit of diplomacy at times. He never did give a straight answer to the man who asked about paying Roman taxes but neatly evaded the trap that was set for him. Not a lie perhaps but surely an evasion. The Africans here have a nice way of avoiding conflicts. They tell a person what they think he wants to hear. Furthermore, is always telling the truth always morally justified ? Are there not occasions where to tell the full unmitigated truth would have such direful consequences that there is no way that truthfulness could be justified ?

Finally, what is truth? It has been argued more than once that truth is subjective and not absolute so that your truth and mine could be totally different. Religion is one place where that applies. What is a truth to a Christian is lies to a Muslim or a Jew. What is truth to a Catholic is not necessarily so to a Protestant.

Rick (C92/25) : When it comes to statistics I always refer to Mark Twain:- There's lies, damn lies, and bloody statistics!

John Neary

John : I expect your proposals on criminal disposal will feature at the *Mensa at Braziers* weekend in September !

Your "what is truth" question is interesting, if not original (!). I used to belong to a small, extreme (well, extremely small, any way !) Protestant sect called *The Bereans* (see Acts 17:10-11) that referred to its message as "This Truth". As a world-view (and it wasn't that wacky, else I wouldn't have gone along with it !) it was very unlikely to be true in any objective sense, else why did so few people believe it ? Actually, this was part of the fascination, being part of an exclusive "elect". Anyway, "Truth" seems to be used in two senses; one, an objective, truth-functional sense; the other as a term for a body of doctrine that its adherents hope to be true (if they knew or understood what it was they're supposed to believe - another muddling factor).

Theo



10th April 1998**Graham Dare****IS IT RIGHT TO EAT ANIMALS & THEIR PRODUCE ?**

We have evolved as a species to eat animals as well. The best proof of this is that if someone has a food allergy, and they go on a diet of Lamb and Pears, the allergy will always disappear. (Certainly it is thought that most food allergies are caused by the fact that we have not evolved, through natural selection, to be able to eat farmed / processed crops, and animals fed with natural products.)

We used to eat food we could gather and hunt for meat, and fish, from wild animals, but as we have become more civilised we have started to farm food. The main moral drawback is the farmed animals do not have a fighting chance of survival, and they may be fed on unnatural foods (although organic farming avoids this). The main moral improvement is that by eating farmed fish, and meat, we are not killing animals that would otherwise have survived, and one could argue that these animals would not have had a life at all had we not bred them.

The key issue is that one should not eat meat if one would not be prepared to slaughter the animal oneself. Country people, and many people from other lands, keep their own animals, and cut their throats when they need them for food, and the human race may not have survived if it had purely relied on fruit and vegetables.

With regard to animal products, the only valid reasons against these are; if they are non-organic and not fed on natural foods causing cancer, BSE, etc.; and / or if they are not free-range - eg. factory farmed.

Graham T. Dare

Graham : I've carried on publishing your homilies as you haven't asked me to stop, and they have the virtue of brevity & act as springboards for raising numerous fascinating issues. Above, you said something I strongly agreed with for once ! I share your view that domesticated animals only exist because we farm them, and that their feral ancestors wouldn't now exist in the numbers their domesticated counterparts do. We do, however, have the obligation to ensure that farm animals' lives are, on the whole, worth living for each individual - even if their lives are short - by avoiding the worst excesses of factory farming.

That said, is the effectiveness of the "lamb & pears" diet an established fact or an old wives' tale ? Is the fact that domesticated animals wouldn't survive in the wild an issue ? We humans live in a symbiotic relationship with them - we wouldn't survive very well in the wild either; leave me out when we return to hunter-gathering !



Incidentally, does anyone remember the TV drama *Threads*? It dealt with the aftermath of a nuclear war, with the ensuing nuclear winter. Scary! The UK population would rapidly decline to mediaeval levels in the absence of industrialisation & efficient farming - ie. nearer to 6m than 60m.

I don't go along with this "do it yourself" slaughtering lark! I'd be too squeamish to perform an appendectomy, but that doesn't mean I have no moral right to have one if the need arises. We all have different stomachs & are suited to, or can tolerate, different jobs.

Theo

7th July 1998

John Neary

DEMOCRACY

Theo, I copy herewith a comment on Democracy. I acknowledge that the substance came from an article in the Spectator some time ago by Peter Jones. I have lost the original and only have my notes to go on.

