

Commensal

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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27th June 1999**Theo Todman****EDITORIAL**

As usual, we welcome our new members to the SIG. We have fourteen new members again this time, so welcome to :-

• Gary Lee	• Maureen Dominey
• Partha Lal	• Brian Page
• Nicholas Rowden	• Timothy Sale
• Andrea Borrett	• Jane Benn
• Jean Roscoe	• Debbie Miller
• Ann Kucera	• Helen Bell
• Bob Cooper	• Peter Hodgkiss

A particular welcome to Ann Kucera, who joins us from Garland, Maryland, USA as a member of American Mensa (and ISPE) and adds to the international perspective.

PDG Conference

Well, our first conference is now in the past. All things considered, I think it was a great success, though it would have been good to see more of you there. As it was, there were 20 of us and, from a PDG perspective, it was great to meet Alan Carr, Malcolm Burn, Michael Nisbet and John Fender as well as seeing Roger Farnworth, Alan Edmonds, Leslie Haddow and Jane Benn again. The ISPE contingent supplied an international flavour, with delegates from Alabama, Copenhagen & Budapest.

Leslie Haddow has supplied an interesting analysis of the conference, thereby saving me the effort of doing so. Where our perspectives differ, I've drawn attention to the fact in my usual commentary.

Thanks also to Michael Nisbet who wrote an article (included below) on the limits to agreement in philosophical discussion. This was stimulated by the polarisation of the conference into the "rationalists", of whom I'm one and for whom "proof is everything", and those who adopt a wider (but necessarily sound !) view.

I did promise a collection of write-ups from the conference. As things stand, of those papers presented by PDG members, Malcolm Burn's has been summarised by Leslie Haddow in his conference summary below and Leslie's own paper & Roger Farnworth's had already appeared in *Commensal*. Maybe Alan Edmonds will let us have his talk in writing in due course. This leaves mine. As there's room, you've got it inflicted on you in less abbreviated form than that delivered at the conference.

Next Issue of *Commensal*

As this issue is late, and to allow for the holiday season, we've skipped a month. **15th August 1999** is the closing date for contributions to September's *Commensal* (C98).



THE 98th MENSA INFORMAL RESIDENTIAL DISCUSSION CONFERENCE

Braziers Adult College, Braziers Park, Ipsden, Wallingford OX10 6AN

GLOBALISATION

Chairman: Jane Benn

Friday 24th – Sunday 26th September 1999

FRIDAY	
19:45	<i>Supper</i>
20:45 – 22:00	Introductory Session - including discussion on what we understand by the term "globalisation"; delegates are invited to bring their own definitions.
22:00	<i>Refreshments</i>
SATURDAY	
08:30	<i>Breakfast</i>
09:30 – 10:15	Peter Elkan : Economic Aspects: Technological and demographic developments in the world; economic theories of production and income distribution.
10:15 – 11:00	Alan Edmonds : Financial Aspects: International currency speculations; multinational companies; control of the media by near-monopolies.
11:00	<i>Coffee</i>
11:30 – 12:15	Alan Mayne : Must Capitalism Dominate Globalisation ? - the widening gap between rich and poor; threat to democracy; "new economics" thinking.
12:15 – 12:45	General Discussion
13:00	<i>Lunch</i>
	Afternoon Free
16:15	<i>Tea</i>
16:45 – 17:15	Discussion Groups
17:15 – 18:00	General Discussion
18:00 – 18:45	Jenny Turner : The Delights and Disadvantages of Multicultural Groups of Students in an F. E. College, also a brief history of the Pestalozzi Children's Trust.
19:00	<i>Supper</i>
20:00 – 22:00	INTERLUDE - Music, poetry, etc - washed down with wines of the world; delegates are invited to bring an appropriate bottle and thereby contribute to our increased understanding of globalisation. Musical delegates are invited to make use of the good piano available, or bring their own instrument.
22:00	<i>Tea and coffee</i>



SUNDAY	
08:30	<i>Breakfast</i>
09:30 – 10:15	John Maxwell : Nationalism and Patriotism: The flip side of Globalisation ? Contrasting patterns taking Scotland and Serbia as examples.
10:15 – 11:00	Leslie Haddow : Is Globalisation a Myth ? – an ephemeral, not a sustainable state:-will only be meaningful when all people have access to equity, justice and a fair sharing of wealth.
11:00	<i>Coffee</i>
11:30 – 12:00	Discussion Groups
12:00 – 12:45	Final Session : General Discussion and Plans for Future Conferences
13:00	<i>Lunch</i>
	Conference ends, but delegates wishing to stay on for informal discussions and tea are welcome to do so.

Editorial Note : lest any PDG readers be confused, the above conference that new PDG member **Jane Benn** is organising is not the next PDG conference, which will, we hope, take place next May, but is the latest in the long tradition of ***Mensa at Braziers*** conferences. We have arranged things so that the two conferences will each be annual and will alternate at the same venue, with the *PDG* conference seeking to carry on the best of the traditions of the *Mensa at Braziers* one. There is a fair sharing of attendees between the two.

The cost & administrative details of the ***Globalisation*** conference are the same as those of the recent PDG Conference, ie. the full fee, including accommodation and catering, is £92. Early booking is advisable. Apply for further details to the College at the above address (Tel: 01491 680221). A deposit of £20 is payable. Please book directly with the College. Partners, whether Mensans or not, are welcome.

Theo



98th Mensa Informal Discussion Conference at Braziers 7-9 May 1999
Incorporating the Philosophical Discussion Group and ISPE
Reflections by Leslie Haddow

The weekend brought together a group of most interesting people from a wide range of backgrounds who actively participated in some very challenging philosophical topics. I am now trying to understand why, on my way home and since, I recall it with some disappointment. It is not that we failed to settle such questions as Free Will v. Determinism: — even the professionals after centuries of debate have not got far with that question

Part of the problem was in the presentation. Michael Nisbet got off to an awkward start on Free Will by relying on random jottings in a notebook, and seemed to lose himself as well as us before he had finished. Had he written out his talk, like some of his well-structured articles in Commensal, this might not have happened.

Frank Luger tried to pack too much into the time available, and I was confused from a third way through. Theosophy has never been one of my serious interests, although it was much in the air when I was growing up in pre-War India when the ideas of Mme Blavatsky and Annie Besant became somehow mixed in with Gandhi's movement. But I would have been interested to hear how someone who had spent a lifetime in the study of the sciences, and much else, was now drawn to its ideas.

Alan Mayne also tried to pack too much in. His style was to catalogue a plethora of themes, mainly "New Age", (each of which he claims to be "very significant / very interesting") which somehow obscured any underlying message, with the result that there was very little discussion of his talk.

Presentation was not a problem with Theo Todman's talk ("Is it Rational to be Religious?") — in fact, I think his six-page handout was a model discussion document, and the issue of Rationality v. Religion deserved to be the high-light of the weekend. The problem was organisational. No time was set aside for its discussion, and we did not return to it in any of the later sessions. A lesson here for future meetings.



Roger Farnworth's talk "The Meaning of Life without Belief" was also based on a handout, and might have been discussed in conjunction with Theo's, as the themes are complementary. Whereas Theo's approach was analytical, breaking the subject down into a multiplicity of facets, Roger seemed to be searching for a synthesis through metaphor and almost poetic imagery. I liked, in particular —

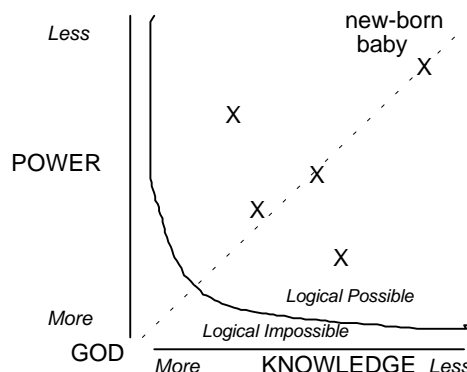
- *"... our skill and purpose must be to surf the breaking wave of the present",*



- *“This wave that emanates from the big existential bang carries the conundrum of its origin for ever . . .”*

Philosophical essays of these kinds are not for light entertainment. Much thought and reflection goes into their preparation. Likewise, we, the audience, usually need time to think and reflect on them before entering into their discussion (hence the desirability of handouts in advance). But eventual group discussion, with the rapid cross-fire of comment and criticism is, in my view, the whole point of a Braziers' weekend. One-to-one arguments during meals and coffee breaks will often follow, but they are no substitute for the real thing.

Perhaps the most delightful session was after coffee on the Sunday morning, when the sun came out, and we all moved out on the Terrace for Malcolm Burn's quick talk on the two "Omnie's". Omniscience implies that God has all knowledge of the future, as well as of the past. But that means that God has no power to change the future, which is what Omnipotence implies. If God were looking on, as we presume he was, he must now realise that he cannot have it both ways. Using a flip chart, Malcolm illustrated this with what he called an Argand diagram of Power against Knowledge. This confused the mathematicians among us, especially when he explained that each quantity was at its maximum at the origin, where God was located, and got less as one moved to the right or upwards. On this chart he then drew a hyperbola-like curve, below which it was logically impossible to have both power and knowledge, and above which it was logically possible to have varying degrees of each. A new-born child was at the top right, both innocent and helpless, and various characters from history (including Genghis Khan) were dotted about.



The popular image of scientists is that they claim to be all-knowing and all-powerful, thereby displacing the role of God. This claim is not supported by scientists themselves, and, implicitly, Alan Edmonds explored this in his talk on the Philosophy of Science. He led us through from Newton's laws of motion, and the then heretical concept of action at a distance, to Einstein's relativity, Maxwell's equations of electromagnetism and quantum mechanics. None of this suggested omniscience, and Alan has little time for transcendental interpretations. But I felt that there are many aspects of modern science which have important implications for us today, and which deserve philosophical analysis, and these did not get much of an airing in his talk or in the short discussion which followed.

In re-introducing my paper on Crime, Punishment and Society I had hoped that members of this group would turn their philosophical minds away from furthest-away areas of human speculation, and towards some of the problems in the here-and-now of our fast-changing world. From earliest times such questions as to whether moral responsibility can be compatible with human behaviour which is determined, or



largely influenced by, environment has been the very stuff of philosophy. Consideration of crime and punishment might have been a way of our focusing on these problems. Instead, the discussion turned on simpler issues, like whether there were inherently criminal classes, and whether crime would be reduced if more money were spent on education.

During much of the weekend, I was puzzled why so much attention was being paid to esoteric matters. Can it be that, in the face of ever-expanding knowledge of the world, and of scientific insight into such matters as personality and consciousness, the traditional religious basis of morality no longer seem appropriate. Instead, we appear to be trying to relate the meaning and purpose of life to cosmological events like the Big Bang, Quantum Mechanics and the mathematical theory of chaos.

