

Commensal

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

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Contents

Page 2	Editorial
Page 10	The Crucifixion or How to Accept Defeat Gracefully (Dave Botting)
Page 13	The Purpose of Art (John Stubbings)
Page 15	Response to C90 (Michael Nisbet)
Page 17	'Is', 'Ought' & SIG Polity (Roger Farnworth)
Page 19	Morality, Ducks, And Souls (Anthony Owens)
Page 21	Comments on C90 (Mike Rossell)
Page 23	More on Multinational Corporations (Alan Carr)
Page 25	Comments on C90 (Alan Carr)
Page 26	Gurdieff, Religion & De Bono (Norman Mackie)
Page 28	Comments on C90 (Stef Gula)
Page 31	Comments on C90 (David Taylor)
Page 33	Correspondence (Theo Todman & Sheila Blanchard)
Page 35	Assassination & After (Sheila Blanchard)
Page 37	Dualism (Roger Farnworth)
Page 40	The Philosopher's Song (Monty Python)

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14th March 1998**Theo Todman****EDITORIAL****New Members**

As usual, we start off by welcoming new members to the SIG. Quite a squad this time; so welcome to :-

- Malcolm Burn
- Don Cannons
- Victoria Catterton
- Mr. A Copson
- Chris Dancer
- Anthony Embleton
- Ms Josephine Estaphanos
- Leslie M. Haddow
- Dave King
- Donal Murray
- Valerie Ransford
- Rev. Andrew Rowley
- Alan Smith
- Mr. B. Suitters

Staying in Touch

Please don't forget that if you are a paying member and your balance falls below 60p you will stop receiving the newsletter after one reminder. I think mentioning people by name, as last time, was a mistake since three of the four of you presumably responded to a reminder before receiving the newsletter. The other had already ignored a reminder, so didn't receive the newsletter. Either way, the warning was of no value to the individuals concerned.

Mensa Magazine

So, we've had two mentions of PDG on the trot in *Mensa Magazine* ! The first one, rather a notice in passing, resulted in increased interest. Hopefully the second one will do likewise. Well done to Dave Botting for catching Mike Carley's eye with *A Sociopath's Guide to Moral Philosophy* ! Of course, it helps to get your bit in first as you appear at the front of the newsletter & are more likely to get read - maybe he'd have mentioned *Another Helping of Rick Street Soup* if Rick had written in a little earlier ? Or maybe not. Talking of which, where is this month's helping, Rick ? Actually, though, I tend to read periodicals starting from the back. I think it's more to do with holding the magazine in my right hand & flipping the pages with my left, rather than any subconscious Semitic influence.

Eric Hills

You will have noticed in *Mensa Magazine* the obituary by Victor Serebriakoff of Eric Hills who had recently joined PDG. Thanks also to Roger Farnworth, Sheila Blanchard & Leslie Haddow for informing me. I'm sure we would all have benefited greatly from Eric's wisdom. I've left in the correspondence ensuing from his piece in C90. As the writer to the Hebrews said of Abel "he being dead yet speaketh" (Heb. 11:4).



Both of the above notices indicate how important it is to read *Mensa Magazine* - it's not top of my reading queue, I must say, but the latest edition wasn't that bad.

Mensa at Braziers

One of the events Eric Hills used to organise was *Mensa at Braziers*. The next gathering is still on (8th-10th May 1998) - when I phoned (27th February) there were six places (of twenty maximum) free, so phone 01491-680221 and make a reservation if you want to go. Send £20 deposit (full cost is £92, £54 including meals for non-residents) to ...

Braziers, Ipsden, Wallingford, Oxon OX10 6AN

I've signed up for my place. Roger Farnworth & Leslie Haddow will also be there. The subject this time is *Learning from Life*. The generalised schedule of events is as below. Doubtless a more detailed plan of the sessions will be issued nearer the time.

FRIDAY

19.45	Supper
21.00	INTRODUCTORY SESSION
22.30 (approx.)	Tea or Coffee

SATURDAY

08.30	Breakfast
10.00-11.00	SESSION
11.00	Coffee
11.30-12.45	SESSION
13.00	Lunch
Afternoon free	
16.15	Tea
17.00-18.45	SESSION
19.00	Supper
Evening arrangement to be announced	
22.00(approx.)	Tea or Coffee

SUNDAY

08.30	Breakfast
10.00	SESSION
11.00	Coffee
11.30-12.45	SESSION
13.00	Lunch
	COURSE ENDS

(Visitors staying overnight on Sunday at the end of the course should note that tea will be at 16.15 and a buffet supper in hall at 18.30.)



For those who can't get in this time round, there's another *Mensa at Braziers* conference in September on *Crime and Punishment*.

Oxford University Summer Schools for Adults

While we're talking about getting away from it all for a spot of philosophising, recent PDG joiner **Malcolm Burn** has alerted me to the above courses. While they do not require attendees to have any prior qualifications, they are serious affairs, with lots of pre-course reading and an essay to produce before you get there. You also have the benefit of individual tutorials, which those of you who've benefited from an Oxbridge education may or may not want to re-live ! The courses last a full week and cost £540 full board if you want a single room (£390 for a twin; £295 non-residential but including lunch & dinner). There are several philosophy courses, ie :-

27/7 - 1/8	Mind & Consciousness
27/7 - 1/8	Plato
1/8 - 8/8	David Hume
1/8 - 8/8	Political Ideas
8/8 - 15/8	Kant
15/8 - 22/8	Moral Dilemmas

You can get more information (including course synopses & preparatory instructions) from :-

Anna Sandham, OUDCE, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JA.
Tel : 01865-270396; Fax: 01865-270309
Email: anna.sandham@conted.ox.ac.uk

I may be there for the *Plato* course, or even one of the others if the family holiday comes to nought, as seems likely. Any other enthusiasts ? I'd have preferred *Mind and Consciousness*, but it was fully booked when I enquired. The course on *David Hume* looks rather difficult (though interesting) but for me clashes with another engagement.

ISPE (International Society for Philosophical Enquiry)

I hope you will excuse me if I include a plug for another Hi-Q society I belong to & which I've alluded to from time to time. I'm clearly not trying to entice you away from Mensa, else there'd be no-one to write in to PDG ! However, it's another opportunity for fun, and, with only 717 members in 37 countries, a bit like a SIG by way of intimacy. There are about 40 of us in the UK.

The affirmed purpose of the society is :-

to provide a world-wide association for those persons at the highest level of intellectual ability who come together to motivate one another to distinguished achievement through



exceptional creativity, leaving a legacy of wisdom and accomplishments that benefits civilisation

Maybe a bit idealistic and gung-ho for ears this side of the Atlantic, but respectable enough nonetheless. If you're interested, write to :-

**Hugh G. White III,
3213 West Kansas Ave.,
Midland,
TX 79701,
USA
Email: colwhite@iglobal.net**

A slight catch is that you have to demonstrate a score in the top 0.1% in an IQ test (ie. "one in a thousand"). This equates to 150 on the Stanford-Binet scale, 172 (I think) on the Cattell. If you didn't demonstrate this on entry to Mensa, they have their own test you can take. Why not have a stab at it ?

PDG & PhySIG

Anthony Owens pointed out an obscurity concerning my remarks on the interrelationship between PDG & PhySIG :-

"I didn't quite understand the bit about directing physics bits to Physics Sig. How could you put anything sent to one publication into another Sig. of which the correspondent wasn't a member? - but perhaps you have a cunning plan! "

My plan is anything but cunning. If you want to talk physics per se (ie. not philosophy of science), you have to join Physics SIG. Sorry.