"We do not live in a Democracy. The Athenian Cleisthenes invented democracy in 508 BC. It continued until 322BC and has never been repeated. It meant, literally, "Power of the Citizens".

Citizens were all Athenian males over the age of 18 without respect for position or wealth. They met every 9 days in the Assembly to discuss and decide public policy. The assembly was totally in power. Its decisions were final. If some people like Pericles had influence in the Assembly it was because the citizens liked what they said. Nobody had constitutional power. The Assembly also elected executives, men of more than 30 years of age, to enforce their decisions. They were responsible to the Assembly and carried out the orders of the Assembly. They were nominated for one year, normally by lot, and at the end of their time their actions were examined. If the Assembly did not like their actions they could be punished at least by fines, at worst with death. That was democracy. Our system is not democracy, it is an elective oligarchy because we elect a small number of representatives to govern us for a certain number of years."

Given that this is true, the question of **Alan Carr / yourself (C92/26-27)** about the rights of a majority overriding the rights of a significant minority has to be examined in light of the status quo.



If we give the power to govern us to a small number of people then it must be that the rights of a majority of those that rule [*I've just noticed that something seems to be missing from this sentence, Ed.*]. So then it is much more subjective and becomes a question of the conscience and prejudices of that small number and the influences that powerful people or groups can bring to bear. Hence we have whips and lobbyists and the like all trying to influence a small number of elected representatives. I presume that in a real democracy with a large number of deciders that effect would be sufficiently watered down as to become almost ineffective.

The problem, as I see it, is that not enough people recognise our system of government for what it is and, of course, it is in the politicians' interests to keep it that way. So they will always talk about democracy and the rights of the majority and so on. This is also why they don't like using referenda to decide issues as it is diluting their power. It is also why we have dictators, corrupt governments and presidents with vetoes and so on.

However I can't see how real democracy could work in this day because of sheer volume of numbers. Can you imagine the logistical problems of getting all British males over 18 to assemble in one place at one time and the bear garden that it would turn out to be even if you were successful ? Maybe a form of regionalisation would be a good compromise with local assemblies sending representatives to the general Assembly at certain intervals. Those representatives to be under the same restraints as the Athenians were. The various Ministers could then be elected by all the representatives instead of being appointed by the party bosses. That way they would be responsible more to the nation than to the party policy. I'm not sure whether we should execute them if they did a bad job But, on the other hand.... ;-)

John Neary

John : many good points here. Maybe it's because we live in an elective oligarchy, rather than a true democracy, that we can allow the "rights" of minorities to be taken into account ? In a true democracy, everyone in the assembly is voting for himself, whereas in an elective oligarchy, voting is on behalf of others, for causes the voter may not privately support but has to publicly support for the political reason of remaining electable.

Theo

July 1998

IS / OUGHT

Roger Farnworth

Malcolm Burn (C92/35) makes, I believe, four errors :-



1. He says ought statements presuppose that "there are at least two possibilities" to choose between. He then says "there has to be a hard core of ought statements that are incontrovertible". If an ought statement is incontrovertible it cannot give rise to two possibilities.
2. he says moral 'ought' statements arise in the discovery by trial and error of the means best suited to satisfy the aspirations which bring people together to form societies. A discovery by trial and error must be the discovery of what is the case. This is what I contend but he began by saying that every ought statement is derived from a prior ought statement. By showing that moral ought statements have derived from a discovery of a fact he has contradicted himself.
3. He says that moral choice depends on free will. He also observes "arbitrariness is there even in the moral code". An arbitrary selection or decision is not compatible with a choice that is the result of the deliberations of free will.
4. He attempts to counter the fatal infinite regress in his propositions that each ought statement derives from a prior ought statement which itself derives from an ought statement by reference to a hard core of ought statements taken as incontrovertible, ie. primary principles from which secondary principles of ethical action are derived. Primary principles were once held to be absolute, divinely ordained, universally obvious or common-sense or a whole rag-bag of derivations that avoid reasoned justification. Malcolm has added 'arbitrariness' to this list. So, if the primary principle statement "killing is evil" is arbitrary then surely his ethics must be trivial.

I would be interested to hear how other members derive their moral imperatives as it is the central ethical question, isn't it ?