This conference was notable in drawing members from three sources — the original Mensa-at-Braziers group, the Mensa Philosophical Discussion SIG, and ISPE — with some common membership of all three. It was also notable for the range of places from which they came —

Domicile	Name	P D G	I S P E	M @ B	Occupation
London	Jane Benn Alan Edmonds	Y Y		Y Y	Retired Scientific Civil Servant Mathematical Physicist & Archaeologist
Birmingham	John Fender	Y			Economist
Milton Keynes	Alan Mayne			Y	Mathematical Statistician & Author
Wantage, Oxon	Pamela Boal		Y		Editor / Publisher
Stratford-upon-Avon	Caroline Hastings		Y		Tourist Guide / Freelance Writer
Esher, Surrey	Leslie Haddow Sheila Haddow	Y		Y Y	Retired Electrical Engineer Retired from Law Office
Billericay, Essex	Theo Todman	Y	Y	Y	Computer Project Manager
Sutton Coldfield	Julie Douglas			Y	Magistrate
Cornwall	Roger Farnworth	Y	Y	Y	Philosopher
Gloucester	Malcolm Burn	Y			Solicitor in Land Registry
Edinburgh	Richard Hackett Alison Ritchie		Y		Computer Engineer Bank employee
Taunton	Michael Nisbet	Y			Civil Servant
Galway, Ireland	Alan Carr	Y			Student of Philosophy
Copenhagen	Peter Lagersted		Y		Political Scientist
Budapest	Frank Luger		Y		Mathematical Physics Research
Alabama, USA	Don Grace		Y		Water Engineer



Of these, eight had been before, and eleven were new to Braziers. All have promised to come again. It was also one of the largest attendances of recent years, and three members had to be boarded out, and two lived locally.

In conclusion, I enjoyed the philosophical weekend, catching up with old friends and meeting new ones, and I hope the experiment is repeated next year with improvements resulting from this year's experience.

Leslie Haddow

Leslie : I have some comments & reflections to add to yours above. I think these events are as much "experiences" as efficient means of arriving at the truth. This was, as well, an experimental conference. While much could be made of the lack of professionalism or excessive ambition of the speakers, I have attended events where the fare has been much worse. I'm sure I'll remember Michael Nisbet's animation when delivering his case for free-will long after I'd have forgotten his arguments had they been clearly presented.

Your brief commentary on Frank Luger's talk betrays the bemusement most of us left. He didn't mention any of the theosophical notables. I'm sure he had a lot to say, but the presentation of his thoughts to sceptics was not easily achievable in the time at his disposal. He seemed to polarise the audience. Those who didn't understand a word of what he was saying were most impressed & applauded at the end. Those who understood his words, but couldn't understand his argument (because there didn't seem to be one - and maybe couldn't be, given the time limitation and the breadth of his canvass) thought he was trying to blind the ignorant with science. Maybe this was a misjudgement, but we must see his arguments in detail to be convinced.

It's a moot point whether the conference should have had a theme, or spared the time to follow up on particular topics. I'm glad you thought my talk was worth while, if I understand your comments correctly, but it's difficult to know in advance how interested people will be and how much of the programme one has a right to monopolise. We can always follow up these themes in subsequent years, or in *Commensal* in this case.

Malcolm Burn has the reciprocals of Power & Knowledge on his axes, though I don't think the mathematics should be pressed too far in this obscure subject. I did feel that his argument depended on God being locked in time with his foreknowledge rather than being outside of spacetime, in the Augustinian sense. God must be allowed to know a manifold of possible futures depending on his use of omnipotence. I do think, though, that God is logically incapable of affecting the past.

I tweaked the table of attendees you supplied, so must lay claim to any errors that remain !

Theo



12th May 1999

Michael Nisbet

THOUGHTS ARISING FROM BRAZIERS 1999
AGREEMENT, DISAGREEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

1. It seems to me that people accept or reject ideas in accordance with their personal needs. (Except where specific ideas are forced upon them e.g. by a dictatorship. But this amounts to much the same thing: people need to accept such ideas if they are not to suffer the consequences). There is no sphere, except possibly within the academic imagination, in which ideas are accepted or rejected entirely in their own terms and on their own merits. Hence ideas in themselves do not provide a context for agreement, except where the personal needs of a number of individuals coincide.
2. Facts that can be independently verified (that are within a sphere in which independent verification can be applied) can provide a context for agreement. But then, what such facts imply, and what to do about them, is something determined within the ideological sphere: the sphere of disagreement.
3. Only individuals within a strongly cohesive society or group, with a common sense of identity and purpose, can properly agree about anything. But such cohesiveness is established in contradistinction to the ideas that it rejects, and hence is divisive within a broader context. 'The selfishness of the group feeds upon the altruism of the individual'.
4. It is all very well to say, in a pluralistic society, that we agree to disagree, and accept the need to live together peaceably, but how many people regard *this* as a liberal ideology that is being imposed upon them ? It is something 'faute de mieux'.
5. If nobody agrees about anything, then nobody agrees about anything. So what ? Can't a lot of fun be had from disagreeing ? But, if there is no ground for agreement, there is no ground *for constructive* disagreement either.
6. These statements themselves probably represent ideas that I feel inclined to adopt in order to rationalise my imperfect ability to communicate. But they leave me wondering whether there is any point in a philosophical discussion group such as ours. On balance I think there probably is, because at least it allows me to put my thoughts into some sort of public arena.

Michael Nisbet

Michael : I'm receptive to much of what you say above, but think we must distinguish between the initial encounter with ideas, especially if this is in public, and their more considered entertainment, especially in private. Ideas have a subversive power working



subconsciously as we make them our own. Criticism of ideas, provided we understand them, is a constructive help. Maybe we do occasionally break down into mutually uncomprehending sub-groups where we can't even disagree. However, a belief that all ideas are equally open to criticism and elucidation is essential to the sharing of ideas, rather than the selling of ideologies. Ideas do tend to get lost because no-one cares to attend to them; there are, after all, so many themes demanding our attention these days that unless an idea is packaged for easy consumption – in the sense of having a readily comprehensible hook to catch the casual reader or listener – it may easily float by unappreciated. I have to admit, however, to being more easily caught by ideas that slightly modify or extend my own than by those of a more revolutionary nature, unless I happen to be on the look out for such.

Theo

3rd September 1998

Frank Walker

I BELIEVE

In the high and far off times before the Long Vacation of *Commensal*, I was reproached by another contributor for saying “I believe”, in my own contribution, on the ground that my personal belief was neither here nor there, and indeed totally irrelevant to any discussion of philosophical principles. This is my too-belated apology and explanation.

Of course, any one person's personal belief is irrelevant in a philosophical discussion of general principles (but may be relevant in a particular example, eg. exploring the state of mind of a flat-earther shanghaied on a round the world yacht race). A widely held belief may be relevant, a universally held belief almost certainly so. There are certain consequences if all human beings believe that tonight will be fairly dark and will certainly be followed by tomorrow when it will be light again.

However, I was using short hand. What I meant was that I have considered and weighed all the evidence known to me : I have considered all the arguments put forward for and against : I have rejected the untrue evidence and the fallacious arguments : I have come to a conclusion. This is an awful lot of meaning to attach to two words, but it is a useful phrase in that meaning, and saves an awful lot of tedious repetition. I would assume every member of PDG had gone through the same process before advancing an opinion.

I believe there is a fountain within the perimeter of Great Court, Trinity College, Cambridge. I may one day produce an article arguing the case pro- and con. I may pray in aid the principle of universal belief above. If I do, I shall conclude the fountain is in truth there, or at any rate it is rational so to believe and that those who believe otherwise or have no belief are ill-informed or irrational.

Frank Walker



Frank : Agreed, but I would add that the term “belief” is ambiguous. Even so, beliefs are relevant whether they are your well-founded deductions or the “off the wall” speculations of others. I would add that our most fundamental beliefs, though we may give reasons for holding them, are not open to proof without incurring infinite regress. For instance, we cannot argue that we should accept logic, as this would involve the use of logic. All we can do is show it in action. Where the fun starts is in deciding which beliefs are of this foundational kind and which are deductions from other more primitive beliefs.

Theo

11th March 1999

Albert Dean

COMMENTS AND RESPONSES OF THE VARIOUS KIND

First off, **C96 - 22/23**, to **Theo** and **Graham**. Oooops ! Sorry. Entirely fair complaint from **Theo** on page 23. When I used "Graham Dare & Theo" on page 22 as a subheading I had no intention it suggest you held common ground. I meant only to draw the attention of both of you to my query.

Further to the above though, and not so as to water down my apology. Whilst certainly accepting that science has influenced religion, I think my query still remains. **Graham's** opening in **C95/35** reads to me as saying that over the centuries science, and only science, pruned religion back, and pruned it back to a stump. I do not know that is true. My reasons for doubting it are, building a little on what I said in **C96/22**, that:

- (i) Recognising the distinctions between religion, church, science and technology, I guess around the world comparable large numbers have long worked and taught in all four sectors, and in result probably about 80% of people now hold at least some beliefs from all four of those sectors simultaneously.
- (ii) In the main streams, I suspect the vast majority of personnel engaged in these areas would not actually reject optionally spiritually inclusive sciences and technologies, nor optionally materially inclusive religions and churches.
- (iii) I would suggest the historical battlefield actually looks more four cornered rather than two sided, with forces from the worlds of politics, economics, technics and spiritics scattered all over it.

Surely I do not need to work through it all in any greater detail to show that what **Graham** begins on is probably not a firm base, and what he calls for is probably not the best thing to call for. So, how should it be done. Well f (^&@M > \$£\$£) & = Gott im Himmel! + !!! Yes. The sting in the tail. For what purpose is information on the basis of life and spirit required. What will you gain my friends, when someone finds the way to switch you off at a distance, when someone sets a fallen angel in the



tip of a cruise. How tempting it is, the richest harvest of terror one could wish for. It is irresistible.

Alan Edmonds / Theo - C96/5-6: Theo mentioned Individual Worth v Individual Ability. It is probably too late to be of much interest, but.... Proposition: All of life is the application and to it of equal worth are all information processing capabilities. The same with manual dexterity capabilities. And, if one special case requirement happens to cause down-rating of someone in one respect, then, that is exactly balanced by some other special case requirement up-rating them in some other respect. It is only a suggestion.

Graham Dare - C96/6: We exist to create universes. We do it with our heads and with our hands. We do it from the cradle to the grave.

Michael Nisbet / Theo - C96/9 - 13: Computer Do [??, Ed] "believe cats are dogs until told cats might not be dogs" then "believe cats might not be dogs until told cats are not dogs" then "believe cats are not dogs until told cats might be dogs" then "believe cats might be dogs until told cats are dogs" Loop. And truth rests in five or ten slashes across the cheeks and some missing bits of arm or leg. So, whilst soft skimmers like us are obliged to rapidly establish for the duration what is cat and what is dog, the hard skinned rhinoceros may chose and re-choose as it likes. Meaning that, for any given memory, generally,

- (i) should the topic be critical the mind considers that memory to be green until it is obliged to paint it amber or red, and,
- (ii) should the topic be not critical the mind treats the memory as green until it chooses to paint it amber or red. With repainting options on both. Is this basically what you are talking about?