Commensal on the Web

There has been some small progress with putting *Commensal* on the Web. Not a lot of opinion expressed so far, however. Anthony Owens & David Taylor seem generally happy with the idea, but Mike Rossell warns against. Any other opinion ? I've written to Mike Carley, the SIGs Officer, to determine the options. I've also checked out the Mensa Web Page & corresponded with the Mensa Web Master. Some SIGs do seem to have Web pages already. Pam Ford, the previous SIGs Officer, was very much against the use of the Web, fearing it might lead to a two tier society. I suppose this is possible in the short term, and we must be careful that those without email or Web access - doubtless the vast majority, even in Mensa - are not disadvantaged. However, over the longer term - and especially given the ever-declining cost and increasing value of PCs - this must surely be the way to go ?

The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy



Talking of Web sites - I've recently discovered EJAP - the Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy. It's free - all you need is Web access. Their address is <http://www.phil.indiana.edu/ejap/ejap.html> - and if you know what you're doing you can find the downloaded files on your hard drive after a quick browse & can print them off for a leisurely read or off-line review. It's produced, or at least hosted, by the University of Indiana and seems to be quality, if fairly technical, stuff. It appears rather infrequently, about once a year, and has been going since 1993.

The latest issue (Spring 1997) is on Ontology which, for those not in the know, "is the study of what exists, with special attention paid to the different ways of existing possessed by different kinds of things". It includes the following tasty subjects :-

- The methods of ontology
- Carnap, Quine and the fate of metaphysics
- Quine on matters ontological
- Julius Caesar & the number 2
- Ontological categories and how to use them
- The formal ontology of boundaries
- CYC : a case study in ontological engineering

The paper on CYC leaps in as though the reader will know what CYC is. It seems that "the most ambitious attempt to build an intelligent system is the huge computer knowledge base called CYC". What this acronym stands for is left obscure. I did a quick Web search and found a site telling me all about CYC, but not what it stood for ! It came up with various Yacht Clubs & Youth Collectives as well !

RIP Lectures

At the suggestion of Professor Anthony O'Hear (how many names can you drop in one editorial !), I've been along to some of the *Royal Institute of Philosophy's* Friday evening lectures. These have been dealing with German-language philosophers. We've had distinguished speakers on Hegel, German analytic philosophy since Kant, Frege & the later Wittgenstein (Peter Hacker), Carnap & the Vienna Circle, German philosophy of mathematics from Gauss to Hilbert and the influence of German philosophy on British analytical philosophy. The lectures have seemed to get easier, though I'm not sure whether this is more due to the subject matter becoming more appealing to me or with my increasing re-familiarisation with listening to lectures while sat on uncomfortable chairs (or, in one case, the floor) ! There have been lots of other lectures (eg. on Nietzsche) that for various reasons I've not attended. The last one in this year's series was on Friday 13th March & was by Jurgen Habermas in person. Unfortunately, I was too busy at work to attend; a poor set of priorities, no doubt.



Apologies for alerting you to these lectures too late (you have to be a member of the RIP to attend - but that's no problem - see C90). They start up again in October - I don't know the subject of the next series - and are held at 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0AG. The nearest tube is Euston Square.

PDG Mentors

I've been corresponding with Professor Oswald Hanfling on and off over the last couple of months. I'm trying to induce Professor Hanfling to act as Mentor for PDG, maybe with some success. He's volunteered to give a series of lectures, though there's a fair amount of organisation required before that comes to anything. As for what Mentoring might involve (and please note, this is not the same as moderating !), here's an extract from a recent letter of mine to him :-

I'd hate to involve you in anything tedious. Please let me know what you want to avoid and I'll do my best to steer it away from you. I'm sure you don't want ... to get involved in endless controversies. What I had in mind was rather the occasional prod in the right direction, or the suggestion to consider another viewpoint, read this or that book, etc. without people having the right to take you to task all the time (unless you so wished).

The group isn't under the delusion, I hope, that it's advancing any philosophical frontiers. Its only value is for its members, in that it's an active forum. My position is that philosophy is an activity that people need to do. Intimacy with the thought of the great philosophers, or with current philosophical ideas, is a huge advantage in that it helps (or, would help, in my case !) one better to understand the questions, but is not something open to everyone; nor is its absence as fatal to the amateur philosopher as, say, ignorance of modern physics is to the amateur physicist. Nor are the answers to questions as obviously right, though they may be obviously wrong.

He has a couple of *Commensals* to look at to see what involvement he can suggest. He was in sympathy with the paragraph above.

Is / Ought Questions

Professor Hanfling was also kind enough to comment on my review, in C90, of his article in a recent edition of *Philosophy*. He wasn't uncomplimentary, but didn't agree with many of my observations ! I don't think I've the right to reproduce any of his comments in *Commensal*, though, so this will have to remain enigmatic.

Book Advert



Finally, I've been importuned by Ralph Ellis of Edfu Books (and Mensa) who's had difficulty, it seems, advertising his book *Thoth, Architect of the Universe* in *Mensa Magazine*. I'm not too excited by the book myself, but I attach a snippet from their web site <http://freespace.virgin.net/kena.edfu> for your edification.

Books, both ancient and modern, have contemplated the enigmatic monuments of Gizeh and Stonehenge. They have traditionally asked many questions, but have invariably provided few answers. What has been lacking is an assemblage of sensible solutions to these problems, ones that are based in the real world of science and technology, not myth and magic. Thoth, Architect of the Universe gives you those answers, even if they are not the ones you were expecting.

So was there an ancient civilisation? Did the tribes of Neolithic Britain, for instance, know and worship the mathematical constant pi at their sacred monument of Stonehenge?

As one sage said, on reading an early manuscript of "Thoth" : "I understand what the book is saying, the data and diagrams are just fascinating, but I am afraid you are asking me to believe too much". How much will you let yourself believe?

Thoth, Architect of the Universe, is a high quality hardback, 250pp, with 70 diagrams and 40 full colour prints to fire your imagination. History will never be the same.

To order you copy, please send £15.99 plus £2.00 p&p made payable to Edfu Books. Postal Address: EDFU books, PO Box 3223, Dorset BH31 6FJ.

I received a paper extracted from the book claiming that the Avesbury stone circle was a map of the world. I remain to be convinced.

Slapped Wrist

Please could all of you remember to cross-reference your comments to the previous (or whatever) edition of *Commensal*. Most of you are doing this but some forget, and it's a pain for me to do it for you.

Grovel

Please let me know if there's too much "internet" in this issue ! It's one of my enthusiasms, as you may have guessed, so I may be going over the top. Also, as this edition is desperately late, I've had to truncate my commentary somewhat, restricting it in the main to responses to comments on my own comments & thoughts. Grovelling apologies, as usual.



Commensal 92

As you will have guessed, the closing date for submissions to the May 1998 edition of *Commensal* (C92) is 15th April 1998. By way of accommodating the forgetfulness of some of you, the deadline now appears on the bottom of every page (except, perversely, the cover).

Incidentally, one SIG member expressed a preference for monthly newsletters. Any strong feelings either way ?

Best wishes,

Theo



12th January 1998

Dave Botting

THE CRUCIFIXION or HOW TO ACCEPT DEFEAT
GRACEFULLY

At the behest of a mob, the Roman authorities crucify Jesus. Accepting defeat gracefully, Jesus forgives his executioners before dying. Fast forward three centuries where the Roman emperor Constantine adopts Christianity in order to keep his armies under control, since most of the soldiers were both Christian and Germanic. Once the emperor has decided and has arranged the various institutions, it does not take long for society to follow, even though it is essentially the same society that killed Christ in the first place (in any case, monotheisms seem much more fitting to the imperialist mentality than polytheisms; it legitimises the centralisation of authority. There is a Socratic dialogue at the beginning of 'The Last Days of Socrates' which highlights the difficulty of defining virtue when there are many gods). Another couple of centuries later Rome is sacked by those same Germanic tribes and Christianity is carried off as part of the booty. With further nurturing by the Roman Catholic Church, including such cynical acts of power-mongering as the Donation of Constantine, Christianity becomes the dominant religion of the Western world and the Ten Commandments becomes the basis of its morality. (For those fans of the Ten Commandments I would like to pose a multiple choice question. When Moses came down from the mount and found all those people worshipping the Golden Calf did he :-

- a) Shrug his shoulders and say "They have a right to their opinion".
- b) Damn them to hell and sulk.
- c) Have them all killed.)

