Commensal

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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28th April 2001 **Theo Todman**

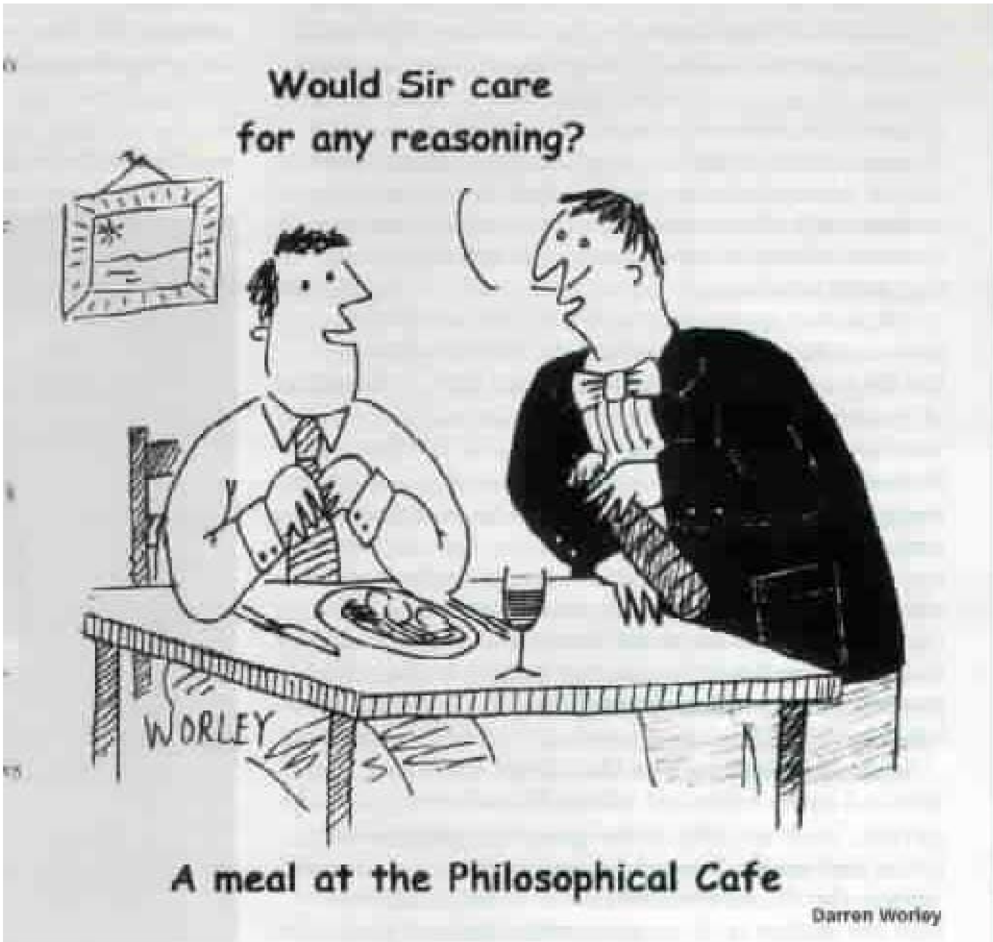
EDITORIAL

I did promise that this would be a brief newsletter advertising the 2001 Gathering, with the real newsletter in late April. Well, the Gathering is fully booked, so there's no point trying to drum up any more support - and I've only just managed to issue the newsletter in April ! More of this after welcoming our new members :-

Glyn Williams	Gavin Maxwell
Roy Chancellor	John M Cooper

PDG Gathering 2001

As announced, this year's *Gathering* will be on the subject of *Consciousness.* You may have seen the advert in *Mensa Magazine* and also the plug Mark Griffin gave us on the SIGs page. It will be held at Braziers Park over the weekend of Friday May 4th - Sunday May 6th 2001. As noted above, it seems to be fully booked as at the date of writing. The cartoon below has been borrowed with permission from *Philosophy Now*[1], to whom and to the cartoonist, Darren Worley, thanks are due and given.



[1] This is an excellent magazine, not altogether ruined by regular letters from Roger Farnworth, and is published by the same team that organise *Philosophy for All*.

Here's the final programme of events. Anyone who has only a very short presentation can deliver it at the "round table" session that Leslie Haddow is chairing; otherwise, this will be a useful opportunity to cover all the items that have been arising in people's minds throughout the weekend. If anyone wishes to speak during this session please let me or Roger (on 01208 821 544) know as soon as possible (there have been no volunteers so far).

Roger & I will open proceedings on the Friday night by debating the question - *Is a Conscious Computer Possible ?* Roger will respond positively by focusing on the Turing Test, while I will seek to marshal John Searle's Chinese Room argument in an attempt to cast doubt on the idea. Roger has persuaded me to start the Saturday off with a quick introduction to the subject. I've not started preparing it yet, and am willing to be persuaded out of the idea, but in anticipation of this not being the case, I've amended the programme slightly to allow the introduction.

Friday	**4th May 2001**
17:00 – 18:30	Arrive
18:30	Supper
20:00	Introduction “in the round”; review plans for the weekend
20:30	Introductory debate: *Is a Conscious Computer Possible ?* Roger Farnworth and Theo Todman
Saturday	**5th May 2001**
08:30	Breakfast
09:15	Introductory Talk : *Consciousness - why is there a problem ?* (Theo Todman)
10:00	Talk & Discussion: *Can Neuroscience Explain Consciousness* (Alan Edmonds)
11:15	Coffee
11:30	Talk & Discussion: *Consciousness and Complexity in the Coming Century* (Peter Lagersted)
13:00	Lunch
Afternoon	Free
16:15	Tea
16:30	Talk & Discussion: *Thought Experiments* (Roger Farnworth)
17:30	Talk and Discussion: *The Evolution of Consciousness* (Frank Luger)
18:30	Supper
20:00	Philosophical Cafe (at Braziers) – bring a bottle !
Sunday	**6th May 2001**
08:30	Breakfast
09:45	Talk and Discussion: *The Phenomenological Approach to Mental Illness and its Implications for the Mind/Body Problem* (Peter McCarthy)
11:15	Coffee
11:30 – 12:45	Round Table Discussions : (Chair : Leslie Haddow)
13:00	Lunch
14:00	Planning next year’s Conference
14:30	Departure

Notes	
1.	The programme makes provision for plenty of spare time for informal discussion at meals or in the lounge.
2.	Roger Farnworth and / or I will arrive by 17:00 on the Friday and meet all guests as they arrive & show them to their rooms.
3.	At Friday's introductory session we will encourage flexibility throughout, and seek to have each session chaired by a different volunteer if that's deemed to be a good idea (otherwise Roger & I will share the job).

PDG Conference Administrative Details

The conference is to be held at Braziers College, Ipsden, Wallingford, Oxon., OX10 6AN, over Friday – Sunday, 4th-6th May 2001.