Mark Griffin - C96/16: "Can God commit murder?". In our world the answer is no. As King Canute demonstrated: Our legislation must always give way before what is inevitable.

Self / Theo - C96/22: I was only suggesting contradiction of Göring's claim that the extinguishments had been a political matter and not a criminal matter might be found in argument structured something like "The proper role of A (politics) is to cause B (accord), the proper role of C (crime) is to cause not B (discord), hence, as the result of what was done was a not B, what was done does not relate to A but does relate to C". And I agree completely that my "the proper role of crime ..." is, in a world without a "force of evil", far from a good way of putting things. But I couldn't, and still can't, think of anything better. Perhaps someone else can. However, I still think some construction like this might be the approach. Focusing on what politics should do rather than what Göring said it could do, and then using some bridging negation to show accord relates to politics and discord to crime. Perhaps part of the reason it is so tricky is that maybe there are two issues to be addressed; (i) that politics excludes extinguishments, (ii) that extinguishments are crimes. But have I made errors in assuming politics is exclusive of badness and dark and crime is exclusive of goodness



and light. More likely I am going down the same road as just about everyone else that has tried the Göring problem and have not yet realised it runs in a circle. But, meanwhile, as well as noticing its "tempting symmetry" as you very correctly put it, did you also notice the even more tempting double symmetry ? That, if it should prove a valid approach, it is near certain it would be possible to simply flip it around to show it was not necessary to put the Allies in the dock because the result of what they did was a B. That in fact brings me to another point. Looking at it all again, I now wonder if looking at Nuremberg might be to look the wrong way. If we look instead at the Allies, then what we find is something like "the proper role of politics is to establish separate law that applies equally to all and then to seek to subject itself to that same law". It all hinges in the word "seek", permitting the prosecuting branch reasonable choice in who to prosecute. We do not punish one trying to be good, we punish one trying to be bad. I am not quite sure this could have been used at the time though, most of the Allies would probably have just scraped through on it, they had at least been trying to be right, but Russia under Stalin would have been too great a problem, can we say Stalin tried to be good. Might we say he, at the time, was beyond legislation, one of the inevitables King Canute illustrated. However, today it might hold, Stalin was denied by Russia in the end. But there would be a greater problem. It would mean the charges were false. The legal crime was not what was done under the law, the legal crime of the Nazi politicians was that they established punitive partial law and did not subject themselves to it. Was that actually charged ? Interestingly, and perhaps not entirely by coincidence, that seems in line with Simon Wiesenthal's view on how it all came about: That the great mistake was that Germany simply inherited and continued what had been practised in the old German states, the manufacturing of specific law for specific governments. A system where some one makes law for some one.

Nigel Perks - C96/23: If you wish to resolve your dilemma in regard to the rights and wrongs of taxation you have no choice but to do the following: First, you must choose what you believe will not otherwise be funded but wish to be funded. Second, you must choose who else's views on that to incorporate or reject. Third, you must choose representatives willing to action what you desire. Fourth, you must allow those representatives to seize all who oppose you gently by the scruff of the neck, and wobble them a little until their contribution to the requisite funding for what you wish falls out of their pockets, and they come to appreciate it really is all in their best interests. Because, left to themselves, the little dears will squander everything on sweets, and I assume you prefer civilisation.

Roger Farnworth - C96/25: "Can philosophy be used to ascribe a meaning to life which is not derived from a system of beliefs?". I think it has already been attempted. Bertrand Russell said the time one enjoys wasting is not wasted. There seems an essential truth in that and perhaps something which is fairly free standing. It suggests that providing the subject is not aware of Russell's Rule, which would link them to the greater system, they can have a full life in a closed system of meaningless meanings and purposeless purposes. But, perhaps a surfing analogy denies that. Most surfers like to know where the reefs are so they don't get killed, etc.



Fred Hobson - C96/32 - 34: A case which comes to mind is that of Paulus, commander of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad. I have no idea at all as to what actually went on his mind, but suppose: Paulus is ordered to have his army capture Stalingrad. He and his troops are surrounded by the Russian Army. Göring says the Luftwaffe will supply his army. Paulus believes this but it proves untrue, eventually. He is told the rest of the German Army is coming to his aid. He also believes this and it proves untrue, eventually. He is promoted and ordered to have his army fight to the last man. The promotion is to appeal to his vanity and show his family will be looked after. He actually had his army fight only to the last bullet. There is a considerable difference between the two. And he finally orders his army, and, in a sense, himself, to surrender. Hitler condemns him for not going down with his ship, but does nothing more. Now. Consider: Paulus receives a legitimate German order from a legitimate German command to cause many German citizens to commit violence on many Russian citizens at Stalingrad. To complicate the matter he knows this order is military nonsense, he should bypass Stalingrad. And, if the order is military nonsense, is it a legitimate order? He also knows his command has only passed this order to him because it came from Hitler, and that his command are far too afraid of Hitler to tear it up, as is Paulus. And that is because Hitler also controls other forces who would certainly do to the relatives of Paulus and his command whatever Hitler might want done to them if his Stalingrad order is not obeyed. Then there is the matter of the men under the command of Paulus. In their regard he has two responsibilities to them, one is to require them to die while he thinks, the other is to require them to live while he thinks. What can Paulus do but accept what comes until in his mind he can balance the actual slaughter of his men against the possible slaughter of his relatives, neither of which groups are of any great concern at all to all the rest of the world. What begins with resolution of forces, turns into the pros and cons of logistics, and ends waiting for one probability line going down the graph to cross one real line going up the graph. And by then the original dilemma, what to do in regard to his improper proper orders to do an improper proper thing in Russia, is no longer even on the chart. You might also care to consider the case of Marshall Petain and Vichy France, particularly in regard to shattered trust in the Maginot Line, trust in a shattered France, a future of German domination, what he might say before colleagues and enemies any or all of whom might be liars, a future of Allied domination, the accusing finger, and what he might say before his judges at his trial where at least some of the witnesses on both sides were liars. I choose these two because Paulus was guilty but is considered innocent, and old Petain was innocent but is considered guilty.

Gwen Jones / Theo - C96/34: You're quite right to query the wording of my challenge: "Show that it would be possible for a human being to make a perfect God angry". Trouble was I fiddled about with it so much it came to seem quite precise and elegant. But, in fact, it is a bit vague and rather cumbersome. And it also contains a distinct fault. First the fault: "a perfect God" is not intended to mean any one of many perfect Gods amongst many imperfect Gods. It is meant only to mean suppose there is one God, and that that God is perfect. And now I have a double "that" which is awful, but so be that. Then the words: Perfect means; terrific, wonderful, flawless, all powerful, tremendous, supreme, ultimate, infinite, and whatever else is necessary to mean can do everything all at once and never makes a mistake, ever, sort of God. And.



Anger means, annoyed, peeved, irritated, etc., and possibly wrathful but only in the sense of becoming wrathful and not in the sense of sitting there looking for an excuse to be even more wrathful. One does not feel that God actually sits there in a constant fume from high spirit pressure.

Having said all that, as far as I can see you have both anyway got a fair sense of what I was addressing in the challenge. Basically; the inconsistencies between the likely capabilities of the God usually declared and many of the attitudes, and sometimes actions, that God is said to take in response to human thoughts and deeds. I can perhaps best express my own view by analogy. We know that sometimes a piece of equipment might only work after it is given a moderate knock or kick. From that one might try to argue God gives us a tap on the shoulder now and then to try and keep us on the right path. But, surely that is a false argument. We only use the tap it approach to get a machine going for two reasons. One is that we don't know where the fault is, and the other is that though we know where the fault is, for some reason or other we choose not to fix it properly. Now, are we seriously to suppose the technician in charge of the universe is unable to work out where our faults lay and fix them, or that for some reason that technician chooses not to intervene that way but chooses instead to intervene another way, by giving us quick prods in the rear. It is all too unlikely, it is not what duty of care means.

But there is another side to this. Gwen is quite right to ask me if I see anger as inconsistent with a perfect God or emotion in general. It is the latter. Suppose, to complete the evolution of God, the New Testament God is developed into a more technically minded dispassionate God, one that is just interested. Such a God would still imply we asked to be here and asked for no interventions. Little in any religion need be abandoned, far more it would just be a case of re-examining the way whatever it was works, prayer, for example. If there were any major changes then perhaps they would only be that we abandon the notion of a forgiving God, because no one is ever accused, and get a God who can indeed sit back and watch us run ourselves into the ground, but as part of our experiment and not as part of God's. And the suggested God would not worry about any of that because it is implied we would all come out alright in the end. The master technician having assured we are in a fail safe universe in which nothing truly vital can be damaged beyond eventual repair.

Which leads to part two of the challenge: Show that it would it be possible for a human being to make a perfect God love.

In direct response to Gwen's two main points. In 1. It is very curious, but substituting love for anger in Gwen's queries seems to create almost a Mediaeval feel to the whole thing. So, is it possible I am going backwards? Whatever. The usual advice from all advisors in all fields is to keep calm when making any decision and not to let one's emotions lead one astray. Presumably this means emotions are not to be trusted. So, would a perfect God have any? And if that God has emotions then would that mean they are so perfectly tuned they are in fact no longer emotions. In 2. It is entirely up to you. Choose the God and show the evidence or choose the evidence and show the God. In theory the same God should appear either way.



Albert : I know you always give me the option to cut your offerings, but that makes me feel like a censor. Please - only your "best two sides" next time. Apologies, no time to address your thoughts this outing. The same goes for almost everyone else from now on this issue

Theo

27th April 1999

Michael Nisbet

COMMENTS ON C96

For now, just a note to tie up one or two loose ends.

Apologies for the blunder pointed out in your footnote at **C96/10**. The sentence should read: 'Now, if the predicate exists in the mind as well as the subject, it must either (1) exist in the mind *in the same way* as the subject or (2) it must exist in the mind in a different way.'

I think the core of Moore's argument is that there is a sensation e.g. of blue that is not itself blue, yet we tend to confound the sensation with what it is of, which allows what he considered to be an idealist fallacy to arise. It is interesting to note that S.T. Coleridge, in some philosophical excursion of his, apparently drew up a distinction that seems to relate to this. According to him, a 'conscious presentation' is (1) *a sensation* in so far as it relates to a 'modification of one's own being' and (2) a *perception* in so far as it refers or relates to an object.