Forgive the history lesson, but I wish to use this example in response to several comments in *Commensal 90*.

First of all in answer to **Rick Street (C90/29.2)**, does the above seem much like an evolution either of society or morality? If by evolution you mean adapting to new circumstances then yes. If you mean improvement then no. The social and moral systems that we find ourselves in are the result of historical accident; there are no evolutionary or dialectical processes involved, only the long-term effects of decisions by those in power. The lion and wildebeest analogy, which seemed rather tenuous to me in the first place, I have concluded to be totally unsound.

Rick Street goes on to say (also in **C90/29.2**) "an ethical system which focuses on the perfection of the individual ... (has) to rely on a set of rules to define right and wrong actions". On the contrary, most of the prescriptive ethical systems are also objectivist, while the descriptive ethical systems are usually subjectivist. My personal ethical system is basically existentialist.



Michael Nisbet says (in **C90/12.1**) "It is not necessarily the conscious purpose of religion to promote social order". I have written pages arguing that this is entirely the purpose of religion, but it would not be practical to go into them here. I will only say that if you look at how social structure has developed and how concepts of divinity have developed there is a remarkable similarity between them, of which the monotheism/empire equivalence is only one example. Could there be any better training for social order than the antiphonies of religious ceremonies? Isn't the concept of nirvana a mystical version of the commune? I refer anyone credulous enough to believe that the Church has much of anything to do with holiness back to the Donation of Constantine. The two Borgia popes. The Arian, Pelagian, Sabellian, Nestorian and Monophysite heresies. The last two are particularly amusing since they are opposite to each other. Who wants to talk now about the timeless values of religion?

Michael Nisbet also says (in **C90/11.2**) "Individualism is only meaningful within the context of a social system which it seeks to enhance". How does the social system repay those individuals who have enhanced it? Let's see: Socrates, Jesus, Bruno, Galileo, Darwin... does a pattern seem to be emerging yet? Enhancing your social system is a very dangerous (not to mention futile) exercise. While it is possible to improve the standard of living, it seems impossible to improve the standard of those living it.

I would like to make a brief comment on assassination, since there is a sense in which the last named were all assassinated, albeit with the sanction of the establishment and of the people. Galileo avoided the stake by recanting and escaped with confinement for the rest of his life. Darwin never had to cope with the kinds of methods beloved of the Inquisition. For this he has to thank the greater influence of the media. These days it is no longer necessary to go to the trouble to assassinate the person himself, one can merely assassinate their character through the media. Therefore assassination, which was a common political weapon in Renaissance Italy, for example, is simply out of date. One can never overestimate the power of suggestion.

Finally I would like to ask **Theo** what he means by living 'efficiently' (**C90/6.2**). Surely he doesn't mean our use of natural resources which are being consumed at high speed. Eat a few berries, kill the odd passing animal (or human!)... in what way is this mode of living less efficient than ours? Also, your argument seems to be getting very close to the so-called Anthropic Principle - "the universe exists in order for us to observe it".

Couple of last things. Anyone out there heard of Ayn Rand? And by the way, the answer was c. The sons of Levi, under Moses' instruction, killed the idolaters, which is why, being the only ones still alive, the next book in the Old Testament is called Leviticus. In the words of Rick Street funny old world innit?

Dave Botting



Dave : it's a good idea to respond quickly ... gets you first in the queue in the next edition ! Given the contents of your contribution this time round, are you pining for SceptiSIG, by any chance ?

I thought Rick Street's wildebeest analogy quite pertinent, but I'll leave it to him to sort you out on the matter. What do you mean by saying that your personal ethical system is basically existentialist ? Existentialism, and existentialist ethics, hasn't come up for discussion yet, so maybe you could enlighten us ?

I think you're too one-sided on the interrelationship between the state & religion. Religions, in general, seem to have developed as counter-cultures because their founding individuals perceived there to be something wrong with their society or its perception of / relationship with God (or the gods). Religions that are, or become, conducive to social order may be adopted by the state, as you demonstrate, but they commence as radical movements, as Christianity did. It may be that the political structure of the current state is used as a picture of the heavenly court (or whatever), or suggests itself to the religious thinker, for lack of imagination, as a pale reflection of the way heaven must be organised. Religions may become the instruments of the state, as you suggest, but radicals are always arising to call the faithful back to the faith's roots.

Your comments on holiness in the church are also one-sided, and also more at home in SceptiSIG than PDG. It's no good just selecting the blackest moments. What's your objection to the heresies you mention. The fact that they were accompanied by an unseemly rumpus, or the fact that Christians disagreed ? From a philosophical viewpoint, what are these timeless values of religion ? There's much disagreement here, even within Christianity, and (Cardinal) John Henry Newman wrote an influential book on the subject (*Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*).

On Ayn Rand (courtesy of the Encyclopaedia Britannica) :-

(b. Feb. 2, 1905, St. Petersburg, Russia--d. March 6, 1982, New York, N.Y., U.S.), Russian-born American writer who, in novels noted for their commercial success, presented her philosophy of objectivism, which held that all real achievement is the product of individual ability and effort, that laissez-faire capitalism is most congenial to the exercise of talent, and that selfishness is a virtue, altruism a vice. Her reversal of the traditional Judeo-Christian ethic won her a cult of followers.

After graduating from the University of Petrograd (1924), Rand went to the United States in 1926 and was a screenwriter in Hollywood. She became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1931. The Fountainhead (1943), her first best-selling novel, depicts a highly romanticized architect-hero, a superior individual whose egoism and genius prevail over timid traditionalism and social conformism. The allegorical Atlas Shrugged (1957), another best-



seller, combines science fiction and political message in telling of an anticollectivist strike called by the management of U.S. big industry, a company of attractive, self-made men. Rand also wrote a number of nonfiction works expounding her beliefs, such as *For the New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (1961), and she edited two journals propounding her ideas, *The Objectivist* (1962-71) and *The Ayn Rand Letter* (1971-76).

Universal egoism is based on the principle "Everyone should do what is in her or his own interests." This principle is universalizable, since it contains no reference to any particular individual and it is clearly an ethical principle. Others may be disposed to accept it because it appears to offer them the surest possible way of furthering their own interests. Accordingly, this form of egoism is from time to time seized upon by some popular writer who proclaims it the obvious answer to all our ills and has no difficulty finding agreement from a segment of the general public. The U.S. writer Ayn Rand is perhaps the best 20th-century example. Rand's version of egoism is expounded in the novel *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by her hero, John Galt, and in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1965), a collection of her essays. It is a confusing mixture of appeals to self-interest and suggestions that everyone will benefit from the liberation of the creative energy that will flow from unfettered self-interest. Overlaying all this is the idea that true self-interest cannot be served by stealing, cheating, or similarly antisocial conduct.

There are, of course, numerous Web sites referring to or dedicated to Ayn Rand.

One final quibble - I think that some of our readers might find your title unnecessarily offensive.

Theo

12th January 1998

John Stubbings

THE PURPOSE OF ART

Dear Theo,

Just found some bits in *Commensal* on **The Purpose Of Art. C90, p14 & C90 p31**. Unfortunately my copy of *Commensal* 89 was burnt. This wasn't an act of Dada, but of necessity. In Welsh farmhouse over Christmas, cold, needed to start fire, nothing else available.

Here's my twopenneth.

The Purpose Of Art



Art's purpose is communication.

Any creative/destructive act any creature does with the intention of communicating with any creature including itself is Art.

Art comes in so many different forms because no one discipline is capable of communicating all messages. Different disciplines are more or less capable of communicating particular messages depending on the message, the ability of the artist and the perception of the recipient.