Roger Farnworth

Roger : don't beat about the bush, Roger ! You seem to be a lone voice on this one - given the support Malcolm received earlier in this issue from Kevin Arbuthnot & Michael Nisbet ! Also, as I said last time that I "agreed entirely" with him, I can't resist responding to what you have to say. Shouldn't do it, I know, and maybe Malcolm will have to put us both right ! Referring to your points above in turn :-

1. We're talking about two different things here - we might agree that the prohibition of murder is incontrovertible, but a citizen still has the option to commit the crime or not.
2. The discovery is of means to ends not of obligations.
3. Isn't this what free will is all about ? If it was bound by deliberations, it wouldn't be free. It's the "what the heck I'll do it anyway" factor that (seems to) give the freedom.



4. Hard luck ! All ethical systems are ultimately trivial (I contend) unless we can ground them in facts in some way, which I allege we can't. A society (and the individuals who make it up) has to decide what it wants & be willing and able to fight for its view of what is valuable if others don't share the vision in all its pellucid beauty. Otherwise, the barbarians take over.

Expanding on point 2 somewhat, a society could have one of two guiding principles :-

- i. you, citizen, ought to want mutual prosperity
- ii. you, citizen, ought to earn points of honour by out-doing your neighbour

Following on from this, we might by trial and error find two means to ends :-

- i. co-operation & peaceful co-existence leads to mutual prosperity
- ii. indulging in a vendetta establishes & maintains points of honour

From these we might deduce one of two further "oughts" :-

- i. you, citizen, ought to co-operate with your neighbour
- ii. you, citizen, ought to subvert your neighbour at every turn & take a pop at him when opportunity permits.

The "ought" statements arise from matters of fact only because there were prior "ought" statements.

Theo

July 1998

Roger Farnworth

DUALISM

Apart from David Taylor's interesting speculations on how the brain does our thinking for us, there was so little response to my article on Dualism that I fear it's radical implications were not noticed. So, let me draw out one startling consequence more explicitly.

I believe that one part of this problem that engulfed European philosophy for centuries can at last disappear. Setting aside (for reasons stated in the original article) the lesser sense detectors of friction, chemistry and sound waves, my claim is that the barrier between the external world and inner sensation is lessened because light operates on both its sides.

Our knowledge of the external world is empirical; it is derived from sensations of light which are correlates of the action of light in the external world. Not only does consciousness vary directly in response to light (see previous article) but the brain may alter as a result of light much as do the chemicals on a photographic plate change or a tooth filling can be hardened by a laser. A machine to count photons is being developed in Japan as preliminary work



in developing the quantum computers of the future. As part of that team, neurologists are hoping to use this mechanism to study the way the brain stores memories.

Descartes' dichotomy between the external world and our sensation of it would be a radically different problem if the two could be correlated by the behaviour of quanta. However, the subjective experience of a red dot for example would remain a mystery. So on this point I disagree with David Taylor when he writes "all that remains is to find the parts of the brain involved in consciousness".

Roger Farnworth

Roger : I just don't understand it !! What are you on about, saying "light operates on both its sides" ? Clearly, I understood much of what you had to say in **C91**, but the second half of **C91/37** & the first half of **C91/38** had me groping in the dark, somewhat. I restrained my comments in the last couple of issues of *Commensal* hoping that enlightenment would strike me. It hasn't. I think general bemusement may explain the lack of response. Even David Taylor's vote of confidence "I'm impressed by this one, and find myself in agreement with most of it, though I don't think I'm a dualist" seems to betray bogglement rather than positive engagement. Does he think you're a dualist (as a normal reading of his comment would suggest) ? I'd thought you were arguing against dualism. Not, by the way that I'm happy with your definition ! You said the "extra bit" that expands monism into dualism was that "in addition there is consciousness of sensation". Monism doesn't deny this. What it denies is that we need any extra mental "stuff" to explain consciousness.

I do agree with you, though, that "what it is like to experience qualia" is not something that is explained by brain states. It is David Chalmers' "Hard Problem". The big divide in consciousness studies is whether or not the problem exists. I cannot envisage how it can be explained, but don't think introducing mental stuff or universal consciousness to "explain" it gets us anywhere. Nor, I think, do you.

Consciousness studies is such a difficult, but at the moment well-farmed, field that we are silly not to pay attention to the many contemporary books on the subject. Would someone please read, understand & review one of the following books ? ... starting with you, **Roger** ! Any one will do, off you go

1. *The Mind Matters - Consciousness & Choice in a Quantum World* (David Hodgson, OUP, 1991)
2. *The Astonishing Hypothesis - The Scientific Search for the Soul* (Francis Crick, Simon & Schuster, 1994)
3. *The Conscious Mind - In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (David Chalmers, OUP, 1996)
4. *How the Mind Works* (Steven Pinker, Penguin, 1997).