As for my attempted analysis of a tautological element in statements such as 'I see blue', of course my identity does not consist in any particular sensation or group of sensations or in sensations generally. But personal identity, it seems to me, arises within the context of perceptions and actions, which in language are reduced to subject-object terms. The core of my personal identity is the 'I' that acts and perceives (and subsequently thinks), and language encourages me to see that 'I' as having in itself an identity or substance that transcends any given action or perception. But in the last analysis that 'I' exists relative to what it perceives, thinks and does in the same way that what is perceived, thought and done exists in relation to that 'I'. In the sentences "I see blue" the prior term (if anything) is not either 'I' or 'blue'; it is that which relates the two: 'see'.

The Escher staircase provides a kind of inverse analogy. The unity of the staircase is revealed as an illusion from any perspective apart from a particular one. The dichotomy of subject and object, and of mind and matter, is revealed as an illusion from a relation-as-prior perspective.

On the morality and personhood front, the denial of the personhood of a human entity is rarely complete. This does of course happen from time to time, as where lynchings occur. Some measure of personhood (and hence last rites etc.) may be accorded to the



condemned criminal by a society that has adopted humanitarian notions of a universal personhood, at least so far as its own members are concerned; and the football in no-man's land bears witness to such notions applying temporarily beyond national boundaries. There is always a tension between the identity of the group, which defines personhood in terms of that group and in contradistinction to the human entities excluded from it, and the perception that any entity capable of reflexive awareness is potentially a person. A human entity can both be and not be a person. Personhood is relative to the defining group, and the perceptions of the members of a group are subject to change. We cannot with a good conscience kill an entity admitted to the person category. If we kill someone whom the group that we belong to authorises us to kill in so far as that someone has been excluded from the category, and subsequently that person is admitted, then a quandary of conscience is inevitable.

To kill an entity maliciously when that entity has been admitted to the person category is murder. Euthanasia is not malicious, but there are circumstances in which a malicious killing could masquerade as euthanasia. I think that this is the core of the euthanasia problem.

I agree that my statement about the nature of objective fact towards the end of my **C96** contribution is a bit too gnomic, but it will have served a useful purpose if, as you hope, it sparks off debate. I shall refrain for the present from commenting further, other than to say that perhaps I should have said something like : A statement intended to relate to 'objective matters of fact' pertains to a context of agreement, or to a shared context.

Objectivity cannot be established save where agreement is possible. Conversely, a subjective statement pertains to a private world that cannot be shared. Yet there are degrees of subjectivity that shade over into degrees of objectivity: in other words, a continuum that has been severed by the subject-object dichotomy.

I hope to be able to respond to some of the various and interesting contributions to **C96** shortly, although possibly post-Braziers.

Michael Nisbet

14th May 1999

Rick Street

**LIFE, EXISTENCE, GENETICS, GOD, SOCIETY, MORALITY,
PROOF AND MATHEMATICS**

Graham Dare (C96 page 6) - The Meanings Of Life: Your three possible meanings are less mutually exclusive than you seem to think. What you are forgetting is the possibility of alien invasion. These weapons that you assume to be always dangerous to the survival of humanity are in fact quite likely to eventually save us from a hostile



non-human species. It is this that balances the dangers of weapons research leaving medical research to be an entirely beneficial area of human knowledge. Consequently, on balance the **pursuit of knowledge** is *fundamental* to **protecting our species from extinction**. What's more the **spread of happiness** is rather like the glue or oil or whatever that keeps things together and working properly, 'cos things that jeopardise the survival of the species don't generally make large numbers of people happy.

Theo (C96 page 7) - Why Should There Be A Meaning To Life?: Why indeed? Graham seems to think so! Does this mean that Grahams life has meaning and yours doesn't? Or do you believe that each person's life has its own meaning whereas Graham believes in a more universal meaning (or meanings)? And what if everyone looked inside themselves to find out their own personal meaning and wrote it down on a piece of paper and once revealed this piece of paper showed everyone's personal meaning to be the same? Why should there be a meaning to life? But if there is then what does that imply?

Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Mike Nisbet, Theo & Stef Gula (C96 pages 8-11) - Existence: That *is* what you mean by the rather unintelligible phrase "the subject-object dichotomy" isn't it? Remind me never to read *The Vocabulary of Philosophy* by William Flemming or indeed Lewes' *Biographical History Of Philosophy Volume IV* 'cos the latter has made a right pigs arse of explaining the ideas of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel and the former probably only quoted it verbatim cos he couldn't figure out what the hell the latter was on about. How you can call this a very neat summary, Mike, I'll never know. Personally I have no prior knowledge of any of these thinkers or their ideas so I rely entirely upon the quote for what follows, and what follows is my attempt to translate the quote into English. Please tell me if this interpretation is wrong.

Fichte - Subjective Idealism: The only thing that really exists is the mind (ie the subject). Everything else is merely perception within the mind (ie ideas hence idealism).

Schelling - Objective Idealism: The only thing that really exists is the totality of everything as a single entity. Any divisions we make of this totality (including our own individuality) are merely perceptions created by us. Viewed objectively everything is just ideas.

Hegel - Absolute Idealism: The only things that are real are the relationships between things that are only defined by the relationships themselves. Absolutely everything we consider to exist is all just ideas and the only reality is beyond our perception.

And according to Mike...

Bishop Berkeley - Idealism: Nothing really exists. Everything is just perception (ideas).



...as opposed to...

Anyone with any common sense - Realism: Stuff really exists.

Frank Walker (C96 pages 13&14) - Castrating Criminals: Who says that 500 years of removing criminal genes by hanging was ineffective? Obviously we still have criminals but who's to say how many more we might have if all those miscreants had been allowed to go forth and multiply. And you answered your own question about Australian crime rates. Most criminals deported to Australia died in their first couple of years and many thousands of law abiding citizens have emigrated to Australia since it stopped being used as a penal colony. I actually doubt that modern Australia's criminal heritage is significantly higher than anywhere else.

Personally I broadly agree that there isn't a criminal gene per se. However it seems obvious to me that some people are going to be genetically more predisposed to committing certain types of crimes than others. Any dog breeder will tell you that its not difficult to breed aggressiveness into a fighting dog or out of a lap dog. And although us humans are less influenced by genetics than dogs because of our more rational cerebral configuration, our animal instincts haven't been totally forsaken by any means.

But its not the genetics that's really the issue. Its the upbringing! Even an adopted child is more likely to grow up to be a criminal if they are taught from an early age that life is just about looking after number one and breaking the rules is ok as long as you can get away with it.

Mark Griffin & Theo (C96 pages 16-18) – God's Will: It is God's will that man should be free to do as he pleases and suffer the consequences at God's hand if he does wrong. Atrocities committed by humans in God's name will probably be seen as atrocities by God and punished accordingly. Atrocities committed by God should not be seen as atrocities 'cos we do not have the power to punish God. But what of atrocities committed by the state ? Should we not see them as atrocities because we lack the power to punish the state ?

Nigel Perks (C96 pages 23-25) - Modern Society: I pretty much agree with everything you say! However I do think that modern society has lost something. Many people attribute this to capitalism but I attribute this to education. Parents trust the state to educate their children but the state is not capable of doing this properly, therefore many people leave school with no relevant skills to exchange for the money that they need in order to enjoy the kind of lifestyle that they grow up to expect. In simpler cultures children learn directly from their parents or within extended families and as a result grow up much better equipped for adult life. I think that teaching children is too complex to be left to teachers. It is those who have and use relevant job skills that should be educating the next generation not people who have had an exclusively academic careers. All a teacher can really teach you... is how to be a teacher!



Fred Hobson (C96 page 32&33) - Morality and Law: These two things are quite distinct. In an ideal world laws would be agreed upon by democratic consensus of those expected to abide by them but this clearly isn't the case. Laws are forced upon us by people we'll never even meet and administered by people who are "just doing their job". If I were in your position I'd go for the closest thing to justice that was available to me. Just as a true sociopath forfeits his right to social privileges so an oppressive, unjust inquisition forfeits its right to honest responses. If I were to get mugged and I had the means to incapacitate my attacker I would harbour no guilt regarding the violence of my actions. Similarly if I were mugged by the legal system I would harbour no guilt regarding any dishonesty I might need to use in order to defend myself.

Gödel (C96 page 35) - Mathematical Proof Of God's Existence My Ar!:** Axiom 1 "A property is positive if and only if its negation is negative" is fine! Axiom 2 "A property is positive if it necessarily contains a positive property" is... shall we say... two of the more spherical parts of the male reproductive anatomy! For example, lets assume that intelligence is a positive property and a pre-requisite for success. Neither of which are true but that is unimportant for testing the logic. This would mean that according to axiom 2 success is therefore positive. Success is a property that necessarily contains a positive property ie. intelligence. However success may also contain ruthlessness which may be a negative property and cancel out any positivity conferred on success by intelligence.

Daniel J Berger (C96 page 36) - St Anselm: You may well believe St Anselm's ontological argument "God = perfection; existence is a necessary part of perfection; therefore God exists" to be the weakest of the classic formal arguments for God's existence but personally I believe it to be utter rubbish ! You may as well say "God exists therefore God exists QED". Its a totally circular argument that proves nothing whatsoever. In fact, why are we even discussing it !?

John Brink (C96 pages 36&37) - Proof: A good beginning broadly agreeing with me about Gödel's axiom 2 but let down later on by the implication that anyone can or should try to prove anything. Proof is the protection of a belief from question, by the logical association with less questionable beliefs. He who attempts proof is insecure in himself.

Stan Tenan (C96 page 37) - Does God Exist: Of course God exists! Like you so rightly say, Stan, the only question is What does the word "God" mean? Is he a fictional character in a book called The Bible? Is he a deliberately manufactured myth intended to control the population? Is he exactly what the Pope says he is? Is he exactly what Jesus said he is and if so can we ever find out exactly what Jesus said, so long after he said it? Will any two people ever agree on a definition? Probably not!

V. V. Raman (C96 page 37&38) - Mathematics and Religion: Nice one V.!



Theo (C96 page 40) - Mathematics: Discovered or Invented?: Mathematical theories (such as $2+2=4$) get invented first and then some of these inventions are discovered to be true by rigorous testing. Of course nothing can ever be proved beyond ALL doubt but mathematics is a closed enough field to mean that the approximation of truth is reliable enough to be assumed to be actual truth. Mathematicians start to look stupid when they try to apply mathematics to things other than numbers.

The Entire PDG Readership: You can wake up now I've finished.

Rick Street

20th April 1999

Alan Carr

ROUGH THOUGHTS ON INDIVIDUALS & OBJECTS

Below is a rough synopsis of what I have been working on, and the more I think of it the rougher it gets !

I must begin (if there is such a thing) with an admission of failure, failure in that all I write is only an interpretation, a description of what I perceive to be reality and no more, no matter how pure its reflection of reality and for this I apologise.

My capacity to describe an object is limited by my ability to realise what that object is, for I am not the object, and my description or interpretation is not the object either. I cannot become the object, I can only interact with it, and this interaction is subjective and so the realisation of the object is beyond my capacity, it is objective. My description or interpretation can evolve each time I describe or interpret and this can differ from any and everybody else's description or interpretation.