C90, p14 Eric Hills quotes from a book that says Art originally was probably functional, meant to store, transmit and retrieve information. How is Art today different? I know it is more complex, but it is still functional whether it transmits stories, emotions or the position of the local deer, it serves to communicate. I know someone is going to say Art today can be purely decorative, but doesn't decoration say something about the decorator. Of course it does. Our choice of decor is amongst other things a subtle form of communication to others and ourselves about the way we see ourselves.

I have seen cave paintings in the Dordogne, France. They were TOPtastic !

You can imagine early man saying to early woman "I love the way he applies paint with a club and his use of the lack of light. Your cave or mine! "

I suspect its major function has never changed!

John Stubbings

John : some good points ! However, I'd add some caveats to the "art is communication" theme. A 'phone call is communication, but isn't necessarily art. I do think, though, that communication is an essential aspect of art and I like the idea of self-communication. We don't truly perceive until we try to express that which we perceive. Not simply facts, either, but feelings & impressions; ways of seeing or understanding the world.

Theo

11th January 1998

Michael Nisbet

RESPONSE TO C90

Dear Theo,

Some comments further to **C.90**. Apologies to readers if what follows is a bit disjointed.



1. **Yet more about morality.** First in response to **Dave Botting (C90 p.5.)**. I agree that "all men are not akin", but I didn't say that they were. My words in C89 are: "all persons are akin to ourselves". That is, all human beings whom we judge to be persons are ipso facto akin to ourselves. I am not trying to state a moral imperative, but to offer an analysis of what morality is and how it works.

To act on the assumption that all persons (however defined) are akin to ourselves -to treat them accordingly- is to act morally. If a universal system of morality is required, then whoever requires it must broaden the scope of their definition of the person to the widest possible extent: then everything else will follow. If, on the other hand, anyone wishes to go to the opposite extreme and refuse to accord the status of person to anyone other than themselves, then they must face the fundamental indifference of the universe to the existence of the individual, alone.

For reasons adumbrated towards the end of my **C90** contribution, a universal ethical system may not, however, be possible, unless perhaps we take the indifference of the universe as that in contradistinction to which we define ourselves as moral beings. I would like to remind readers at this point of Arthur Koestler's words: "The selfishness of the group feeds upon the altruism of the individual".

2. **Reflexive awareness etc. etc.** Now to the questions usefully posed by **Eric Hills (C90 pp.13-14):-**

- 2.1. **Q.** "How does human reflexive awareness create the subject-object dichotomy of religion and science?"

- A.** Reflexive awareness is the act, or event, whereby the human organism recognises itself as a discrete entity. In doing so, it splits the continuum of the organism-environment field into a dichotomy of a self or subject that acts and a series of objects that are acted upon. Prior to that act or event, all action is an integral part of that field.

- 2.2. **Q.** "Why does the act of reflexive recognition involve a partial disidentification of the nascent self with its body?"

A. Because 'I' and my body are not entirely one and the same thing. By 'I', I mean more than just my body. I am in part - in my existence as a bodily entity - object to myself (I can act upon my own body). Prior to the birth of the self, there is only the body as an integral part of the field.

What this does entail is the realisation that the self (the subject) is not free and absolute, but a subject rendered object -or objectified- by the bodily ground of its existence. We collectively attempt to resolve this quandary by positing the self as prior to bodily existence.



- 2.3. **Q.** "In any case, why potentially disastrous consequences to the ecosphere?"

A. Because the ecosphere now contains an element - the self - that is not an integral part of it in functional terms. The needs of the unselfconscious organism are an integral part of the organism-environment field (this is what ecology is all about). The advent of the self means that an entity is now present in the field that refers its needs reflexively rather than, unconsciously, to the whole, or rather, bears them as part of the whole.

There is of course some controversy as to the extent, if at all, that we have damaged the biosphere as a whole, but at least on a local basis we seem to be highly capable of messing things up. The most worrying thing, from our own perspective, is the decrease in the human sperm count, which, as you doubtless know, is quite probably due to the release by ourselves of oestrogen-mimicking chemicals into the environment. We may have inadvertently struck at the very roots of our existence.

- 2.4. **Q.** "Would not regaining the perspective of an unself-conscious organism be an undesirable loss?"

A. From our own point of view, probably yes, if it were possible to achieve that state on a permanent basis. But the state that Douglas Harding describes as "headlessness" - the temporary dissolution of the fixity of one's consciousness of oneself as a discrete entity - is elusive. Yet to have touched upon it does broaden one's perspective considerably. (I know that this is a bit unfair, as I am appealing to something beyond rational argument. But take it or leave it).

3. The understanding of reflective surfaces. Last to **Rick Street's** comments (**C90 p.28**) and in particular, "Now if you could demonstrate that (say) blackbirds understood reflective surfaces but still attacked their own reflection, I would happily eat my words". I do not wish to make anyone eat their words, whether happily or otherwise, but I would refer readers to "The Ape's Reflection" (Adrian Desmond, London 1979) pp 175-176, where Gordon Gallup's experiments with the crab-eating macaque monkey are mentioned. A specimen of that species continued to treat its reflection as another individual of the same species even after a total of 2400 hours of mirror exposure. The author then refers to experiments dating from the mid 1960s in which macaques were shown to be capable of using mirrors to locate food morsels hidden by the experimenters behind screens. Desmond states that the monkeys "appreciate that the food's reflection is inedible (or at least unattainable) since, having spotted the food, they smartly turn away from the mirror to feel for it".



Unless someone else asks me for a response on a specific point - as against merely criticising what I say - I think I had better now shut up on these issues. Indeed I feel that, doubtless to the relief of many, I have now more or less exhausted my limited philosophical repertoire.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Nisbet

Michael : Well, I seem to have run out of time this month for a comment on what you've written , but we can't have you absenting yourself from the list of "regulars" ! We've already lost Philip Lloyd Lewis and, last time at least, Rick Street. Where will it all end ?

Theo

13th January 1998

Roger Farnworth

'IS', 'OUGHT' & SIG POLITY

Dear Theo,

You discuss (**C90, p.36**) whether one can conclude an ought statement from a description of what is. The purpose of Chess is to save the king. A situation can thus arise where you conclude you ought to take the opponent's rook or sacrifice the knight to save the king. This unobjectionable derivation of an "ought" from an "is" in a game can be transferred to an ethical situation. The purpose of the plotters against a tyrant is to save persecuted people from death. A situation can thus arise where you conclude you ought to kill the tyrant or sacrifice your life in attempting to do so. "Ought to kill" is not analytic to "tyrant"; it is not a moral imperative deduced from the word "tyrant". It derives logically from the plotter's purpose. This is an unobjectionable derivation of an ethical "ought" from an "is".

I am now going to give you personally four "oughts" which you will be able to exchange for what is the case.

1. You are the editor, so you ought to exercise editorial control ("so you ought" = "that means your job is").
2. Because paying members contribute disproportionately to Commensal funds you ought not to expect us to pay for printing a dozen pages of vaporising by one member ("you ought not to expect" = "I object").



3. This is a democratic SIG so you ought to print a returnable questionnaire on a tear-off back page to ascertain the views of the membership and not rely on a straw poll ("ought to" = "it is within our rights to ask you to")

Suggested Questions

1. Do you want correspondents to be limited to replying to one topic?
2. Do you want replies to the same topic to be grouped together ?
3. Should replies to an article be limited to three follow-up editions with the original writer being invited to make a final response ?
4. Which of the two dozen suggestions for renaming Commensal do you favour ? It ought to be *Mensa Minder* ("it ought to be" = "I want it to be").
5. Would you like a philosophical or practical question to be posed for each issue, inviting replies of up to 100 / 200 words ?

Roger Farnworth

P.S. Thanks for all the work you do.