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

The all-inclusive fee, ie. including accommodation and meals, is £95, and early booking is advisable - the deposit is £20. For the fiscally challenged, or those who don't wish to attend for the whole weekend, other options are available. Camping is £5 per night inclusive of breakfast (but you have to bring your own tent). Saturday attendance is £5 with meals extra. Meals are £7.50 each for mid-day & evening.

Apply for further details to the College at the above address (Tel/Fax: 01491 680221, or on email at admin@braziers.org.uk). Please book directly with the College – I will keep in touch with them periodically to see how things are going. Partners, whether Mensans or not, are welcome.

PDGList

This is the internet discussion group of PDG and invited guests. The list continues to be active. There are currently 49 members.

To join you have to go to http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PDGList/ and follow whatever instructions come up in order to join Yahoogroups and then apply to join PDGList. I then need to accept your application. Once accepted, whenever anyone posts anything to the list, you will automatically receive an emailed copy of the posting (subject to the alternatives that you can set ie. "daily digests" or "Web only" rather than "individual emails"). To post something yourself, just email to pdglist@yahoogroups.com and everyone on the list will receive a copy.

Why not give it a go ? If you get stuck, just email me (theotodman@lineone.net) and I'll subscribe you directly.

Incidentally, for those who've signed up for PDGList, MS Word 97 versions of all the back-issues of Commensal since I've been PDG Secretary are available in the "Files" area at the PDGList website (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PDGList/files/). Also, anyone, not just members of PDGList, can access PDF files of all past issues of Commensal from the PDG Web page (http://website.lineone.net/~theotodman/pdg.htm).

PHILOSOPHY FOR ALL – PFA[2]

Kant's Cave : On every first Wednesday of the month, from 7pm (lecture at 7.30 pm) PHILOSOPHY FOR ALL meets at "**Kant's Cave**" for a lecture, debate and social evening. Kant's Cave meetings are now held at a NEW VENUE - the **upstairs bar** of **The George**, on the Strand, London (opposite the Royal Courts of Justice - 2 minutes' walk from Temple tube station and 7 minutes from Holborn or Charing Cross tube stations). Door-charge: £2 (free for PFA members)

UPCOMING KANT'S CAVE LECTURES

May 2001	May will be Kant's Cave marathon month : together with the Forum for European Philosophy, PFA are organising weekly Wednesday meetings featuring talks on EXISTENTIALISM, details below … Convened by Jonathan Webber (University College London)
2nd May 2001	Prof. David Cooper (University of Durham) - *Existentialism - An Assessment*
9th May 2001	Dr. Azzedine Haddour (University College London) - *Postcolonialism*; Dr. Ursula Tidd (Manchester) - *Gendering Existentialism : Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*
16th May 2001	Dr. David Snelling (Birkbeck College London) - *Is there a Place for the Unconscious in Existential Psychology ?*
23rd May 2001	Dr. Christina Howells (Oxford) - *The Ethics of Aesthetics : Sartre and the Subject of Commitment*
6th June 2001	Roger Park (City University) - *Husserl's Phenomenology and the Horizons of History*

The PFA at the Mary Ward Centre : **Philosophy Debates** are to be held approx. monthly on Saturdays 14:00 - 17:00; Dates : 19 May, 2 June, 9 June. There are also **Public Lectures** on some Saturdays 10:00 - 13:00; Dates : 7 April. The Mary Ward Centre is at 42 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AQ. There is no fee.

[2] See C100 (or http://www.pfalondon.freeserve.co.uk) for more details on PFA. It has no relationship with PDG or British Mensa.

OXFORD SUMMER SCHOOLS

These courses are run by OUDCE (Oxford University Department for Continuing Education). There is no connection with Mensa, though members of PDG have been known to attend. I have been known to lose my deposit. The courses look very interesting, but there is usually an amount of preparatory work required (including a pre-course essay). Stimulating, but not a holiday. Also, not cheap. Prices per week vary from £325 non-residential to £465 for a shared room to about £600 for a single room.

There are many courses on offer on a variety of subjects - I've simply highlighted the philosophical ones. Administrative details follow the announcements below.

Week 1: 14th - 21st July : An Introduction to Thinking Philosophically
Does God exist? Could I become a robot? Why does the universe exist? Is the world just an illusion (as it is in the film *The Matrix*, for example?) These are some of the deep questions with which we will be grappling. You will be introduced to the ideas and arguments of some of the best-known Western philosophers, including Plato, Descartes and Wittgenstein. The emphasis throughout is on reasoning clearly, precisely and logically. You will find that the thinking skills that this course enhances will be invaluable to you whatever your interests.
This course may be taken as part of the Undergraduate Diploma in Philosophy. ***Stephen Law, DPhil,*** is the author of The Philosophy Files, *editor of the forthcoming Royal Institute of Philosophy journal* Think*, and lecturer in philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London.*

Week 1: 14th - 21st July : Science and Religion
Einstein maintained that science without religion is blind but religion without science is lame. This course aims to help those who want to engage in this debate in an informed way by trying to understand the issues involved. Controversial areas such as creation and evolution, cosmology and theology and the ever-vexed ethical questions raised by genetic engineering will all be explored. This course will proceed from the view that the discoveries of modern science and its applications must be the raw materials for contemporary theology. No expert knowledge of science is required, nor is a specialist theological background.
John Kerr, BASC, MSc, DTh, S0Sc, *has taught at several universities in the United States and Britain and has published well over 150 reviews, articles and chapters in books. He is ordained in the Church of England and is former Warden of the Society of Ordained Scientists. He teaches chemistry, logic and theology at Winchester College.*

Week 1: 14th - 21st July : Kant's Ethics
Kant's little book *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is one of the great books in Moral Philosophy. The aim is 'to seek out and establish the *supreme principle* of morality' [392]. Acting *from* the recognition of such a principle constitutes a response to the question 'What *ought* I to do?' which is an expression of our first-person perspective that constitutes our human condition. The task is: • To build a moral thesis on rational grounds • To show morality is inescapable, and • How it is related to freedom We shall consider some of the most profound questions: what is the *good will?* In what sense is morality objective and rationally necessary? Why are persons 'ends in themselves'? What is it to regard ourselves as 'members of the intelligible world?' What is the relation between *freedom* and *autonomy*?
This course may be taken as part of the Undergraduate Diploma in Philosophy. ***Andrea Christofidou, BSc, MA, PhD,*** *is Lecturer in Philosophy at New College, Oxford.*

Week 2: 21st - 28th July : Persons, Selves, Bodies and Minds
Who and what am I ? Influential replies have been suggested by Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and many others. But not all posed the same question. Descartes' thinking substance bears some resemblance to Locke's disembodied consciousness, for instance, but Descartes' "I" was in search of certainty more than identity, while Locke's "person" was a "forensic" or legal concept intended to identify the individual agent that could be held responsible for acts. Assuming no prior training, we shall tease out different questions metaphysical, ethical, psychological and social - and explore some of the modern answers, both classical and contemporary, that have been offered.
Daniel Kofman, MA, is Lecturer in *philosophy at Pembroke College.*

Week 3: 28th July - 4th August : What's Real and What's Not
This course will introduce and examine some of the fundamental questions of metaphysics, including mind and body, space and time, moral values, universals, and freedom of the will. This will include discussion of the positions and arguments of

some of the major figures in the history of philosophy including Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, and Hume - but we shall focus mainly on the issues rather than on the people.