I can only describe or interpret myself as a human entity subjectively, although I, being an object, can only describe or interpret myself subjectively. This does mean that what I am is beyond my capacity to realise, but my interaction with reality, myself included, has the potential to build up my framework or scaffold of corresponding descriptions and interpretations of reality and the potential to evolve the realisation of what I as an object am.

Can the human entity be separated from: the ground it stands on, the air it breathes, the water it drinks, the space it occupies, the time it exists in, and whatever else ?
Is this separation possible ? Can there be a single or individual or individual object ?

Or



Is every thing / object connected in objective reality ?

There is a potential infinity of descriptions and interpretations of reality. If / when I look at an object(reality) I see a reflection of the object(reality). If / when I look into a mirror, into the eye of my reflection then am I looking at :-

- my reflection ?
- my reflection of my reflection ?
- my reflection of my reflection of my reflection ?
- a potential infinity of reflections ?
- an infinity of reflections ?
- or all of the above ?

Although there is a potential infinity of descriptions and interpretations, I must divide them into two groups relevant to the human entities interaction with reality :-

Corresponding :-

where all descriptions and interpretations correspond or do not contradict previous descriptions or interpretations of reality, this being limited by the human entities capacity for realisation.

Non-corresponding :-

where descriptions or interpretations contradict one another and no framework or scaffold, or structural interpretation of reality can be realised.

The expression of language is our most evolved form of description / interpretation, but the expression of language is subjective and therefore potentially impotent as a means of communication. Communication is possible between human entities because although the human entity experiences reality subjectively, they can share the experience of reality. The expression of language evolved with the human entity's ability to describe shared experiences. This being the basis of communication is also a limitation of communication as those sharing the experience of reality will have difficulty relating or communicating with those not sharing the experience.

That there are potentially infinite descriptions or interpretations of reality, then opposing descriptions and interpretations of reality are possible, and while both opposing sets of descriptions and interpretations are potentially valid for us, they are not reality itself, only descriptions and interpretations of reality. The evolution of the framework or scaffold of description or interpretation of reality is through the asking of questions. A question has the potential to build up the framework or scaffold of corresponding descriptions or interpretations, creating a clearer picture of reality for the human entity or society which possesses the framework or scaffold, or rather the potential of the question being relative to the capacity of realisation of the human entity or society.



Theo understand that this an unpolished cut out of some of the work I am engaged in at the moment, but I would appreciate your opinion on the above passages.

Alan Carr

Alan : Thanks for these thoughts, and for the extended ones received a few weeks back. I'll get round to them eventually, if others in the PDG readership don't get there first.

Theo

April 1999

Ann MacKinnon Kucera

THE CREATION OF A HERO

We have lately witnessed an extraordinary confrontation between our¹ president and a massive group of legalists and moralists. One would assume that the mostly law-abiding citizens of the country would have backed the moralists in their efforts to bring Mr. Clinton to justice, but unless the constant polls of public opinion, taken to assess the effect of his having been brought before the congressional bar were faulty or dishonest, his popularity has increased rather than diminished. Indeed the polls show that his popularity has increased from a so-so condition to that of overwhelming approval since the discovery of serial lifestyle. Although the populace now agrees that he has also broken the law and shown signs of being dishonest and unreliable in his position of power, it does not want him removed from that position of power. One commentator expressed his surprise at this state of affairs and said that Clinton should be eternally grateful to Monica Lewinsky for changing him from a barely acceptable president to an object of irrational adoration, for he could see no other explanation for the change. It is a mystery defying reason and deserving of intense scrutiny.

We intelligent, educated, thoughtful, cautious adults who make up surely twenty percent of the population cannot make head nor tail of the situation. The hierarchy of our society is shaken up; common sense is offended. Anxiety is the order of the day. We have the future of the country, its precedents, its necessary legislation to look to. Will husbands leave their wives, will children disobey their parents ? Will a number of laws have to be re-written ? I cannot see a good way clear before us in the tangle resulting from the clash between our elected representative and our other elected representatives.

The duller or more ignorant half of the population has fixed its heart upon Clinton, and so has a good hunk of the thinking people. There ought to be identifiable causes for this outpouring of love and I have tried to narrow them down to three.

¹ Ann writes from her perspective in the US. I have retained the US English spelling.



1. **Loyalty.** Loyalty is a very simple thing; a wolf pack knows all about it. There are those men who still cling to bow ties or a favorite brand of cigarette, not to speak of loyalty to one's clan when it defies the rest of society. We generally consider it a virtue, perhaps it is the lowest and simplest member in the family of virtues. Even two drops of water will cling together, or two oxygen atoms. Presumably those die-hard Democrats who voted for Clinton, as well as those who chose him on whim, will stick to him, no matter what, and I say hurrah to them. They will account for a large part of his approval, but what of the rest ?
2. **Mirror-love.** Do those who perform acts like his find that what he does is good because they do the same ? It is the simple psychological explanation; we are all narcissists admiring our own reflections. I see his behavior reflected in a certain number of people around me, though most of them hide it and act ashamed. They may account for a percentage of his approval, but half of those naughty people are Republicans whose own loyalty would reduce the numbers of apologists.
3. **Hero worship.** It seems to be a condition built into most of us. Some worship God, some look nearer and offer their love to a tangible person, having mythicized him quite a lot first to suit their fancies. Quite a few of our presidents have been mythicized and worshipped, so I selected this theory for further exploration and turned to Thomas Carlyle's famous essay *On Heroes and Heroism*. He starts with the worship of Odin as the most primitive worship he can find. This is from the first chapter:

"This poor Scandinavian hero-worship, that whole Norse way of looking at the universe and adjusting oneself there, has an indestructible merit for us. A rude childlike way of recognizing the divineness of nature, the divineness of man; most rude, yet heart-felt, robust, giantlike, betokening what a giant of a man this child would grow to!"

I find it proper, though not very polite, to compare us to the early, uncivilized Scandinavians, for our people do not have the mellowness of the more established Europeans. For in our country the continually arriving immigrants and the constantly moving native born have often to start over again acquiring new language and new habits of thought from always rubbing against strangers. We have only a thin coating of educational and theological varnish to hold us together while underneath seethes warring views of worthwhileness, practice and purpose. Indeed we are childish, rude, and though we have some scattered leaders and scattered elements of civilization, there lacks a unifying vision or model for us to follow. Perhaps the real American Dream consists of a sullen independent desire not to be disturbed, not to change, not to be put upon, to drag the feet, not to embrace ideas.

Carlyle lists the attributes of the primitive hero:

1. Big, strong
2. Man of genius



3. Sincere recognition of Nature
4. The chosen one stepping forward
5. Brave, Courageous
6. Beautiful traits of pity

It is said of Jimmy Carter, whom we saw occupying the presidential seat, that he was not at all what he appeared to be but was merely a construction of his handlers. Clinton also is partly himself and partly an artificial construction built up by his very smart public relations people. To be sure he is himself big and strong, the chosen one stepping forward, and after recent events, we realize that he sincerely recognizes Nature. As for brave and courageous, he might be frowned on for dodging the draft, which may not have shown cowardice, but only an unwillingness to put himself out for others. His present continual foolhardiness and love of gambling seem to require a pretty high degree of courage.

He is generally viewed as a man of genius; I have heard it many times. It is probably based upon his having been chosen as a Rhodes Scholar. But since 1969 or earlier the Rhodes Scholars have not been selected for their academic brilliance but for their leadership potential, which he had in quantity at that date, as big man on campus. The real men of genius are behind him, hidden in the offices of the White House.

To return to Mr. Clinton as a natural man, one would think that there would be general disapproval among all us puritans over his sexual excesses. However, the demographics of the country have changed dramatically. When I lived in Puerto Rico I was surprised to find the windows of the houses barred for fear of rape, all unescorted females (even ugly ones) obliged to remain in the stuffy tropical indoors for protection after dusk. I was told that the men think it is their manly duty to attack as many women as possible. My Cuban professor told me that the New England Puritans are the traditional enemies of the Central Americans, because of their prim and stuffy ways. An election poster in San Juan showed the candidate's name and face, the office sought, and a fine pair of big muscular hairy arms.

As for beautiful traits of pity, it has been difficult to make Clinton look like Dr. Schweitzer or Mother Theresa, but both he and Mrs. Clinton are kept to a hard schedule of visiting the poor, the old and the undereducated, where they sigh in a heartfelt way, scattering alms and also promises to make things better.

Before Monica he was just the president, liked for his partially mythical qualities by the hair-worshipping populace, before whom he was constantly paraded, and disliked for his inattention to order and for his prodigality by the more worrying part of the country. After Monica he appeared to possess that final gift of Nature which he had hitherto lacked. It will be interesting to see if the worshipping majority will stomach his Jovial excesses lately revealed.

Ann Kucera



14th April 1998

Valerie Ransford

REVELATIONS & AXIOMS

Thank you for the incredible *Commensal* 96.

I'm so sorry that John Stubbings thought I wrote incoherent babble. I think his babble is no more coherent than mine. Do I have to give a reason ? No. My attitude comes from a revelation, and I'm grateful to him for suggesting that I could do this. How can one deal with the statement : "The art vs craft debate is just a subject the anally retentive use to induce nausea" ? One needs revelation here, as one does with most of his oracular pronouncements.

Albert Dean's comments on **C96/22** are very helpful. I now realise that other people are now producing models, where the medium is the electrostatic field and that my not agreeing with them is a revealed characteristic of my model.

V.V. Raman's writing on **C96/37** impressed me because I too believe that maths has aesthetic beauty and spiritual grandeur.

I've noted, Theo, that you like there to be a point. Well, the point of all this is that revelations and oracular pronouncements from Stubbings' to V.V. Raman's are relevant to philosophers. What should we do ? Should we break everything that is said down into propositions ? What happens if some are more skilled in logic than others ? What are our axioms ? Do we all know what our axioms are ? Do we agree about self-evident truths ?

Incidentally, I swear I'll never perpetrate a gratuitous display of bad taste, ever.

Valerie Ransford1st May 1999

Anthony Owens

VARIOUS RESPONSES TO COMMENSAL 96

I'm not trying to annoy, honest (**Theo C96/16**). I try to be pithy and to the point. See, you're driving me to tautology now. Can we have a little bit of pithy first and then I'll get serious ?

Thanks to **John Stubbings (C96/7)**, even if he is no longer there. For painting read sculpture, music, prose, and poetry: all derived from once-useful procedures or occurrences. Painting. pictography, though **Albert Dean (C96/19)** is right: still useful: like those road signs which make you think, "Does that mean I have right of way or he does? Aaargh!". Sculpture.. randy cavemen: need I say more ? Have you never wondered why early sculptures had no clothes on ? Music: various volumes of running water plus a bit of wind and thunder heralding



rain. Great news if you're thirsty, or had just got your Spring veg. in. Prose: tales to let the kids know what's what. Poetry: ditto, with some memory-aiding repetitive features. Nothing to do with Art for Art's sake. That came after the good became the pleasurable. A cul-de-sac for the human mind.