Roger : This "is/ought" business is a complicated matter and I get more confused the more I think about it ! The main issue is what on earth is at stake in the question, because often it seems to be such a silly assertion. I raised the following example with Professor Hanfling :-

I can't help but think that Hume et alia wouldn't be proposing a thesis that could be overthrown by any statement of the form "X is a duty, therefore you ought to do it". They might say that you could not deduce from the fact "your family is in distress" the obligation "you must assist them", but they would surely not deny the syllogism : fact ("your family is in distress" and "it is your duty to support your family in distress") therefore, obligation ("you must assist them").

If I interpret his response correctly, Professor Hanfling agrees that proponents of the is/ought question, if not Hume himself, would understand it thus. He wouldn't rely on an example like this, but would stick to examples of murder & promise-keeping, but does think that there is a logical connection between "distress" and "ought", but which needs spelling out.

My point has been that people disagree over what is a moral duty, so such duties aren't facts, and therefore aren't part of the "is". We definitely disagree about whether or not it's right to assassinate a tyrant. Orthodox Christian teaching is that you shouldn't - not that this view is necessarily one that I share, but it shows that it's not a fact that you ought to do so.



I often wonder whether there's confusion - which you've helpfully drawn our attention to - between the logical & moral uses of "ought". It's obvious in the example from chess. There's no moral compulsion to play so as not to lose (except if you're playing as part of a team), but it is irrational to do otherwise. Similarly, it may be rational or expedient to kill the dictator, but not necessarily moral. I may have read somewhere (or maybe only dreamt it in a bat-state) that consequentialism is thereby not a moral theory at all.

As for your suggested "oughts", firstly, this SIG isn't democratic & your bete noire doesn't even think democracy is a good thing ! I'll exercise my free will and general disagreement with their hold over me and ignore them this time round. However, if there's a general upswell of popular feeling in support of your views, I'll listen to it; from a strictly rational rather than moral standpoint, you understand ! I don't think *Commensal* is currently experiencing a crisis, so I'm not currently of a mind to hold a referendum to resolve one. Last time the Editor did that sort of thing the newsletter disappeared from the scene for 3 years.

Theo

15th January 1998

Anthony Owens

MORALITY, DUCKS AND SOULS

Morality (Dave Botting, C90/5; Michael Nisbet, C90/10-12): Further to **Rick Street's** comment (**C90/29**) it could well be that morality simply evolves, like fingers and brains, and involves just about as much choice as they do. It aids the common, though ultimately the selfish, good; and promotes the survival of an optimum number of individuals for whatever are the prevailing conditions. This suggests that morality changes over time under its own momentum. Is this the essence of the '*Voluntaristic Fallacy*' (**Theo, C90/36-42**)? Social morality breaks down when the optimum is breached by that increase in numbers or deterioration in conditions which individuals regard as threatening to their own well-being. Historically, it might seem that having a war at that stage was an efficient, it perhaps unintentional, remedy: naturally selecting the peaceful from the violent. Of course, the best war for the purpose would involve volunteer armies fighting each other; rather than protecting themselves the most and involving the innocent as much as possible, which has characterised military thinking since carpet bombing and nuclear weapons. However, the danger to a society of not having a war when one is needed may be internal anarchy. Is this where choice might come in? Either way, it could be we're now headed back to the caves ready for the next major evolutionary step!

Zero Ducks and Other Uncertainties (Theo, C90/10): '*mathematics is the most precise language we've got*' falls short of a ringing endorsement of mathematical precision but I'll gloat briefly by just saying that after four thousand years (or more?) maths still doesn't know its curve from its straight.



In the matter of the positive negative it would serve little purpose to try to justify my perhaps clumsy introduction via the root of the negative so let me skip on to a physical analogy. Is an electron less than a positron? Would their mutual annihilation result in a zero? Except in the well-known field of mathematical fiction called accountancy a '*negative duck*' would be a lot more than a promissory note: it would have the power to annihilate a duck; leaving a state which would give the impression of containing zero ducks; but which would contain a virtual duck and a virtual negative duck: a state from which Stephen Hawking could grow an entire duck universe! Incidentally, understanding the dictum, '*Space acts on matter, telling it how to move. Matter reacts back on space, telling it how to curve.*' begs not the maths but a definition of the term 'Space'. Without such definition it would have marginally more meaning if you substituted the term 'rice pudding'. Of course, imagining a space full of virtual particles, virtual ducks, ..and.., yes, virtual rice pudding might well be persuasive enough for anyone to conclude that it had more than sufficient power to '*act*'. (... and science thinks religion is metaphysical?! - pots and kettles)

Soul and Evolution (Nina Burton, C90/15): You ask: '*why would we have an existence beyond our physical selves if we are just a passing stage*' (on '*the evolutionary ladder*'). The question itself assumes the belief to be: 'I am a body which has a soul', as indeed does most writing on this matter. If you substitute: 'I am a soul which has a body' then the problem may be resolved. Matter is freed to evolve and souls are freed to inhabit some dimensionless realm on/in which matter develops to the point at which the awareness of the soul can emerge constructively within the maelstrom of what is demonstrably purely apparent existence. Of course, this begs questions of awareness. Is it just electronic jiggery-pokery which would be equally at home in a brain or on a bit of silicon, or is it something more? I fear that these are questions you can only ask of yourself. Perhaps some individuals are aware and some are robots (**Mike Rossell, C90/17**). How could we find out which ?

Anthony Owens

Anthony : As usual, I have to take issue with you on your philosophy of mathematics. What do you mean by saying that "maths still doesn't know its curve from its strait" ? Why, also, do you think it has trouble with the term *space* ? Have you tried reading any book on general relativity where the concept is discussed ? I won't enter into it here as I'd only end up tying myself in knots. Besides, it's a topic for PhySIG.

With respect to negative electrons, you will find that there is a subtle difference between a positron and the absence of an electron. The latter is termed a hole and features in semiconductors. It is simply a missing electron. When an electron turns up, the hole is filled and we end up with nothing. Things are much different with positrons. This is an anti-electron, not a missing electron, and its interaction with an electron leads to their mutual annihilation in favour of photons (gamma radiation). There would be a similar distinction between a negative duck and an anti-duck, though the latter would be rather difficult to construct ! To ask whether an electron is *less than* a positron doesn't make sense. The *charge* on an electron is equal &



opposite to that on a positron. Minus 1 is less than plus 1, but this isn't telling us anything meaningful about electrons & positrons as the sign is a mere convention. In any case, comparing the *particles* is not the same as comparing their *charges*, or *masses*, or other properties.

Mathematics is a collection of models which can sometimes, amongst other things, be applied to physical situations in order to make concrete predictions. Using the wrong model won't give you the right answer.

Theo

28th January 1998

Mike Rossell

COMMENTS ON C90

With lots more cross-referencing.....

Theo Todman (90/4) : An academic Mentor might produce a clash of ideas on the style or standard of philosophy in this hallowed journal! Is 'Philosophy Now' judged or censored at all ?

Nina Burton (90/15) - **Philosophy and Evolution** : Are we really the first truly self-aware form of life ? Regardless of the problem of identifying the first 'real' human being, I think it's impossible to conclusively prove an absence of self-awareness in other animals. If we assume that other living things do think, then we should have more respect for the environment! Maybe tofu will go to heaven...(86/3.4)

Better to side-step the question by arguing that we cannot consciously realise any form of self-awareness other than our own. So we are the final step of the evolutionary ladder leading to human beings, but not the one leading to (eg.) dolphins or termites. We believe humans are more important because we are human (**Rick Street**, 89/31.6).

Vijai Parhar (90/24.2ff) : I don't agree with the idea that materialistic or dispassionate observations are more 'real' than our own perceptions. With this assumption, the beauty of a flower presumably wouldn't exist if there were only bees to look at it!

What is your definition of 'physical reality' ? Is it better and more appropriate to exclusively view flowers as insects' nectar stations ? Would it be better to relate to other humans as simply 'moving objects made from clay', ignoring things like emotion because they are obviously 'only' subjective constructs ?