This course may be taken as part of the Undergraduate Diploma in Philosophy.

Peter J King, BA, BPhil, DPhil, is *visiting lecturer at the University of North London, part-time lecturer at the University of Reading, and College Lecturer at Christ Church and Somerville College, Oxford.*

Week 4: 4th - 11th August : Conceptions of Happiness

Aristotle believed that our main aim in life was to achieve 'happiness" *(eudaimonia),* the utilitarians famously argued that 'happiness is the only thing desirable as an end', but what exactly did these philosophers mean by happiness?

In this course we will examine different conceptions of what happiness consists in from Plato and Aristotle to the present day.

The course may not make you happy, but it will make you think.

This course may be taken as part of the Undergraduate Diploma in Philosophy.

Elaine Beadle, PhD, *is a tutor in Philosophy at the University of Reading and also teaches for OUDCE.*

Week 5: 11th - 18th August : Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*

Martin Heidegger is one of the most controversial thinkers of the twentieth century, and *Being and Time* his early masterpiece. This text has been hugely influential, not only upon continental European philosophers, but in many other disciplines including theology, literary theory, psychology and linguistics.

The course will concentrate on reading and understanding this difficult, complex text. We will also situate the text through considerations of the thinking from which it arose, the questions it sought to address, its critical reception, its subsequent influences and the direction of Heidegger's later thought.

This course is aimed at the newcomer to Heidegger, or continental philosophy - no prior knowledge of German is required.

This course may be taken as part of the Undergraduate Diploma in Philosophy.

Alison Haley, MA, *is a part-time tutor in Philosophy at OUDCE.*

Booking details can be obtained from Anna Sandham, OUSSA, Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, FREEPOST, Oxford OX1 2YZ.
Fax : 01865-270309; Phone 01865-270396.

PDG Web Page

The PDG web page remains at :-

http://website.lineone.net/~theotodman/ pdg.htm

The site contains most of the back-issues of *Commensal* produced since I became SIG-secretary. The advantage of the HTML versions is that they allow you to hop around between articles (useful for understanding the mixed-bag commentaries on previous issues). There are also PDF versions of all these issues available for you to download and read off-line.

Hopefully, we'll soon get the links set up from the Mensa Web page, which should help advertise the SIG … we seem to be awaiting someone to volunteer to do the rather tedious job of maintaining the Mensa Website.

Any article submitted for publication in *Commensal* will assumed to be accompanied by permission for placing on the web-site, unless you tell me otherwise.

Editorial Assistance Requested

We have shorter articles this time round, and I've added a few comments on the shortest ones. However, we still have no-one willing to write up the PDGList debates. As I keep saying, this is a very worthwhile task for one of the participants in these debates. Not only does it give that person the opportunity to put his or her own slant on the outcome (hence, hopefully, generating further interest in *Commensal*) but also it's an opportunity to step back from the heat of the cut and thrust of email exchange, which is, after all, what we as philosophers need to do.

The Future

Sorry to sneak this comment in right at the end of the editorial, but I have to warn you all that I may not be able to continue as SIGSec and Editor of *Commensal* beyond the summer months. As you will know, in addition to a fairly demanding day job, I'm studying Philosophy at Birkbeck with a view to a second career as an academic philosopher should I prove able to jump through the requisite hoops. Consequently, I want to give it my best shot. The hard work starts in the second year, which will leave me less and less time for Mensa. In addition, I'm a natural candidate to help run the Birkbeck philosophy society, which is itself a substantial job and one more germane to my present interests than anything in Mensa.

So, if there's anyone out there keen to take on the baton, please start thinking about it now and let me know of your interest.

<u>Next Issue of *Commensal*</u>

The next full edition of *Commensal* (**C107**) will appear in late June (ie. after my exams !). The closing date will be 7th June 2001. The reminder date appears on the bottom of each page.

Best wishes,

Theo

27th February 2001 **Anthony Owens**

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Might I send a few thoughts on the 'initial question' on the 'body swapping' subject ?

The 'initial question' posed in Theo's 'Body Swapping' piece in *Commensal 105* was, "Is it possible that you could exchange bodies with someone?". It seems to me that lurking behind this question is another, namely, "To what extent is one's identity a part of the brain, the body, or is it wholly other?" May I try to address this amended question?

If I am my brain then changing bodies need present little difficulty, in thought at least. After all, there is no shortage of actual empirical evidence. The body I have now is not the same as the one I had forty years ago. Although any changes involved may have occurred only slowly, rapid changes can occur in such as serious accidents or illnesses. However troublesome these may be they seem to present few insurmountable identity problems for the victims.

Such cases of accident might assist us with the next part of our question: the part played by the body in identity. There exists hearsay evidence from amputees that they can still feel a lost limb. There is also some empirical evidence that such as a transplanted limb never works quite as well as the original. This could be due to shortcomings in the technique of transplantation, but it just may be that the brain cannot fully recognise this foreign addition to the nervous system. The brain may still be remembering what it had before, leaving it confused. As such cases seem to match more closely the body swapping scenario this may be significant. A swapped brain may retain identity but never be able to fully take control of its new environment.

Turning to our third consideration, can we ever know if our identity is 'wholly other'? The fact that a damaged brain may seem to lose its identity is irrelevant: it may simply lose the ability to communicate that identity. Perhaps a clue might lie in the 'memory' of an amputee's missing limb. How much of our nervous system could be cut away before the integrity of our identity is breached? After all, however specialised it might become, our brain is basically just a lumpy bit of our nervous system.

This last matter might be insoluble, but that our identity, even if it is 'wholly other', acts through our brain is an unavoidable assumption. This brings us back to a brain possibly incapable of fully recognising a foreign nervous system. Our brain swappers may swap identities along with their brains, but they might be crippled in the process.

Turning to the 'downloading' basis of identity swapping, it seems to me that both, or all, individuals would need to be permanently attached to some sort of swapping hardware. Even then, assuming David and Victoria Beckham were the subjects of the experiment, it is difficult to see how 'Posh Spice' would cope with 'her' memories of playing for Manchester United; though I can see how David might enjoy 'having been' a Spice Girl.

Anthony Owens

Anthony,

One of the problems with placing a tasty question at the start of a long and fairly complex article is that it becomes an irresistible temptation to the reader to answer that question without engaging with the argument of the article, which addresses the same issues. Bernard Williams' piece is aimed at such a question posed by Anthony - and it is indeed the adoption of the first- and third-person perspectives which points out this question. The third-person perspective argues that identity resides in the mind (not in the brain, though in its contents); the first-person perspective argues that identity depends primarily on somatic continuity.