Speaking of cul-de-sacs (take your teeth out now Theo, I wouldn't want you to break them), leads naturally to mathematics. I've already proved that $1 + 1 = 2$ is a departure from reality (C90/8); and no matter how innovative we get at measuring space or how useful it might prove, I can't see any way back to reality if the very first mathematical step we took is away from it.

Are you quite sure that causality has gone '*out of the window*'; or does '*statistical predictability*' simply measure the width of our own blinkers. Consider the sentence, "*if we wanted to know why the alpha particle was emitted at that particular time we would have to know the microscopic structure of the whole world, including ourselves, and that is impossible*". The implication is that the particle is not emitted statistically; and that the '*microscopic structure of the whole world*' is not only involved in the event but the world state before the event could be used to forecast it but for the impossibility of discovering what that state was. Who wrote it ? **Werner Heisenberg; *Physics and Philosophy*; Pelican, 1989.** That's good enough for me.

Gödel's proof of God's existence (C96/35) seems to me to depend on questions of existence. Can an entity exist of itself, unchanging ? If so, any negative of it is not necessary. God, as the perfect Being, must be capable of such existence. Thus Gödel's argument, as I see it, fails at the first hurdle. If Gödel is assuming that evil is the negation of God then, as George A. Sargeant says (C96/36), being God-like could be negative from Gödel's argument. A perfect Being must include both positive and negative within itself (note that Being and not-Being are not opposites) or it lacks something and would thus not be complete, completeness being a necessary attribute of a perfect Being. I have always interpreted the doctrine of the Trinity as meaning that evil, personified by the devil, is the negative of God the Son. This implies that the devil does come from God the Father, which might seem to pose a theological problem. I reconcile this by assuming that in the act of creating perfect good, perfect evil came about as a necessary consequence, but not a deliberate creative act.

Though I balk at Stan Tenen's proposition (C96/37) that '*Atman and Brahman are One*', I would agree that we are God-like in our recognition of good and evil. I would also agree that consciousness and physicality are aspects of the same thing. Physicality is the illusion in which evil is trapped while consciousness escapes at death.

Proving this, indeed proving the existence of God is quite another matter. Is God Plato's geometer ? Mathematics may be eternal, but while it may also be always incomplete that isn't the same as fully infinite. In fact mathematics recognises an infinity of infinities: all limited to mathematics of course. Semantics has never been its strong point. Is God Origen's miracle-worker? If science could provide a complete description of the workings of the world and everything in it; and if an event could be shown to be counter to it and attributable to God: perhaps; but I wouldn't hold your



breath ! Is God Aristotle's unmoved mover; or Aquinas' first cause? If God can, must, be infinite, why cannot moves and causes ? Is God Anselm's best possible being; on the grounds that a best possible being must exist because if it didn't exist then it wouldn't be the best possible. This seems to leave open the question as to whether God could improve, which contradicts His C.V.! Is God Rousseau's private experience? As it was private, you'll have to ask Rousseau ! Is God Leibnitz's designer ? One might suspect that He could have done a better job, which ought to be impossible!

My favoured option starts at the point where some sort of existence cannot be doubted: Descartes' '*Cogito ergo sum*': Before anything can exist it must be preceded by the potential for its existence. Therefore the potential for all that did, does, or will exist must have some form of existence of itself. The problem is whether the potential is used up in becoming actuality. If not; and one might use the conservation of energy as an analogy; then it follows as a bonus that anything that did, does or will ever exist must be capable of re-existence.

Of course, if one could prove the existence of God incontrovertibly this might seem to be inconsistent with free will, which might seem to be also impossible to prove. Then there is the inequality inherent in any proof. Why should only those who understand it benefit ? This would hardly be a mirror of God's perfection. Is this proof that God's existence must necessarily be unprovable ?

The analysis of previous proofs is based on, **Bertrand Russell; *A History of Western Philosophy*; George Allen & Unwin, 1983.** (The truncations, adaptations, comments and errors are mine, of course.)

Anthony Owens

30th April 1999

Maureen Dominey

OPENING THOUGHTS

I, like Gwen Jones, consider myself to merely have a philosophical turn of mind. I do hope, however, that my personal lack of "training" will not prevent me from reading and contributing to *Commensal*.

I found *Commensal* a thoroughly interesting read. I was particularly interested in John Stubbing's final contribution: what an angry man he appears to be ! I do hope that other members have a bit more respect for other people's contributions. I do hope that no one chastises me for writing "twaddle" or "incoherent babble".

Also, thank you for printing Gödel's Mathematical Proof of God's Existence. This did, initially, fascinate me. However, after a few moments thought, I got the distinct feeling that I'd seen various forms of this argument before. Maybe it is hoped that this argument is a stronger version of Anselm's, but it really does nothing for me.



24th April 1999**Gwen Jones****RE ALAN EDMONDS' "WHAT DOES IQ MEASURE ?" (C96/5)**

Statistics can too easily be misunderstood or misrepresented. The 20th Century has an appalling record for this, particularly where policies based on racial and social assumptions have been carried out. The measurement of intelligence hasn't been immune to such prejudices, so it's worthwhile to look at the history of intelligence testing.

When states began to invest money in compulsory education they did so not out of altruism, but because the industrial revolution had created a demand for an educated labour force (and perhaps for other reasons too). It was soon realised that an enormous amount of talent was being wasted. In order to identify those children who would most benefit from advanced education (and who would therefore be of particular value to a state wishing to compete in the world's market-place) intelligence testing was developed. For the first time in history, children could gain access to advanced education purely on intellectual ability, regardless of the wealth of their parents. (It has never been that simple, but I'm not writing a book !) Most of us consider that this was Progress and a Good Thing.

In time it became clear that much talent was still slipping through the net. Comprehensive schools were seen as the answer; intelligence testing as a screening tool became unnecessary.

Until that time, there had been no demand that intelligence tests (IQ is a score relating performance on an intelligence test to age) should test anything more than the understanding and use of language and logic (ie. the abilities necessary for a child to benefit from an academic education). Now a demand for intelligence tests which could be used for diagnostic purposes arose, and hence a desire to identify and define different facets of intelligence.

What intelligence is not is a fixed feature of the individual. It can change over time (even during the course of a day), and is influenced by heredity, environment, health and other factors. It can be enhanced by making improvements in certain of these factors - or is it that an individual's test performance ability can be enhanced ?

It is not the case that if we can't define what we measure, it doesn't exist. It's my view that the question WHAT DOES IQ MEASURE ? is pointless outside of the context WHY DO WE WANT TO MEASURE IT ?

Gwen Jones

17th May 1999

Frank Walker

COMMENTS ON COMMENSAL 95

As **C95** was in the post to me I was in an ambulance on my way to hospital with a broken hip, now mending nicely thank you. This is my specious excuse for being late in responding. Specious, because enforced immobility gives more time for reading, thinking and writing. The truth is that the immobility adds to my ingrained lethargy and procrastination. However, here goes :-

C95/29 : You ask us to define philosophy. Etymologically it means love of wisdom. In English it is a label for a branch of knowledge / learning / study and means the pursuit and study of wisdom. No more need be said.

For me it raises the old question, *what does IQ measure* ? I think it measures cognitive ability; that is to say the ability to recognise, classify and manipulate the objects and classes of all kinds and to draw deductions from doing so. I take the word of the experts that it is an ability that can be accurately and consistently measured in any one individual. It is useful in many every-day activities and can be used to acquire money and power. It is confusing to call it intelligence because it has no relationship to wisdom. Rather, it is the sort of thing that computers do very well and I will go to the stake if necessary in support of the proposition that computers are incapable of any grain of wisdom. In so far as computers have intelligence it is, no more and no less, the intelligence programmed into them by the individual programmer, who, being human, is prone to error (eg. the millennium bug).

Assuming Mensans all have an IQ above whatever the level is, let me quote three examples of what I mean :-

- a) Some of the contributions to Mensa Magazine are clearly written by people who are, as the saying goes, as daft as a brush.
- b) Something like a third of the SIGs are clearly concerned with branches of "knowledge" of no interest whatsoever, because they are false, or trivial, to anyone who is wise.
- c) The Annual Meeting a few years back was proudly advertised as Power, Money and Sex. Presumably the name was approved by our governing body. In sufficient and moderate quantities power, money and sex are agreeable and enjoyable. But anyone with a grain of wisdom will avoid excess of each and every one of them like the plague.

Theo (C95/8-9) :

- a) You are uncertain what my argument was supposed to be. My intention was to set out the subject of murder and homicide in clear terms to dispel some misconceptions in earlier articles and to indicate grey areas at the edges. Some



homicides are illegal, notably manslaughter; some deeds that would otherwise be murder are justifiable and so not murder in law or morality.

- b) The policeman by virtue of his office, has a plain duty (i) to stop any crime being committed in his presence, (ii) to arrest criminals, (iii) to protect the public by keeping the peace, ie. stopping violence. You are right that each member of the public has the same duty to a lesser extent. But in doing so the policeman and the member of the public may use only reasonable force, whatever that means in any particular case. Usually killing the criminal or disturber of the peace will be excessive force.
- c) I was not trying to make out WW2 as a defensive effort on the part of the British. It was not, either in law or morality. It was a necessity to stop a brutal dictator (and his / their henchmen) from aggressive oppression. I must apologise for an unpardonable omission by me in my first “justifiable homicide”. It should have read “killing, by a member of the armed forces, of a member of the enemy army in time of war”. My examples of grey areas concerned the victim. My further examples under self defence, related to defence of the realm, concerned the attacker. Your confusion is entirely my fault.
- d) I think the lynch mob (named after American Judge Lynch) is largely an American phenomenon, by definition illegal and, in my opinion, immoral. You are right that there are no more outlaws because the arm of the law is now considered sufficiently long. I understand it is still the practice in the House of Commons to defer consideration of the Queen’s Speech until after their own concern, namely the first reading of a Bill “For the more effectual Suppression of Clandestine Outlawries”.
- e) Can God commit murder ? This hare seems to be running so I will defer comment as yet.

Paul Cadman (C95/13) : It is true that “silly rules” were most noticeable in schools and universities, but they also appeared in other aspects of education, eg. children should be seen and not heard. If, however, the education system is to include the entire process by which children are taught how to behave properly in the community and age in which they grow up then I stand by my thesis.

I stoutly deny that silly rules are the spark that ignites real crime later in life. At school and university before WW2 I and most of my friends were enthusiastic breakers of silly rules. Those who survived the war came back and lived on as exemplary law-abiding citizens. We despised the notable exceptions, Philby et al.