Looking back at the subject/object argument (**Michael Nisbet**, C87/6.4-7.3) it seems practically impossible to define what reality really is without being involved in it in some way.

Rick Street (90/29) - **Is War Justified ?** : I wasn't stating that I do think all wars are exclusively the fault of politicians! - but you do seem to agree with the idea of them having overall responsibility (31.1 lines 3-4)

"..if Nazism was totally ridiculous, the German people would never have fallen for it"

Or cf. **Dave Botting** (90/5.1 lines 10-11) :

"..The vast majority of people are led by the nose"

Or, taking an appropriate verse from the Bible - the beginning of chapter 3 of the letter of James, in the NT, says

'Teachers will be judged more strictly than others'

Implying that teachers/leaders, even if 'led by the people', still have to take more responsibility! It used to be the case that the king would fight with his army - even if King Harold lost both his life and the country by doing so! - why isn't this the case nowadays ? Possibly because those in charge of the war are no longer so sure of what they are fighting for ? Maybe it was easier to fight in the past because it was easier to separate 'us' and 'them'. (Cf. **Rick Street**, 89/35.2 and the following section 'Addendum on War and Empire').

Mike Rossell

Mike : Thanks. On your first point (only) ... a Mentor is not a censor but has the right to advise only. *Philosophy Now* is a peer-reviewed journal, so articles may, and no doubt are, rejected as in all publications (except, to date, in the peoples' republic of *Commensal*!).

There's a fine distinction between peer-review and censorship. Most periodicals are short of space (one day this may even apply to *Commensal*!), so they have to ensure that the best material is included. Sometimes this is at the arbitrary decision of the Editor. In scientific & other academic periodicals, an article is reviewed by persons of like competence. There's lots of controversy about whether the names of the reviewers (or even the names of the authors) ought to be revealed after / during the review process. There's also controversy as to whether peer-review suppresses innovative ideas.

Interestingly, there's an OU Summer School for Adults course [25/7 - 1/8] entitled *Questioning the Internet* (there I go again !) which asks the question "how does the information we obtain from the internet compare with information available from other sources? How much can we trust the results of our searches". This highlights the issue of the trustworthiness of



information. Maybe it's more of an issue in science, where not everyone can build a particle accelerator in their back garden to check the results. In philosophy, the cards are more clearly all on the table. Much academic philosophy seems to be of the "who said what when and why" variety, which is heavily factual and open to misleading statements & obfuscation. Not much fun either, I'd add. But, it's at least factual & the facts ought to be checked out by recognised authorities of like standing to the authors (peers). Or, so the argument goes. This isn't so much censorship as good housekeeping. No doubt there has to be some of the "load of crap - must try harder" sort of rejection as well. Why should readers' patience be tried by dull, badly thought out or derivative effluvia ? We're bombarded with reading material & someone needs to sieve out what is worthless.

Theo

31st January 1998

Alan Carr

MORE ON MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS

Hello Theo, Alan here !

A belated thank you for c90. I have to agree with you, I went off the rails in my last article. I could have refined my points much more but I am still not sure if it could be considered "philosophy". But I feel obliged to say that your criticisms or questions did not possess a strong philosophical content. I suppose I am a closet case anarchist but let me make one point.

Most of us in the world today live in so called democracies - governed by people we elect. These public representatives wield power, power the people bestow upon them in order to maintain the "democracy" (granted some are elected on crime or low tax platforms but my point still stands that they are elected to maintain the democracy, however democratic it may be). The people expect a degree of moral and ethical behaviour from these politicians and get it from the majority.

Now multinational corporations (I don't wish to apply strict labels as to what is a multinational corporation and what isn't but I hope you understand) have their power in money or something that has a currency value. They have no mandate from the people. They exist as their name suggests in many countries and hold influence in a large part of our lives, whether we are conscious of it or not: food, energy, materials etc. they do not exist to serve the good of any nation or any other form of land division. They exist to make a profit from whatever activity they engage in. They probably hold a large sway of influence in our political systems through donations to political parties. While I presume each multinational corporation has its own conduct rules, they are not bound to the moral and ethical standards of our governments but wield considerable power over our lives.



This the main thrust of my point. They have a great ability to abuse the power they possess and being multinational they can ignore calls of foul play, environmental damage from individual countries. multinational corporations are a relatively new breed of animal being, I believe, a development of the communications age. They possess the ability to prowl the world looking for the cheapest materials, labour etc. and can move camp quickly as many countries are finding out as they run to Asia. I accept that not all multinational corporations are as ruthless as I have suggested but the ability to abuse their power remains unchecked for the most part.

Now this isn't really philosophy and doesn't fit the *Commensal* and doesn't belong on its pages, but I feel obliged to refine my thoughts after that crude effort.

I would be interested on your thoughts on my thoughts, but you are busy with two SIGs.

I hope to send articles for *Commensal* next week.

I hope I made some sense.

Alan Carr

Alan : Contrary to your remarks towards the end of your article above, I thought what you've written is eminently suitable for *Commensal* and should appear within its pages. As you say, you have thought out your case a little better than perhaps you had done in your previous contribution. I'm not out of sympathy with what you have to say, by the way.

Incidentally, there was some correspondence in January in *The Economist* about the influence of small states & micro-states on global accountability which is vaguely related to multi-nationals. You might have views on this. You'd need to get the back issues from a library unless you subscribe yourself.

Your question is "what is the greatest good a government has to provide in a democracy". You answer this by suggesting that it is preservation of the democracy and suggest that multi-nationals are somehow inimical to this. Isn't the whole point of a democracy the preservation of individual freedom, and isn't the freedom of assembly one of the core freedoms ? Following on from this, isn't the formation of a multi-national, maybe even in opposition to national governments, the apotheosis of this freedom ?

Governments do, however, ultimately have control over multi-nationals. Assets can be sequestered. Bank accounts can be frozen. Perhaps the greatest ever conflict between a state & a multi-national was between church & state in the reformation. I expect the Roman Church was the greatest multi-national corporation the world has seen, but Henry VIII liquidated its English chapter - for selfish reasons & with mixed benefits. A prior example was



the suppression of the Templars in 1307-14 by King Philip IV the Fair of France with the assistance of Pope Clement V, himself a Frenchman. A subsequent example is Pope Clement XIV's suppression of the Jesuits, in 1773, under pressure from the governments of France, Spain, and Portugal.

I'd be interested to know whether you & others thought my rather abrasive comments last time on a couple of issues were likely to discourage contributions. I want to keep the SIG on the straight & narrow, so to speak, but don't want to confuse this path with my own views. Nor, of course, do I want to be scratching about for material.

Theo

7th February 1998

Alan Carr

COMMENTS ON C90

Hello Theo, Alan here, with my piece for the next issue, and thanks for the reply.

Rick Street (C90, 30.1) : why would a question on reincarnation sit better in Aquarian SIG? Would reincarnation raise deep philosophical thoughts that some people would not be ready to deal with or question ? Should we avoid a tendency to discuss "safe" subjects and not handle more exciting or uglier subjects ? I believe that this discussion must evolve before we go deeper (but hopefully not in to endless replies). Oh by the way Rick, I never met a normal man never mind a paranormal one!

Eric Hills (C90, 14.4) : if a consensus is reached by the participants and implemented, would this disrespect the position of the minority of those who refuse to participate in the talks. This problem wouldn't be solved in a few lines of this journal, but in the mean time all us philosophers can stare with frowns of intolerance at those hostile non participants. By the way would you consider Northern Ireland a democracy ?

Please forgive my effort in the last issue, rather crude. I should find another media in which to express my anarchistic tendencies, perhaps therapy.

(**Theo** : before you do a hatchet job on the Northern Ireland one, I am putting together a article on Northern Ireland which should see the light of the day soon. I await the next issue.) Thank you.