It is interesting that A J Ayer, Austin and other Oxford academics discussed this question back in the 1930's - see Ben Roger's biography of Ayer. Their discussion centred on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* - was the resultant of the metamorphosis a man with an insect's body or an insect with a man's mind ?

Anthony remarks that "a swapped brain may retain identity but never be able to fully take control of its new environment". This may well be the case, as I suggested in the article - but the primary example in the piece did not involve swapping brains, but swapping their contents - namely memories, on the presumption that personal identity would pass over with those memories. We might note that, while it is true that our bodies change over time, so do our brains (and consequently, our minds). It seems evident that memories are physically encoded by neuronal interconnections, with massive redundancy to allow for the fact of the continual demise of neurons to result in degradation rather than complete loss of memories.

Anthony says "After all, however specialised it might become, our brain is basically just a lumpy bit of our nervous system." What is this supposed to imply ? This sounds like nothing-buttery. Our bodies are basically just lumpy bits of proteins & carbonates etc. Computers are basically lumpy bits of silicon. It's the organisation that counts, and marvellous that organisation is.

"Our brain swappers may swap identities along with their brains, but they might be crippled in the process." No doubt. This seems to depend rather heavily on the phantom limb argument. Clearly, there is a wiring problem, but we had agreed to ignore this for the sake of the thought-experiment.

As a final comment, why, in the case of memory download, is there a need for the "permanent attachment to some sort of swapping hardware"? Also, the substance of Anthony's "Beckham & Spice" remarks was already in the paper.

Theo

March 2001 **Albert Dean**

UTOPIA MARK II

Thomas Moore wrote Utopia Mark I. He was a well meaning lad of course. But, a lad of peculiar view. He happened to believe it vital we suffer in life, credit from that serving to have us faster into heaven. To spread his opinion he wrote Utopia Mark I in such a way Utopia fails. Many see his book as a challenge to the world to devise a Utopia that does not fail, in fact he says abandon such a search and savour the defects of whatever slum you happen to be in. Sadly, the book is but an appeal to Adam and Eve to not leave the gulag in case they are hit by a bus.

Would it be possible to devise a Utopia Mark II that need not fail. The task may look impossible, but, truth being stranger than fiction, it can be done; indeed, many have already done it

Consider first an example of how a particular search for Utopia failed. A great deal went on simultaneously in the years before WWI. Alliances formed between Britain, France, Italy and Russia, fashioning a ring around Austria and Germany. Except for Germany these countries all had substantial empires with commensurate military forces. The German States had unified in 1870 and the new Germany was ambitious to stride in the world like its neighbours. It wanted also colonies, preferably in the sun, but the world was already parcelled and hardly anywhere was to be had. Germany was governed pretty much by the Prussian military aristocracy. To them military display seemed the natural solution. There was no intention to start a war, it was to be no more than rattle the sabre and the rest of Europe would suddenly find all sorts of odd corners in their empires that Germany might have in appeasement. However, behind all this German bravado there was also fear. Germany was especially nervous of France and Russia. In 1870 the Prussians had humiliated France in a conflict about whether a German nobleman had the title to some land in France. Germany worried that France might strike a blow in revenge, and that Russia might seize the opportunity to grab control of the Skagerrak. Germany devised a plan that if Franco-German relations broke down the German Army would sweep across northern France, secure the northern coast to deter British intervention, drop down west of Paris, and back to bottle up and destroy the French forces, all in six weeks so the bulk of the German army could be rushed east to block any Russian move. Assumed in it all was that Russia would take at least twelve weeks to mobilise.

The arms race began. And everything in all Greater Europe came down to pre-emptive political situation-response lists and military transport timetables. The overall system had so many complexities and hair triggers in that war became inevitable. It was sheer chance the beast was set off when the Black Hand Gang killed the heir to the Austrio-Hungarian Empire. The Austrians wanted to search for the gang in Serbia, the Serbians wouldn't have that, the Austrians said they were going to anyway, the Russians said they wouldn't allow it, and the Germans said they wouldn't let the Russians stop it: In 1912 Germany had reviewed its plan and estimated that if it didn't fight Russia by 1917, then the Russsians, who were rearming at a pace, would win any later conflict. So, Germany attacked France, intending in six weeks to be back east alongside Austria to defeat the still mobilising Russia.

But, in their 1912 review the Germans had also decided they needed to leave some of their troops on their border with Russia just in case Russian border troops might cause trouble. With less troops to attack France the German plan was changed, for the German Army to turn down from the coast east of Paris. Also, in 1914, the Russians actually managed to start doing serious damage to German units in the east in only a fortnight from the start of hostilities, so the German high command had to rush some troops back from France prematurely. Then, using taxis for transport, the Parisian police launched a surprise attack into the west flank of the now short-handed Germany Army, and at the same time French troops that had not been surrounded struck into the German Army head on from the south, and British troops had the channel ports they needed for landings to attack the German army from the north. The Germans withdrew to a line. The rest we know, two approximately equal forces stuck in western trenches for the next four years. And much the same on the eastern front and in the border areas between Austria and Italy, and similar elsewhere, and on the seas and in the air. Pointing to the simple fact that any path to Utopia best accommodate reality in the east and surprise in the west.

However, there was more to this German search for Utopia. Behind the lines was the home front. In the 1912 review government committees looked at munitions supply and food supply. The former is an interesting subject, so the committee for it never really ran out of business until the end of the war. But, the committee for food supply came to the conclusion the war would be over so quick nothing special need be done and immediately disbanded itself. The war began and within a couple of months prices had begun to rise, also wages. In course of the war black market food prices rose about ten fold and wages about three fold. Rationing was introduced, but, by mid-war, portions actually proffered against tickets fluctuated wildly between nil and 100%, and for long periods were often only about a 25% to 50%. Worker expenditure on food rose three fold in line with wages, simply through worker consumption of food falling to about one third normal. An early frost devastated the 1916 potato crop and other supply disasters happened. The winter of 1916/17 saw a virtually non-digestible sweed-turnip usually fed animals became a human staple, it needed nine pounds of it to get 1000 Calories, and there was little else to go with it. In 1917 it was decided pregnant women and children would no longer qualify for what little milk there was. About the same time 750 different sausage substitute were registered, and a brand of pepper had come to contain 85% wood ash. At one time Sacharin was even recommended for its nutritional value. In Germany it had been that the citizen was servant of the state. The lowest class women came to fight each other in all day queues for food, and to berate authority figures in the streets. Through the war class divisions opened and closed on rationing issues. Arrests of females for theft trebled. In a major shift of attitude the German government, trying to prevent the propaganda disasters appearing on its streets, found itself forced to acknowledge it had some responsibility to be a servant to the citizen. But it could not bring itself to fully accept that because tradition in Germany presupposed every citizen a potential enemy of the proud state. And it sort of worked both ways. Public kitchens were set up with capacity to feed about a third of the population, but because authorities would not give these places an imperial veneer they were seen as soup kitchens, and no more than five percent of the proud population would enter them. Also, the lower middle class and down constantly chopped and changed their view of what was fair food distribution, with the state swinging around behind in the wind, ever mindful first call on food was for military and factory canteens. Questions of the day: Was a soldier's wife and child entitled to more as a communal gesture appreciative of her husband's service at the front, should they get more still if he were of rank, bemedalled, wounded or killed. Should rations be in accordance with pregnancy, age, sickness. Was it to be equal shares for all, or just for those who work. Was it right or wrong for businesses to charge more for what is scarce, for profiting farmers, suppliers to the black market, to be forced to get less profit through supply of the cheaper rations. And so on, every possibility being argued back and forth in four years as food supplies gradually faded away. A women wrote a paper she didn't mind eating rat but she could not manage rat substitute. The Kaiser didn't say much when he abdicated, but he did slip in a charge for the new government to see to the nourishment of the people, perhaps by having the Pied Piper reverse his trick, but still highlighting that the path to Utopia requires equitable distribution of burden and reward is perceived.