Leslie Haddow (C95/20-21) :

- a) The “big rise in crime” from the 1930s to the present is about a multiple of 5; that is big. I refer to serious crime (roughly, crime tried on indictment). The figure refers to criminal convictions. Over the same period the detection rate, ie. criminals brought to book for crimes known to the police, has decreased from 60-



70% to 25-30%. Discrimination against women and minorities is not, so far, a crime. It is true that computers did not exist then but the effect of computer crime on the statistics, so far, is minute. It was in the 1930s that cars were first designed to need a key to get into them and to start the engine. As to drugs, alcohol has been around since mankind first invented containers to store it in and cups to drink from. Tobacco was introduced to Europe from the Americas by Sir Walter Raleigh some 50 years after Catherine of Aragon died of lung cancer. De Quincy took up opium eating about 1803. Laudanum was then widely used as a pain killer. Nineteenth century fiction is full of opium dens. The opium wars were in the 1890s at which time Sherlock Holmes used cocaine to pass his idle hours. Cannabis is another American importation (mostly in WW2) this century.

It is true the crime rate in Great Britain (Ulster is a special case) is lower than practically anywhere in Europe or North America. It is also true that Great Britain has the second highest proportion of prisoners in gaol of the same area. Maybe these two figures are related.

- b) You are correct that Britain used to export a lot of its criminals. That is the first point I was making. Imperialism was certainly attended with a good deal of violence but not much of it illegal. On the other hand, Pax Britannica produced a lot of peace where there had been war.
- c) I maintain my stance on the in-built nature of teenage rebelliousness and can enlarge if need be.
- d) Moderate punishment for deliberate violation of rules laid down by lawful authority is never unjust however silly the rules may be.
- e) I object to the sneer about Victorian values. Crime and immorality are wrong equally in the first years of this century as in the last, or in the reign of Queen Victoria, or Queen Boadicea, or the Queen of the Amazons. I am not saying the Victorians were more or less moral than the present population; there is much to say on both sides. I do say the values to which they claimed to aspire were much better than ours today, and crime and criminal tendencies were much fewer. The front door, the side door, and the back door of my father's house were never locked during daylight hours and there was a fair bit of money and silverware lying about.

Finally, I am grateful to **Michael Nisbet (C96/11)** and **Albert Dean (C96/41)** for trying to ease my conscience about the sinking of U577. It is a nice thought that the Government may have paid my moral debts for me. My questions were, however, rhetorical, intended to provoke thought.

Frank Walker



May 1999**Dave Botting****MEDITATIONS ON RAND**

I have also read the books by Ayn Rand mentioned by Nigel Perks and found them ultimately impressive but also flawed as both literature and philosophy. The former is of no concern to this publication so I shall confine myself to the latter.

The major flaw is the amalgamation of several beings into a few, the 'Atlases' of the title. These are the industrial giants out of whose genius (and ego) progress comes. In Rand's work these supermen invent something new, manufacture it, sell it, and profit from it. In real life, these are distinct phases with typically a distinct person in charge of it. The people who are good at inventing things are not usually the same as the people who are good at selling them. More fatally, the latter can prosper without the former, because, the public being infinitely suggestible, they can be sold the image of a product with no actual product; the man ploughing the field may come home not with loaves of bread but with magic beans. In one place, Mr. Perks seems to acknowledge the adverse effect of advertisers without realising what a mess it makes of the simplistic system of exchange he describes.

In the same place Mr. Perks talks about 'doing the work we love'. Rand makes a great song-and-dance about the morality of working for the profit motive, but the fact is her characters work because their work is their overwhelming and arguably single, passion. Which is, of course, fine for them. But there is nothing that I am so passionate about that I want to spend forty hours a week for the next fifty years doing it. I work so that I can do whatever I like during the weekend. Depressing though this is, it is a fact and it is the rule to which the supermen are the exception.

I have already described how profit can be made with the image of a product with no actual product. Much the same kind of thing happens at the next stage of the process. The people who profit are seldom the people whose efforts have gone into bringing a product into the world. They are shareholders, and after making their initial investment they do nothing but submit themselves to the whims of the market. And why is the market so whimsical when the introduction of new products is sluggish by comparison? Because the share prices of a company have little to do with its product line but, yet again, simply on its image.

This brings us to what Rand calls the 'aristocracy of pull'. This is the idea that if the economy is controlled by groups of politicians then profit derives from influence over the minds of the politicians by means of 'hospitality' rather than influence over the natural world by means of technology. The latter would certainly seem preferable to the former. But does capitalism actually produce the latter? No, it merely transplants these tactics to the dynamic between seller and buyer, between 'image consultant' and 'demographic group'. I suppose one might argue that all this is not properly a part of 'capitalism' but should be categorised under 'commercialism' or 'consumerism'. This seems nit-picking to me unless someone can actually describe a socio-economic system where the one exists without the other. Any takers?



Where Rand is strongest is in her critique of Marxist notions of the workers being the value-producers and obtaining equality by seizing the means of production. The workers do not *produce* value any more than the secretary who types out the words of an author produces literature. They *maintain* value, and this is certainly not an unimportant job, and they can be trusted to keep the means of production running as long as nothing unpredictable happens. Since they are going through the motions of somebody else's thoughts they are scuppered when they actually have to think of something new.

On the subject of apathy, I think this is due to the superficial nature of freedom of choice. One is faced with choices which claim to be different but are so only in appearance. Why do so many people not bother to vote ? Because they think there is no real difference between the candidates. Again, image is everything, but due perhaps to the sporadic nature of these images we are not so easily fooled. How much more entrenched in our consciousness are images of nation, religion masculinity ? Structurally they are all similar and they all boil down to the same thing; somebody is trying to sell you something.

Dave Botting

29th April 1999

Michael Nisbett

ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

I couldn't resist responding to **C96/35** on Gödel's mathematical proof of God's existence, which D.J.Berger and others identify as a form of the ontological argument.

As you know, the ontological argument for the existence of God concerns the idea of a being who necessarily exists. It seeks to establish that the idea of a perfect being who does not exist is self-contradictory. This argument, as I understand, has been criticised by Kant and others along the following lines:

Existence cannot be both predicated and not predicated of an identical subject. God is such a subject and either exists or does not exist. If we begin with the idea of God, then God's existence is a possibility entertained by the mind: as such it is not a substantive existence. If on the other hand we presuppose the existence of God for the purposes of the argument, then the question is begged. The *idea* of a perfect being failing short of existence may indeed be self-contradictory: he would not be perfect if he did not also exist. But as an idea, God's existence is not substantive.

I understand that some theologians have approached the ontological argument as signifying an attempt to make explicit that which each of us is said to implicitly admit: the necessary existence of absolute being, or else (as I would prefer to put it) that the self (whether Atman or Brahman or both) is an integral or implicate part of reality. It seems to me that, if the question is approached from this direction, then



Bishop Berkeley seems to offer a far more satisfactory 'proof' via the implicit acknowledgement of the continuum underlying the subject-object dichotomy in his dictum: *esse est percipi*.

In any given act of perception it is not possible, subjectively and existentially, to separate the perceiver and the perceived. The separation that we experience is a linguistic one. If I examine any act of perception closely, and ask my self where, in terms of *actual perception*, the dividing line between myself and the object lies, I find that there is none. The division between what I call myself and the object lies, not in the act of perception itself, but in the words that I have learnt to apply to elements of it, or that in themselves actually constitute those elements. Neither the object nor the subject can otherwise be separated from the act of perception, which Berkeley conceives as being a mental act.

Yet, since the objects of perception do empirically seem to continue to exist independently of the perceptions of any particular and finite subject, it follows that everything must subsist in a universal subject or mind. Or so, more or less, Berkeley would argue: and thus the existence of God is established. Where, it seems to me, Berkeley falls down, is in falling short of the realisation that the mind / matter dichotomy is the product of reflexive awareness, and that neither term is prior to the other.

The question "did anything exist before there was a mind to perceive it?" 'is otiose. Before there were minds, the dichotomy did not exist. Mind and matter (as I have argued - did I hear "ad nauseam" ? - before) are established by contradistinction. There is not something called matter unless there is something called mind, and vice versa. Prior to the advent of mind, there was only the continuum out of which reflexive awareness creates the dichotomy.

Sorry to bore you with more of the same old stuff.

Michael Nisbet

5th June 1999

Theo Todman

IS IT RATIONAL TO BE RELIGIOUS ?

What follows is a brief paper on the subject "is it rational to be religious", which was presented at the "Mensa at Braziers" conference on 8th May 1999. It has been expanded slightly from the 6-page bullet-pointed hand-out delivered on the day, but is still only a sketch. It will doubtless lead to much debate and further opportunity to expand on obscure points and to develop themes. I have intended to be clear, so that blunders and oversights are obvious. Please point them out.



Motivation : Many highly intelligent and rational people have been religious, indeed, some of the greatest minds who have ever lived have been so. But religion amongst the rational is not a thing of the past, for even these days many rational people are religious. However, a question we must ask ourselves is *are they being rational when they are being religious ?*

There's also a current penchant for using religious language in popular science. Stephen Hawking is much to blame for re-introducing the term "the mind of God" into the (popular-) scientific arena with his choice of closing sentence in *A Brief History of Time*, with the baton being taken on by Paul Davies in his book of that name.

There is also an apparent rapprochement between science & religion as exemplified by the distinguished scientific participants in Sir John Templeton's Foundation for Humility Theology. John Polkinghorne, a former quantum mechanist and former Cambridge Professor of Theoretical Physics is a prime example, but John D. Barrow, R.J. Berry, Freeman Dyson & Russell Stannard will be known to many. Incidentally, the aims of humility theology, as stated in the JTF's newsletter *Progress in Theology*, are as follows :-

The Theology of Humility recognises the inadequacy of our senses and our intellect to fully comprehend the Creator who is omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, and infinite. Therefore, it encourages thinking which is open-minded and conclusions which are tentative, and encourages diversity as we build on the strengths of the past with new insights from the physical and human sciences.

Does such a project make sense ? How, from such a humble and temperate-sounding stance can we know that such a Creator exists ? We leave this on one side for the moment and return to our original question. But before we can address this question we need to define our terms. So what does it mean :-

- a). to be rational ?
- b). to be religious ?

Definitions can be either from the (philosophical) dictionary or be home-grown. Mine are primarily the latter; as I'm the author of this paper, it's what I mean by my terms that counts, provided the terms are not used idiosyncratically. Let my readers be the judges, for here goes :-

Rationality

The rational individual, when he / she acts rationally :-

1. Adopts beliefs on the basis of appropriate reasons, rather than on the basis of faith, emotion, authority or arbitrary choice. We'll come to what reasons are "appropriate" later, but let it be known that the four options just listed are not they !