Alan Carr



Alan : I've no problems with us discussing re-incarnation. If I remember correctly, Plato, a philosopher of some renown, thought (or at least asserted) that the acquisition of knowledge was really remembering. This implies the pre-existence of the soul, if not re-incarnation (more "incarnation"). We'd have to discuss the alleged evidence, the differing alternative explanations & the philosophical implications.

Eric can't now answer for himself. I'd ask the further question - under what circumstances in a democracy is it right for the majority to override the wishes of a significant minority ?

Fair comment concerning "hatchet jobs". I have tended to bully you a bit. Thanks for persisting nonetheless !

Theo

GURDIEFF, RELIGION & DE BONO

31st January 1998

Norman Mackie

Dear Theo,

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of C90, with so much to ponder.

My Gurdieff quote in C89, "Your level of Being attracts your life", puzzles me too, it was included for reaction as much anything else. My interpretation goes along the lines of, as we progress along our life path we use our God-given free will in an attempt to determine our future and learn from our life experience. Gurdieff is taking us beyond the normal physical understanding of events, such as 'I will go to the party in the hope of meeting someone', into the realm of synchronicity, which I take to be something like the positive coincidence of apparently disconnected events. Beyond just being in the right place at the right time. More, events influencing each other to happen in the right place at the right time, but not in any ways we as yet consider 'normal'.

(Perhaps the above should be kept for my fellow Astro-siggers, but no harm done).

Nina Burton (C90, p14) : Well done for taking the plunge and sharing your thoughts and beliefs about the human soul or spirit. As a Christian I believe that the main purpose of life is to come to God, and having been blessed through His grace, to share faith in Him and through devotion to gain redemption and eternal life. During my twenties I had for many years stopped attending church, however having observed the miracle of two daughters arriving in this world I found myself drawn back to regular worship.

Some books that I have read over the years, which I would recommend are :-



- Professor Carter : *The Anthropic Principle*
- Leo Tolstoy : *The Kingdom of God is Within You*
- Ved Mehta : *Mahatma GANDHI and His Apostles*
- John Ruskin : *Unto This Last*

In some sense would it be fair to say that religion is the mother of both science and philosophy. Edward de Bono, referring to classical philosophers as the gang of three, contrasts the traditional western view of a problem as dichotomous whereas the eastern view is more often one of duality. Perhaps all seekers of the truth down through the centuries would have remained more integrated had there been more of an eastern holistic approach.

Many blessings to you.

Norman Mackie

P.S. Could you please forward the enclosed book to Nina Burton.

Norman : Nina thanks you for the book, is reading it & will respond to you in due course.

On what you've said above, in what sense is the birth of a child (one of your daughters, at any rate - we'll leave out controversial cases) a miracle ?

I know Edward de Bono had it in for Socrates, Plato & Aristotle. I thought he also had it in for Jesus, or at least for Christianity ? The axe he's always grinding is the importance of creativity. Consequently, he downplays things like logic and certainty as though they are evils that interfere with the creative process. He dislikes the "I'm right you're wrong" attitude. While there's a lot of truth in this (he's certainly made a good living out of it), "babies" & "bathwater" come to mind ! Creativity is fine for generating new ideas. What you need then is the hard-hearted logical / empirical approach to see whether the ideas stand up. That's where the right / wrong angle comes in, for some of us, anyway !

Theo

2nd February 1998

Stef Gula

COMMENTS ON C90

Theo,

It's not that I can't be bothered to read the editorials, but d'you think you could see your way maybe to sticking the "deadline for submissions" info. somewhere on the cover ?



Anyway, in at the deep end. Again. In a way it's nice to be on the defensive a little. Finding folk agreeing with you might be good for the ego - but it's yer critics as show you your weaknesses, innit ? I know some misguided souls see something noble in philosophy - a process of seeking after truth, and all that. But face it - who really wants the truth ? What most people with a "Bright Idea" want is complete vindication of their own viewpoint and the chance to rip sh*te out of contrary opinions along the way. The whole beauty of philosophy is that there's just so much scope for dissent.

Almost too much at times.

Some issues (as **Theo** rightly notes [C90, 23.4]) like "free-will vs. determinism" and the "probabilities" thing can't rightly be covered in a few passing comments. Nor in a few thousand years of human endeavour if the current state of philosophy, science, religion, art, etc. is much to go by. On such a basis, like "First Cause" and all the other circular arguments on which "The Big Questions" traditionally rest, it's probably better to dip in on an "as and when" basis rather than try to devour them whole. Of course, if anyone thinks it worthwhile, I'm game, but I doubt we'll do any better'n has been done before. Unfortunately I was unable to resist the temptation of picking a few scabs anyway. Such as ...

Apparently **Theo** [C90, 23.4] "...couldn't see, though, why not having freewill should prevent one from having opinions...". Nope - not of necessity, I concur. I guess it depends what one means by "having opinions". Accepting, for the sake of argument, that a suitably powerful computer, suitably programmed, might "... hold all sorts of views..." and "...modify them in the light of debate..." is that the same as "having an opinion" ? Does the computer appreciate that what it holds is "an opinion", or is it merely regurgitating suitably processed clichés ? {Come to that, do any of us?}

If, though, what the computer has is "an opinion" - who's ? Does it "own" the opinion, or has it merely inherited it, along with all the other data it holds, from the programmer ? And if what it has is indeed an opinion of its own, might this not simply mean the computer had developed "free-will" - thus allowing it to "really" "have an opinion" ?

"Having an opinion", like "having feelings", implies something more than just responding to stimuli. It implies a "self" to which the state applies. Whatever "it" is that affords the luxury - or illusion - of subjectivity, call it "reflexive awareness", "consciousness", "free-will" or whatever, that we perceive of ourselves as ourselves suggests we have it. Without "me" how can 'I' be said to "have" anything ?

Theo also states [C90, 23.4] "...determinism has no necessary relationship to predictability... ". Agreed ! I wasn't aware I'd implied that I thought otherwise - although I might've reversed the statement - predictability having no necessary relationship to determinism. I fear though some variants on this latter theme might involve "First Cause". Which I propose not to go into any deeper right now in the interests of avoiding unnecessarily offending



religiously orientated readers. I'm sure there'll be ample opportunity at some future juncture to annoy the devout.

Moving on then, to "points arising" and "replies" - which, fortunately, can be covered in a few passing comments

Anthony Owens (C90, 9.3) - Your suggestion that druggies might be guilty of the "...offence of risking violence to others..." raises a host of nightmarish possibilities. Not just drug-users but boozers, the bad tempered, etc. needs must beware this one methinks. Indeed, if risk is a factor we all best watch our necks in your little Utopia, since everyone has the potential to offend. Perhaps the simplest, most cost-effective, permanent and humane remedy would be to save us all from ourselves by exterminating everybody "on spec"?

Shades of "2000 AD", "Judge Death". "The crime is Life. The sentence is Death."

Rick Street (C90, 30.4) : The statement "X is dead" is either "true", in which case "X" is "dead" - or it isn't and they ain't.

Questions concerning the nature of "dead" don't really figure. Alternative statements, each with its own associated "probability of truth", like "I thought / dreamt X was dead", "X who was dead has been raised by Jesus / reincarnated as a bat", etc. also seem to have little bearing on the case since they relate to different things.

That's obvious ! Subjectively !

Incidentally (and maybe this'll help Theo get to grips with non-standard English [C90, 35.2]) "statistically" I think you'll find you're probably neither "bat" nor "human" but "bacterium". Not that it matters since, to a first approximation, life on Earth is either extinct or never got started in the first place - depending how "Terra-centric" your statistics are.

Dave Botting : "A Sociopath's Guide To Moral Philosophy" [C90, page 5] ? Sociopath ? Hah ! Pussycat more like.

You imply that, at best, we are inconsequential, at worst inconsequential and stupid. Which is fair enough. But that doesn't mean we're not "important".