There was much more. From all: The mind seeks the four permutations of real and abstract answers to its questions of fact and fiction. Utopia Mark II is that robust, open and alert democracy that allows the permutations insofar as it must or may, be they or their result, case by case, tragic, comic, or of no consequence at all.

Albert Dean

February 2001 **Gavin Maxwell**

MODERN LIBERALISM - A CRITIQUE

I have just received my first issue of *Commensal* and I was delighted to find such high quality content and presentation ! I have also been tempted to offer some of my own stuff, based on work I have done for my MA[3] (Hons) Philosophy at the University of Glasgow (finals in next couple of months – help!).

I am mainly interested in political philosophy, but as I discovered when writing my dissertation, this can often lead to a passionate interest in the deeper areas of the subject. I include a piece of work based on a presentation that I gave about said dissertation. Hope it is of interest.

Gavin

[3] The MA is actually my first degree. The older universities in Scotland have always called their undergraduate arts degrees Masters of Arts (and show no sign of changing!). I do hope, however, to go on to do an MPhil, which is a one year taught postgraduate degree in Philosophy, after I have had a year or two of freedom and cash !

This article is about Modern Liberalism and Culture. I want to argue that modern liberalism ignores certain important facts about culture, facts which, when taken into account, demand a fairly significant shift in how we structure society.

I'll give a quick account of modern liberalism, by examining the work of John Rawls, one of the most respected of modern liberals. Then I'll move on to explain the objection.

Modern Liberalism

In 1971, John Rawls published 'A Theory of Justice,' in which he rejected the dominant utilitarian tradition of the time for a theory based on a **hypothetical contract**.

Rawls claims that the way to decide what is a just or fair society is by a thought experiment in which we imagine what principles *would* be agreed to by people who were denied knowledge of their own personal characteristics.

People in the **original position** are placed behind a **veil of ignorance**, where they are denied knowledge about themselves such as their race, gender, social class, natural attributes and their own particular values. The only knowledge available to those in the original position is general information, such as facts of human psychology and economics.

Rawls' argument is that, in this hypothetical 'original position,' a rational self-interested person would choose just or fair principles of society since there is no way of knowing how we will end up. Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift express the idea plainly:

> "If I don't know which of the five pieces of cake that I am cutting I am going to end up with, then it makes sense for me to cut the pieces fairly. Similarly, if people don't know who they are going to be, then it will make sense for them to choose just or fair principles to regulate their society.[4]"

For example, no rational person in the original position would choose a racist society, since no-one knows what race they will end up being and no-one would like to find themselves on the receiving end of such a society.

Through using the methodology of the original position, then, we can ensure that vested interests and nepotism are excluded from the law-making process and that the principles of society are just and fair.

So, that's the general idea of Rawls' Theory of Justice. Intuitively, it seems very plausible. However, by adopting this methodology, Rawls is making certain assumptions about human beings.

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[4] Stephen Mulhall & Adam Swift, *Liberals & Communitarians*, 2nd Edition, Blackwell, 1996, p.3

Rawls' assumptions are that, when talking about justice, it is right to regard human beings as **free** and **equal**.

Let's look first of all, at the assumption that human beings ought to be regarded as equal.

From behind the veil of ignorance, we do not know our race or gender, what position on the social ladder we occupy, nor what personal skills or talents we possess. The decision to place this kind of knowledge behind the veil of ignorance is not arbitrary. Rawls is arguing that such circumstances should not count when talking about justice. Any society that treats people unequally on account of these factors is unjust. So, the idea that people be regarded as equal is Rawls' starting point. In effect, the methodology is derived from the substantive conclusions which appear to be drawn from it. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with this. I just want to draw attention to the fact that this is how the argument works.

The second assumption made by Rawls is that it is right to regard people as **free**.

When Rawls places knowledge of individual conceptions of the good behind the veil of ignorance, his point is that all conceptions of the good are equally valid (so long as they meet the minimal standards of justice described), and that it is not the business of the state to promote any particular conception of the good. This position is known as *state neutrality*. Rawls' argument for state neutrality is that "the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it."[5] In other words, we can always step back from a project and question whether we want to continue to pursue it. So, Rawls is saying that the human self is essentially autonomous or free, and ought to be regarded as such when we think about justice.

It is this second ontological assumption, that the human self is autonomous, which I now want to question.

The Objection

The argument comes from Charles Taylor, and is sometimes referred to as the 'social thesis.' Taylor argues that human beings are not born autonomous. We do not have autonomy just in virtue of being alive. It must be developed.

Taylor argues that autonomy cannot be developed in isolation. The reason for this is that we require discourse in order to discover our own identity. He says:

> "One cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors … A self only exists within what I call 'webs of interlocution.'"[6]

[5] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
[6] Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, Acumen, 2000, p.69

> (Interlocution is just another word for dialogue)

So, it is an inescapable, ontological feature of selfhood that we must be in some sort of conversation with others. “Man is above all the language animal”[7] and it is essential to a human being that we engage in discourse. Through this discourse, our tastes, value, character, and understanding are shaped.

So, it is a basic ontological fact about human beings that they have language, and that their fundamental identities are shaped through dialogues with other human beings.