2. Seeks to understand.
3. Seeks a consistent & sufficient world-picture.
4. Seeks out and follows the evidence.
5. Believes what's most likely to be true, not what we wish to be the case, nor what we can just about justify in an argument by subtle advocacy.
6. Seeks out a formal proof where possible or relevant
7. Is consistent. I.e. is not happy compartmentalising beliefs into mutually conflicting sectors that are never allowed to interact.
8. Is realistic; suspending judgement where necessary & being willing to say "I don't know" if the question is too hard.

Are we in agreement on this – has anyone other ideas on what constitutes rationality ?

Religion

When we come to religion we are on trickier ground. "Religious" is a very wide term and even atheists can be religious, it is said (eg. certain forms of Buddhism constitute a religion with no divine being, it is said). In what follows, I have tried to avoid too much focus on Christianity, especially on evangelical Christianity. The reason for the choice of the wider scope of "religious" rather than (say) "Christian" is that our popular science writers, when they use theological terms to spice up their writings, are not thinking of historic Christianity but something more nebulous.

For your information, so you can spot my biases, my own background is Christian, both Roman Catholic (Mystical – I was briefly a Carthusian monk) & Protestant (Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Dispensational). This may not mean much to you. Enough to say that Christainity was the main focus of my life for a decade or so. I'm also well aware that "religion falsely so called" is a bogey of the Evangelicals. My knowledge of other religions is somewhat meagre, and having seen outsiders' misrepresentations of Christianity, suggest that a proper understanding of them can only be had from the inside, from the perspective of belief and practise, which is impossible for many as such things cannot be turned on or adopted at will.

Because religions differ so much, and because of my professed near-universal ignorance, I have to call in the cavalry in the form of Ninian Smart, Professor of Religious Studies, University of California at Santa Barbara, who divides religion into seven dimensions, each of which is differently expressed & emphasised in the various religions. These dimensions are given as :-

1. Practical and Ritual
2. Experiential and Emotional
3. Narrative or Mythic
4. Doctrinal and Philosophical
5. Ethical and Legal
6. Social and Institutional
7. Material



I'm not sure where the three key Christian gifts of faith, hope & love fit in here ! Maybe into an amalgam of items 2, 4 & 5.

At the Braziers conference, I asked the question *How many people present would count themselves religious, whether confidently or shamefacedly ?* There was quite a positive response in that many did count themselves as religious, and fairly confidently so to. The “confidence” aspect was interesting, and has to do partly to do with the acceptance of “package deals” and partly to do with the division of apologetic labour. If one’s primary concern is with the truth or falsity of one’s position, one is bound to feel under pressure if one feels called upon to defend all of a religion (including those parts of which one has little knowledge or little belief) and if one thinks that it is for the individual to give the reason, not the bloke in the pulpit or the theologian in the university. Most believers, in my experience, would feel no greater compulsion to feel guilty about an inability to intellectually defend the minutiae of Christianity than they would the technicalities of quantum mechanics; that’s for the experts. What they are called on to do is “witness”. Where I part company is that I know that quantum mechanics is a difficult subject that requires experts; and I know that the experts are expert, because I’ve read them and been taught by them. I’m not convinced the same is true of religious subject-matter and its underlying philosophy. The priesthood has been de-frocked. Some, of course, think the same of what they term the scientific priesthood, but more of that later.

Returning to the subject, a religious attitude includes the holistic approach of rational thought, which is the area that makes this discussion interesting and of value, but is obviously not just this, nor, for most people, is it primarily so, nor, for some people, is it at all so. We might say that a religion is both or either of an attitude to life (a life-stance) or an explanatory system.

Finally, as an explanatory system, religion divides into :-

- the concrete (fundamentalist) and
- the poetic

As we will see, my view is that I would be comfortable with the former, were not all fundamentalisms false, whereas I don’t think the latter is a valuable approach at all.

What think ye so far ?

Some thoughts & fundamental beliefs

1. Rationality is not necessarily the highest virtue, but an enabling attitude if we want our statements to be true and our practise to be well guided.
2. It is important that our beliefs be true.
3. Rationality & religion are not necessarily antagonistic by their respective natures. However, I think that the temptation to believe what gives hope, comfort or a sense of belonging and purpose often leads the religious into irrationality. Experiential religion often partakes of the bizarre.



4. “Rationality” is not equivalent to “science”. It’s a continual temptation to assume they are, and to reduce this question to a “science vs religion” argument. But in any case, both science and religion are in principle open to the world as it is. In practice, though, religion is more bound by its traditions than science, however conservative science may seem at times.
5. Even in science, we’re sometimes stuck with partial theories. For example, Quantum Mechanics & General Relativity are inconsistent, I’m told.
6. Life is short and experimental :-
 - We have to act under uncertainty
 - We are allowed to change our minds
7. We should avoid “any port in a storm”.
8. We should beware of empty speculation.
9. We should avoid “explanations” that are “not even wrong”.
10. We cannot plump for Pascal’s wager, as it doesn’t pay up.
11. There are so many mutually contradictory beliefs that might be true. Hence, we need strong evidence to hold any particular belief.
12. The truth is out there !

What is an “Explanation” ?

- Explanations should be of the complex in terms of the simpler & the unknown in terms of the known.
- Religious explanations seem to me to explain the simple in terms of the complex.
- For example, using our putative possession of souls as an explanation of consciousness. We may know little about consciousness, other than the experience of it, but we know less about souls.
- Note, however, that “simple” is equivalent neither to “trivial” nor to “easy to understand”; for instance, mathematics is not easy for most of us, but simplifies or systematises a mass of data.

Failures to be Rational

Splits into two parts :-

1. Irrationality
 - breaks the bounds of reason
 - relies on assertions known to be or most likely to be false
 - acts or believes either without investigation or without evidence or in the face of contrary evidence.
2. Non-rationality
 - applies where rationality is not appropriate
 - for instance, questions of aesthetics or taste
 - possibly ... ethical questions ?



In what ways does or could a religious approach help ?

In my view, a religious perspective would be valuable based on the truth & clarity of its underlying assertions and the scope of its perspective.

Unfortunately, I think where religious assertions could be helpful, in being clear, concrete & open to disproof, they are in fact false.

We should note that people are profoundly irrational in all their beliefs, not just their religious ones. Hence there's no particular war between rationality and religion, any more than between science and religion, but between rationality & irrationality.

In what ways does a religious to explanation approach hinder ?

1. In the confusion of ethics and religion. Ethical questions are often thought to be the exclusive preserve of religion, and an ethical stance meaningless without some theistic underpinning.
2. In the confusion of terms. For instance, the use of the term "God" as explanation, when it is an extremely obscure and ambiguous term, loaded with different meanings in different cultures. Also, using "God" as explanation is attempting to explain the simpler in terms of the allegedly more complex.
3. In the use of other confusing metaphors. Because people differ in the meaning they attribute to religious terms, their introduction does not add clarity.

The Rationality of the religious dimensions

We need to distinguish between the elements that, by their nature, cause adherents to act irrationally, and those in which many people in practise do so, whereas they might do otherwise if they were better informed. Clearly, the analysis would vary from religion to religion.

- **Practical and Ritual** : there are very many irrationalities, though maybe not that important; often due to historical conservatism. Some are to me offensively silly (eg. Anglican foot washing; Pentecostal arm raising) especially when used anachronistically or when socially coercive. Maybe a symbolic gesture like genuflection is no worse than other archaic secular conventions like hand-shaking.
- **Experiential and Emotional** : non-rational rather than irrational unless doctrine forces us to interpret experience oddly, or act against our normal judgement.
- **Narrative and Mythic** : could be rational if true, but in practise (because traditions have often to be swallowed wholesale) people stand on their heads in order to believe them. May be only a problem for fundamentalists with allegedly inerrant traditions.
- **Doctrinal and Philosophical** : could be rational if true to experience and internally consistent. Unfortunately, religions force people to believe ten impossible things before breakfast. Religious traditions, however interesting in themselves, are profoundly unhelpful as they take the place of philosophy or the



sciences, where investigation is freer. They have explanations or embedded traditions relating to :-

- **Cosmology** : most religious traditions have explanations or assumptions about how the world fits together which are unhelpful to say the least
- **Cosmogony** : the same goes for theories of origins
- **Teleology** : and for where we're all headed
- **Ontology** : of what exists - the postulation of unlikely places & beings
- **Psychology** : do we really have souls or spirits, and in what way do such "explanations" explain anything ?
- **Ethical and Legal** : tendency to fossilise & confuse arguments from authority with those from reason. The tradition sometimes forces people to hold ethical positions contrary to their better judgement.
- **Social and Institutional** : probably no worse than any other arbitrary society other than the in-built fossilisation & excessive zeal for tradition ancient and modern.
- **Material** : depends on private attitude. Notorious historical & present superstition. Religious awe in the presence of religious persons, buildings & artefacts is probably irrational, based on wishful thinking, however thrilling !

How could we know a religious explanation to be true ?

I would suggest that we could arrive at a only by observing divine intervention and analysing God's public actions in history and daily life. The hand of God must be unmistakable for this to be relevant, or must at least be the best explanation. We must be able to recognise the acts of God. This is not a plea for miracles, but a desire to avoid ambiguity, or "explanations" that raise more questions than they solve.

Philosophical "proofs" – such as appeals to a "first cause" are sterile, and in any case unsound. At best they demonstrate some "prime mover" with the name "God" but not with the attributes of the god of a religious tradition with which it may be confused; for example, with paternal attributes of the Christian God.

The key point has to do with whether we care whether our religion is true or not, rather than "does it work or make me feel good ?".

Faith

We ought to adopt a faith stance, when we do, based on evidence, maybe arrived at by induction. For example, we should have faith that the world is explicable, if we do, because of success hitherto in explaining phenomena, rather than because it would be nice if it was. Similarly, we should believe we're going to heaven when we die, if we do, because we have evidence that there is such a place & we have the key to get in, not because the alternatives are unpalatable.

We all need fundamental beliefs, and these can't in general be proved beyond all contradiction. However, rational faith is never a leap in the dark.

Theo Todman



15th June 1999**Bob Cooper****THE MEANING OF LIFE ? A RESPONSE TO GRAHAM DARE**

Graham Dare's (C96/6) offered 'three meanings of life' are not meanings at all, but purposes, and not even secondary purposes.

To discover the possible, prime purpose of life might lead to the discovery of meaning but I doubt it would ever be conclusive.

If the secondary purposes of life is to explore all possible means of existence, and to reach the highest level of consciousness in each case, as appears, the prime purpose of life must be to create a God-like being, or to return to God or to being God. Has God 'fallen' and is 'climbing' back ? Are gods self-created or self-recreated through their own creations ?

Is this the meaning of life? That a god must be built ? Or should that be a supergod ?

In our time/space existence this is cart before horse, true, but only we need time and space co-ordinates. A supergod would not.

But as the editor said, why should there be a meaning to life, at least as far as we are concerned ? Wherever we are going we are not there yet. We don't even know where we are. Perhaps it is too soon to discern meaning.

Bob Cooper