Theo

16th July 1998

Martin Lake



COMMENTS ON C91 & C92

Thank you for the three issues of Commensal which I have received to date. I have found time to read them but not time, so far, to contribute. I realise that I have missed the deadline for *Commensal* 93 but do feel that I need to comment on a couple of things that I have read in previous issues.

First the contribution from **Sheila Blanchard (C91/35.4)**. She is claiming that Maori society was less civilised because killing human beings was not considered wrong but is she suggesting that there are some societies which are civilised by this criteria ? It seems to me that there isn't a society on this earth that can say that it considers killing human beings wrong and we are confronted almost daily with news of conflicts within and between a variety of different societies that reflect the sort of situation which she describes, not only between nations and ethnic groups, but, for instance, groups which simply have territorial differences, for example, youth gangs from different streets or estates. And there are examples of changing allegiances too. As to the British Army, that has been seen as a legitimate target by many different groups over the years.

It is my optimistic belief that we are slowly becoming more civilised and some countries enjoy greater internal stability than others, the conflicts that they get involved in, as a nation, tending to be well away from home. But in any society, including ours, where people have not totally renounced violence, it is clear from just listening to people that violent, even murderous, behaviour is not far below the surface. People are territorial and hostile to those who are different from themselves. These traits are probably instinctive rather than the result of conditioning. I suggest that we become more civilised when we put aside instinctive reactions and substitute more considered, and less violent, responses.

Moving on, I have to disagree most strongly with **Anthony Owens (C92/13)**. It doesn't seem to me at all fair that a woman should ever accept the burden of a child alone, although she may be forced to do so. The father may have been equally promiscuous. In this country at least, promiscuity is not a crime and no longer even considered immoral. Of course, society has always had a more liberal attitude towards men's promiscuity !

What is immoral is for men not to ensure that they are traceable in the event of a pregnancy resulting from their activities. And today, a man cannot escape responsibility by saying that it is not possible to establish who the father is. There is no excuse, apart from some misfortune befalling him, for a father not to accept his share of responsibility for the children that he helped to produce.

On the question of abortion, I would say that we do not live in a perfect democracy and the government of the day can get away with things that may not be approved of by the majority of citizens. It does this by a variety of means, including the use of spin doctors. Nevertheless we do have



considerable freedom of speech and freedom to protest and demonstrate. The thalidomide disaster aroused public demand for abortion to be made legal. It was hotly debated and was the subject of a free vote in parliament I believe. I do not think therefore that it is reasonable to claim that "the state" has ulterior motives in allowing abortion.

Martin Lake

Martin : welcome ! Fine ! Run out of space !

Theo

MENSA AT BRAZIERS - MAY 1999 - QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the questions below (tick the appropriate boxes) :-

1. Are you interested in attending *Mensa at Braziers* ? Yes No

2. Which of the alternative dates could
you attend ? 7th -9th May 1999
21st - 23rd May 1999

3. Which of the alternative dates would
you prefer ? 7th -9th May 1999
21st - 23rd May 1999

4. Would you be prepared to present a paper ? Yes No

5. Would you be prepared to take part in a debate ? Yes No

6. Would you still attend if you had to stay in B&B ? Yes No

7. Would you be willing to share a room ? Yes No

8. Would you appreciate a "Key Note" Speaker ? Yes No

9. Should the Conference have a Theme ? Yes No

... if so, and you have a preference, please describe over-leaf

10. Do you object to any of the proposals ? ('Yes' => 'I object')

... Non-PDG Mensans can attend Yes No

... Invited Non-Mensans can attend Yes No

... Joint with ISPE Yes No

11. Do you have any other ideas (please give these
over-leaf or on a separate piece of paper) Yes No



12. Are you willing to pay a deposit **now** ? Yes No

The cost is £92 full board. Note that this might vary for those in B&B & would increase slightly if we had a Key Note speaker whose expenses we had to defray. If you are a 'Yes' voter, please put your money where your mouth is and send **me** a cheque for **£20** payable to *Braziers Park NOW!*

MENSA AT BRAZIERS - MAY 1999 - QUESTIONNAIRE

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Phone 01491 680221.**

Suggestions for the Conference Theme :



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Any Other Ideas ?



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