An objection to this would be to question the expressivist view of language which Taylor presupposes. The expressivist view sees language as not “merely a medium for representing an independently existing reality.” Language actually “shapes, and perhaps transforms those things which come into its domain.”[8]

Steven Pinker claims that this expressivist view is false. He argues that we think in a prelinguistic medium called Mentalese, “and because all languages share the same deep grammatical structure, the mode of linguistic expression is arbitrary.” He claims that “someday we will recognise that everyone in the world indeed speaks the same universal language.”[9]

I think that Pinker’s position seems unlikely. I won’t go any further into this argument. I’ll just state that the experience of most people who are forced to assimilate to another culture seems to support Taylor’s view. Here is a quote by Domenico Lenarduzzi, the Assistant Director General for Education and Culture in the European Commission. Lenarduzzi, who is from Friuli in north-east Italy, says:

> “You carry your mother tongue with you all of your life. It is actually the basis and structure of your identity. Even if you don’t speak it for years, it continues to determine your unconscious and remains the best way you have of expressing yourself, thinking, being. I have been away from Friuli for 53 years but I cannot experience warmth, spontaneity and close contact with others in any language other than my own: Friuli.”[10]

Given this determining power of language, it is impossible to be autonomous without engaging in such discourse. Autonomy is developed through living in a society where autonomy is valued and is implicit in the common practices of the people;

> “in the manner in which [people] treat each other in their common life (for instance in the acknowledgement of certain rights), or in the manner in which they deliberate with or address each other, or engage

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid, p.69-70
[9] George Fletcher, ‘The Case for Linguistic Self-defence,’ in *The Morality of Nationalism*, by Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (eds.), Oxford University Press, 1997, p.324
[10] *LinguaSignal* (the newsletter of LinguaSig) No. 40, p.10

> in economic exchange, or in some mode of public recognition of individuality and the worth of autonomy."[11]

If we accept the social thesis, then we must accept that the liberal conception of the free human being is underdeveloped. People are not free just in virtue of being alive. A suitable culture is required in order to develop autonomy. Rawls' statement that the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it, is misleading. The self is discovered through dialogue, and so is our choice of ends. Of course, autonomy allows us to weigh up the values of various ends for our own lives. But, what *is* ontologically prior is that we find ourselves in a 'web of interlocution,' in inescapable conversation with others, without which we could neither be autonomous nor anything else.

The consequences of this are that, if autonomy is used to justify rights, which of course it is in liberal theory, then we have a right to a suitable autonomy-promoting culture. Furthermore, we have a corresponding duty to belong to such a culture in order to ensure that other people's rights to this culture are realised.

Another important consequence which I see as following from Taylor's insights has to do with awarding cultural rights. Once we accept that our culture shapes our tastes, values, character and understanding, we are more or less committed to protecting endangered cultures. The death of a culture would result in a significant loss to the individuals who were part of it. Not only would their opportunity for meaningful dialogue be dramatically reduced, but the framework in which they could previously pursue their values and goals also disappears, since these are largely created by the culture in the first place. Such opportunities are essential to being human and should therefore, be protected through imposing cultural rights.

Taylor's thesis gives a new perspective on the rights claims of indigenous peoples and minority cultures, and the ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. It would appear to give a great deal of support to these cultural rights claims which are often ignored or trivialised by the liberal tradition.

Glossary

Liberalism – political persuasion characterised by a commitment to protecting individual liberties and to providing a more egalitarian society than would arise from the free market, through the provision of a welfare state.

Utilitarianism – the view that the right action is the one that maximises well-being.

Original position – a hypothetical situation where we are denied knowledge of our own particular characteristics and asked to choose the principles of the society in which we will be born into.

[11] Charles Taylor, 'Atomism' in *Philosophical Papers Vol.2*, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p.205

Veil of ignorance – the knowledge which we are denied in the original position, namely, our race, gender, social class, our conception of the good, etc.

Conception of the good – our view of what makes life worth living.

Ontological assumption – an assumption about the way the world actually is, i.e. about what exists in the world.

Gavin Maxwell

February 2000 **Frank Luger**

SCIENCE FICTION AND ITS POPULARITY

Dictionary definitions of science fiction might be paraphrased as a novel or short story based on some actual or fanciful elements of Science. Such somewhat rudimentary definitions do not take into account many characteristics of the genre. No doubt, the scientific element is crucial; but if we wish to understand what science fiction is and why is it so popular, we need to look beyond simplistic dictionary definitions.

Science fiction is *fiction.* That is, imaginative; but not something that *has* taken place in tangible or actual reality. Whether in its plot, setting, characters, etc.- it is a work of *imagination.* However, its aim is to create a "realistic" story. If science fiction were entirely irrelevant to our mental-emotional needs and mundane realities, it would never see print. As contrasted to simple thrillers and pulp publications, science fiction not only wants to *entertain*, but also, more importantly, to *teach*. Whether in the form of social criticism (e.g. George Orwell), or technological developments (e.g. Jules Verne), or human nature (e.g. R.L. Stevenson), etc., teaching is quite significant. This motive of science fiction ensures its rightful place in literature, as a form of art. In fact, science fiction may be considered as a branch of literature. However, this does not imply the same rank or literary value, as the classics, for example. No one would ever compare the works of Jules Verne and Victor Hugo, Alexei Tolstoy and Leo Tolstoy, H.G. Wells and Charles Dickens, for examples. While it may not ride to the top of Parnassus, serious science fiction is not rubbish, either. It is a whole league above cheap thrillers and trashy literature, popular or not. Should the scientific element be taken away, some science fiction would immediately reduce to trash. It's not the *prestige* of Science that really counts- rather, its cognitive, epistemological, and emotional values. It teaches to think in certain ways, it teaches new knowledge, and it fulfils certain psychological needs, such as awe, amazement, fantasy, and the like. To be sure, Science is no cheap thrill; and more often than not, it can be a difficult subject. Nevertheless, a tale based on science (even if 'unscientific' by pedantic criteria) appeals to the imagination of the people; even if they realize that it cannot possibly be factually true. Science lends a certain credibility and futurism; if something is not true today, it may be true tomorrow. Altogether, relevance, credibility, and public interest due to the *tangible* benefits of Science and Technology explain why science fiction is so popular.

In general, no doubt to due its indisputable *results*, people today respect scientists and science much more than as little as two-three hundred years ago. Especially since the modern scientific-industrial revolution has completely transformed most lives, particularly urban ones. And most people are quite aware of this. Science has become inseparable from even the simplest of everyday activities. Think no farther than how helpless we feel in an electricity blackout. In many popular discussions on virtually any subject whoever produces the most 'scientific' (i.e. reliable and valid) argument, ideally, wins the debate. Furthermore, nowadays 'everybody is a scientist' to various extents, from rural farmers to urban housewives; or at least far better informed, than anytime in the past. That's the bright side. The dark side is profiteering; because with mass production, life standardization, etc.; science is also shamelessly exploited for commercial purposes. This is a sad fact. For example, if the label "Enzyme Active" appears on a perfectly ordinary box of detergent, chances are, according to market research, that it sells much better than a plain box- except perhaps for no-name brand bargains. Now, most housewives may never have the faintest idea as to what enzymes *are;* but because '...it sounds *so* scientific!' they rush to purchase the damn thing, while advertising executives gleefully rub their hands. In short, science *is* popular.

So, maybe it's not surprising that science fiction is also popular. Much more so today, than, say, a hundred years ago in the days of Jules Verne, science fiction is regarded as a good source of entertainment and information, in this order of priority. In those days, many of the works of this great pioneer were dismissed by his contemporaries as 'utopian dreams' and 'phantasmagorias' and 'pseudoscientific rubbish'. We have learned to value his works very highly, not only because of their remarkable predictions, but also because despite a lot of initial hurdles and opposition, those predictions have become tangible realities much faster than anybody could have imagined. A hundred years ago, when my grandfather was a child, there was no such thing as an airplane. The year he died, Man walked on the Moon. Not exactly as prophesied by Jules Verne, but still... But in the case of the other great classic of science fiction, H.G. Wells, the contrary is true. His works enjoyed great success already in his own days. Perhaps they were less 'realistic' or 'romantic' than the works of Jules Verne, but their thrill was outstanding. People were just fascinated to read about time machines, invisible men, Martian invasions, etc. (*Panem et Circenses?).* Sci-fi popularity began to rise rather steeply.

Nevertheless, people were not nearly as interested in science fiction at that time, as they are nowadays. In the XIX-th century, people *could* afford a steady outlook on the world in general and their own futures in particular. Faith, morality, established patterns of socio-political institutions, etc. provided the framework for relative social stability. But in the XX-th century, drastic changes have occurred which gave rise to entirely new phenomena. Our own times, at least in the Western world, wholly lack such a generally accepted and integrated world picture as it was the case in the XIX-th century. The decline of religious faith, the increase of secular views, the erosion of morality and belief in automatic socioeconomic progress, the discovery of vast areas of irrationality and unconscious forces within knowledge as well as the human psyche itself, alienation, existentialism, nihilism, the loss of sense of control over rational human development in an age of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, weapons of mass destruction, etc., etc. have all contributed to the rapid transformation of society. Science has invaded every aspect and phase of human life. It is no longer the 'hobby of some kooky professors' as in the XIX-th century. The tremendous and exponentially increasing progress of Science and Technology brought about an increasing public involvement and general interest. The evolution of science fiction well reflects some of these phenomena. By satisfying curiosity, by providing some escapist fantasy, leisure, and fascination on easy laymen terms, science fiction is perhaps more popular today than ever. And, the plots do not really matter as long as they are scientific or pseudoscientific. They can deal with interstellar travel, paranormal phenomena, robots and androids, future wars and societies, space invaders, or even such 'preposterous' topics as time-travel, adventures in many dimensions and parallel universes, impossible inventions, superhuman heroes, etc. It is interesting to note, however, that while the XIX-th century had produced the true classics of science fiction, it was only in the XX-th century that science fiction became a well-established and 'respectable' branch of literature. Whether it is 'true' literature or not is a moot point, and literary criticism is the appropriate judge. Perhaps an apposite label would be 'marginal'; i.e. it is neither literature of the classical type, nor mass-stupefying *kitsch* of the pulp-thriller sort. It is rather a 'borderline' case and any and all critical evaluation should be directed accordingly. The popularization of this 'marginal' literature belongs to the XXth century.

The first science fiction magazine (Hugo Gernsback's "Amazing Stories") was published in 1926. Since then, and especially since WWII, the genre has expanded rather rapidly. Dozens of 'good' and 'bad' science fiction magazines as well as whole libraries of novels and short stories had become quickly available. There are Science Fiction Book Clubs, and every imaginable vehicle of expression is used by and for *aficionados*. Of course, with such imaginative genre, it is very easy to get carried away; and start manufacturing myths and fads. But, sometimes, the converse is also true- myths and fads can influence, even boost science fiction. Consider UFO's. Which came first- the chicken or the egg? The UFO myth literature or its fad and hype? Yet, a lot of science fiction is perfectly 'respectable'.

Respectability is due to accurate and precise learning, i.e. the reliability and validity of the information contained, however colored by some fantasy-cosmetics. Many bonafide scientists have written science fiction (e.g. Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke, Michael Crichton, etc.) besides professional novelists (e.g. the Huxleys, George Orwell, Alexei Tolstoy, etc.). New sci-fi writers keep turning up by dozens (more markedly in the U.S. than in Europe- due, no doubt, to the profit motive and the popularity of the genre) especially since the advent of the A-bomb and space exploration. The fear of a thermonuclear holocaust gave rise to survival speculations, even utopian dreams.

How about the future of science fiction? While it's difficult to prophesy, there's no reason to believe that science fiction and its ever-rising popularity are merely temporary phenomena. *Au contraire*, as our age becomes increasingly technological as we have seen, science fiction more and more tries to express the romance (sic!) and the adventure of such an age, as well as serving as a vehicle for open or concealed social criticism and fantasy-rich escapism. Most likely, it will not only continue to flourish as an important segment of imaginative writing, but also as an increasingly integral aspect of our lives for an indefinite time into the future.

For the time being, it is safe to say that science fiction and its popularity are definitely well-established. Paraphrasing a critic, it seems that today, the quality of science fiction at its best is as high as it has ever been. It is developing in particular a new maturity in its dealings with possible developments of our present-day society in the near or far future. As an instrument of social satire and social criticism it is proving of increasingly great value although its importance as exciting and adventurous relaxation reading continues to be very high.

Therefore, the conservative, high-brow reader should not dismiss it out of hand as 'pseudoscientific trash' but acknowledge its positive qualities and help to weed out its negative ones. Sophisticated readers can contribute thoughts, comments, criticisms; and help to increase the popularity of *good* science fiction, and indirectly, that of science thereby. And, by mercilessly lampooning or even attacking *bad* science fiction, we can and ought to fight fads, scams, and thinly veiled superstitions.

Frank Luger
(frankluger@hotmail.com)

Written: Montreal, November, 1970.
Revised: Budapest, February, 2000.

21st March 2001 **David Taylor**

RESPONSE TO ALBERT DEAN (C104/32)

Primitive 1 : It certainly looks as though the International Space Station, like Mir, will be plagued by micro-organisms - one shudders to think what will happen on the proposed Mars Mission. I don't think centrifuges were used in the lab experiments on virulence, as they effectively increase gravity; the article just mentions "specially designed rotating vessel(s)". In the lab virulence increased in a matter of hours.

See also *Mensa International Journal*, Feb 2001, pp. vi,vii.

Certainly micro-organisms have played an important part in the evolution of higher organisms. Many years ago, Lynn Margulis proposed that mitochondria - organelles in the cells of higher organisms that release energy from food - were originally separate organisms that entered into symbiosis with their partners, a theory that is now generally accepted. Similarly, the chloroplasts of green plants are thought to have originated as separate cyanobacteria. There is also thought to be a two-way traffic between viruses and human DNA.

We think we are clever inventing genetic modification, but nature has been doing it for millions of years.

Primitive 2 : I suggest that the flue be cleared out with a sweep's brush. Seriously, thought, 'flu viruses do have single-strand RNA. RNA is normally single-stranded, ie. the strands are not paired via the bases, in contrast to DNA which is normally double-stranded, ie. the strands are paired a la Watson and Crick. There are, however, 8 single strands of RNA in a 'flu virus.

There are 3 types of 'flu virus : for pigs, humans and birds, but all three can infect pigs because pig lungs apparently have receptors (I think these are cell surface proteins) for all three.

Consciousness : There is a very interesting article on this in "Greatest Myth of All", *New Scientist*, 18th November 2000. Food for thought also about free-will.

David Taylor

30th March 2001 **Jonathan Young**

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A SCIENTIST TO BELIEVE IN GOD ?

I attended this lecture given by Professor Jennings as a result of it being advertised in the events page of *Mensa Magazine*. I thought that I would meet up with a group, but the only number given was the box office for Reading Town Hall. Despite all my best endeavours, I failed to identify a single Mensa member.

Professor Jennings' field I believe is as a geneticist and biologist. He was a fascinating speaker but his argument was not convincing. Science is wonderful and its complexity is overwhelming. This is all very emotive but is not an argument. The Professor needed to give a definition of what he conceived his God to be. He seemed to be inferring that because everything in the Universe could not have come about by sheer chance, that that proved the truth of the Bible also. There was a very strained attempt to equate the new discoveries in science with lines from Genesis. Science was coming to the conclusion belatedly that life developed in the dust and there is a predictive passage "dust to dust" apparently. I didn't myself find this convincing.

The Professor seemed to be trying to convince himself as well as much as anyone else. There was an air of desperation about his talk climaxing as it did in his bringing his daughter onto the stage to tell everyone what a wonder of creation she was biologically and morally. It was simply embarrassing.

The Professor's lecture was a mixture of sermon and science lecture with the two disciplines being mutually incompatible. If one was looking for an answer to the question raised at the beginning it must be to accept that it is not possible for a scientist to believe in the God of the Bible. Here was a scientist striving desperately and yet failing.

Jonathan Young

Jonathan,

Good to have something from you again after a 4-year gap ! The subject is one of interest to me, as you probably know and is one that surfaced in *Commensal 99*, back in January 2000. Like you, I'm not impressed by attempts to interpret the Bible in such a way as to suggest that modern science supports it, unless this interpretation is the natural way of understanding the text.

There are big questions to which science doubtless, currently at least, has no answers. A typical one is the alleged "fine tuning" of the fundamental physical constants to enable a fecund universe. To some this implies intelligent design, to others a multiverse, to yet others a difficult problem that awaits an answer from a Theory of Everything. Then again there is the question of why there is something rather than nothing - what breathes fire into the equations, as the saying goes.

It is not clear that theistic attempts at providing explanations really explains anything at all, though many people are indeed satisfied by such attempts. The question remains whether a "don't know" answer shows a lack of engagement or is just a rational response to ignorance.

Theo

19th April 2001 **Steve Yarde**

THE GREAT SOLUTION

I glanced at the December issue of Commensal and found the contribution by Frank Luger on memory very fascinating but did not really assist us in making use of this faculty.

There is nothing inconsistent in being philosophical and being practical. In fact, the two should be in harmony like a horse and carriage.

We can study theories on memory until (metaphorically speaking) the cows come home. It is very interesting looking at the speculations and going over the various arguments for and against which have no conclusion, but much better, I think, to get something done.

I thoroughly recommend Harry Lorayne's book *How to Develop a Super Memory*.

It is not a piece of fantasy, as some very critical people might think, but a very common sense attitude to how to do exactly as his book says. It is the art of mnemonics which can be mastered very simply by those who wish to give it a chance.

You can get a grasp of the link and peg system. It teaches us to stop thinking logically but to do the opposite and mock up silly symbols and so forth.

Is it possible to remember all the popes from St. Peter to the present time or the monarchs of a country ?

Is it possible, like King Cyrus of Persia, to recall so many people by their names after having known them for a short time ? (He remembered everybody in his army by his first name).

Is it possible to remember, like an American telephonist, 4,000 telephone numbers ?

Harry Lorayne would give an unqualified "yes".

Just read his book and put it into practice. Get on with it now !

Stephen F. Yarde

Stephen,

Thanks for your first contribution to *Commensal*, so soon after joining, and for your thoughts and recommendations. I have been guilty of despising such techniques all my life. This goes back to rejecting the useful *How to Solve It* (a respectable mathematical how-to-do-it book by George Polya, recommended to me by my tutor at College). The same goes for all the "Improve your IQ" books, and most of the rapid-reading books - though I found *Read Better, Read Faster* by Eric de Leeuw useful, though most of these books seem to labour the point somewhat - in this case, skim first, picking out the first line of each paragraph, then again, stopping yourself lazily re-reading as go. I have to admit to having given away - a very rare event for a book-hoarder like me - a couple of mnemonic-assisted rapid language learning books by Paul Daniels that I'd picked up at knock-down prices, the reason being a contempt for gimmicks (presumably similar to the techniques you describe). I still remember images of cars with bananas sticking out of their bonnets and newspapers over the windscreen, but have not idea what they signified nor what use this would be when struggling to order lunch in a German restaurant.

I think most of us, if an improved memory dropped down from heaven for us at no cost, would be grateful for it. What keeps us from practising these techniques is doubting their long-term effectiveness and usefulness. There seems something rather atavistic, I might say, rather cruelly, rather like your choice of cliché, about learning lists of kings, queens, popes and telephone numbers. Nice for winning the pub quiz, maybe, but isn't the important thing to remember what the worthies in the list did, and how they fitted into the culture and politics of the day and across time. It's really the inter-linkages of memory that are the important things. I have to admit to having had to resort to an intranet search to remember who wrote RBRF and HTSI, but this couldn't help me find the physical volumes amongst the 4,000 others scattered about the house in no sort of order. Nor, I expect, could the Super Memory developed by the amazing techniques in your book.

There's the question why we forget in the first place, and whether forgetting is useful. Aleksandr Romanovitch Luria's *Mind of a Mnemonist* describes the plight of an unemployable man blighted by the inability to forget all sorts of trivia. His method of remembering lists was to "paint" them onto a remembered walk about his home town, Moscow. He also suffered from, or maybe enjoyed, synaesthesia and also ascribed colours and textures to numbers (if I remember correctly).

I'm all for practicality, and reciting the telephone directory is no doubt of some value, but I would prefer to keep my mind uncluttered by things that can be looked up. Still, remembering names is useful and saves embarrassment. I have an excellent memory for faces out of context, but an awful one for names. I got the name of my fiancée wrong when first introducing her to work colleagues, though thankfully she forgave me for it. Can these clues ever go wrong ? One of my favourite lines from *Only Fools and Horses* is where Rodney is trying to give Del Boy a clue about the name of a female swan. After concluding from clandestine gesticulations that it's a 3-letter word also meaning a writing implement, enlightenment strikes with the answer "a Bic" !

Theo