Whilst agreeing that humanity may not necessarily be a good thing I would contend that our collective capacity to foul up on a monumental scale is unprecedented in the history of life on Earth. Indeed, all the available evidence points to it being unique in the Cosmos.

Which surely has to be important in the eyes (or tentacles, or whatever) of any intelligent observer. That the only intelligent life we currently know of (or recognise ?) is us makes no odds. We, at least, have the capacity to



appreciate the utter futility and madness of our existence. All it takes is the realisation that this is what it's all for. And maybe cannibalistic tendencies.

Anyway, I seem to be past my usual word-limit. So, since I don't want anyone thinking it's Rick writing badly under a pseudonym, I guess I better get off me soapbox.

Hasta La Bleedin' Vista Kiddies.

Stef Gula

Stef : Your opening remarks on argumentation refer more to a debating society than to philosophy properly so called. It is incumbent on the philosopher, if not on the lawyer, to at least delude him/her self into thinking what he/she is saying approximates to the truth. That is my pious hope, anyway.

With respect to opinions, and who can have them, I note that we always say "Mensa has no opinions". Are we thereby saying that Mensa, not being a person (except in a legal sense as a limited company), can't, by the nature of the case, have opinions because it doesn't have anything ? Or are we saying it doesn't have opinions because it's a free-speech organisation and has made a policy decision not to (there's a fiction for you !). Mensa, of course, does have opinions - it believes that IQ is a coherent concept that measures something worthwhile, for a start. Newspapers have opinions. West Ham (at least used to) stand for a certain way of playing football. These are opinions that transcend those of the current incumbents (managers, editors, etc.). Thoughts ?

Further, when I find myself foolishly on a white-knuckle ride - having used my free will to decide to get on - I then tend to develop a strong opinion that I want to get off; but I don't really have the free will to do so (especially if I've been strapped in). I can have all the opinions I like in that sort of situation, without the free will to act on them.

Thanks for clarifying Rick Street's use of "statistically". I don't think it's non-standard English though : you've used non-standard English in your piece above to good effect (well, "effect", anyway - this is a matter of taste that not all will share) that is perfectly intelligible. What Rick was saying, or at least what you (and now I, maybe) understand Rick as saying, in a highly compressed form, was that, given the premise that I might be anything dreaming of being a human, and given that there are approximately equal numbers of bats and humans, then I'm as likely to be a bat as a human. The statistics has to do with counting bats & humans. You've extended this to bacteria and humans. Why not go all the way to viruses, or quarks ? Isn't the "statistically" just technobabble that distracts from the real issue which is whether something of the limited intellectual capacity of a bat (let alone a bacterium) has the capability of dreaming it's a human, let alone the unreality of the whole idea ? In any case, what Rick actually said originally (in C89, 34.1) was that "... You could quite possibly be a sleeping bat and I don't see why that should be any less likely statistically than the equally one-in-several-million possibility that you really are human". I think I'm correct in saying this is obscure, as



well as false, in that it doesn't on the surface say "there are several million times the number of non-humans as humans" but seems to imply a low probability of one being a human.

Theo

17th February 1998

David Taylor

COMMENTS ON C90

Dear Theo,

Here are a few comments arising from C90 :-

Theo Todman (C90, p.3) : I don't think I have any objection to putting Commensal onto computers, so long as it doesn't exclude from anything important those of us who lack the funds or the accommodation for a computer.

I was going to comment on free-will (**Stef Gula**, C90 p.22), but there was a gaping hole in my argument - perhaps another time.

Michael Nisbet (C90, p.11) : It is plausible that the self is necessarily conscious. Perhaps consciousness is a special model of the world, with the self at its centre.

"Self temporarily or partially set aside" suggests to me a suppression or diversion of an immediate response - something which seems to involve the prefrontal lobes of the brain. The setting aside of the self may be what gives rise to the illusion of free will. (As an alternative to the above, perhaps this is the source of consciousness ?)

Vijai Parhar (C90, p.24) & **Theo Todman** (C90, p.26) in reply to Vijai : Remember the word "protoplasm" ? We used it when we knew next to nothing about chemistry. Both flowers and men, and birds, and all the rest consisted largely of protoplasm. Now we can distinguish amongst them by appealing to different varieties of DNA and proteins. My biology teacher used to refer to the composition of protoplasm as "CHOPSN" - adding phosphorus, sulphur and nitrogen to carbon, hydrogen and oxygen.

This puts its chemistry in the realm of organic chemistry, where most links between atoms involve just two atoms, and are directed along the line joining the two atoms. Because of this, a molecule's properties depend not only on how many of each type of atom it has, but on how they are joined together. This partly explains the (infinite ?) possible variety of proteins and nucleic acid. This phenomenon is very important in organic chemistry, and is called isomerism. Thus, this basic principle, which explains the difference between



acetone (CH_3COCH_3) and propionaldehyde ($\text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2\text{CHO}$) goes on to (partly) explain the difference between a cat and a butterfly. We also need to consider the physical and chemical reactions among the diverse constituents of protoplasm.

I think these are amongst what Theo calls “emergent properties”.

Sorry, I seem to have gone on rather at length, just to point out that the proportions of atoms are not necessarily the most important thing in distinguishing one substance from another. (Besides isomerism in its many forms, there are polymers - glucose can be considered a polymer of toxic formaldehyde, for instance. There I go again !)

Yours sincerely,

David Taylor

David : Good to hear from you. Yes, that's pretty much what I meant. Thanks for the examples. I look forward to your free-will argument when you've plugged the hole. Since when has having a gaping hole in an argument ever stopped anybody ?

Which sets me thinking. There are (at least) two sorts of chess players - attacking & defensive players. Attacking players are all swash & buckle while defensive players like to point out the errors in others' attacks. Of course, defence can become pathological, in that a player may only see the drawbacks in his/her own attacks, which can be a bit stultifying. That's what happened to me, which is why I don't play any more (as well as it being a waste of time ... provocative remark !). Any analogies with philosophical discussion ? Philosophy's such a difficult subject, that almost anything we say is riddled with errors or confusions, yet we steam on regardless (usually in ignorance until the error of our ways is pointed out !). It's good that we do, otherwise we'd never say anything and there'd be no progress at all.

Theo

12th January 1998

Theo Todman to Sheila Blanchard

I liked the following comment in your recent letter :-

I've just noticed on page 21 of C90 a bit by **Anthony Owens** on abortion which rings an “I've been here before” bell. “If the state wants to legalise murder”, he says. Murder is unlawful killing. If killing is lawful, it ain't murder.



Maybe you could build up your remark about abortion not being "legalised murder" into an article ? Of course, I don't fully agree with you !

I've approached the issue of the term "murder" having an ethical judgement embedded in it in my article in *Commensal* 90. I suspect it's ambiguous as to whether it's used in a moral or a legal sense in many contexts. Anthony Owens intends it in a moral sense and is suggesting that the law is out of tune with morality in this instance. The state can only tell us what is legal; it can't tell us what is right. I think your assertion that "Murder is unlawful killing" ignores the moral dimension at the expense of the legal. Your equation seems suspect to me for a number of reasons. All legally-defined murders are unlawful killings, I would suspect, but not all unlawful killings are murders in the legal sense (I think there's a distinction in law here - an unlawful killing is a lesser offence than manslaughter ?). Also, there are some morally-defined murders that are not legally-defined murders. Assassinations maybe fall into this category ? The question over abortion turns more on the status of the foetus, and what we mean by such terms as "human", "life", "body" and such-like. Shooting your neighbour's cat is usually an illegal killing, but is not thereby murder.

27th January 1998

Sheila Blanchard

Dear Theo,

I'll think about both murder and abortion. It was a bit of a shock to me to see that people were still saying the same things, hence the rather flip reaction. A lot of my writing and arguing in *Mensa* was in the way of campaigning for more sex education, better availability of contraception etc. and of course abortion was always part of the argument. I'm not up to date medically or statistically now. One of the biggest arguments in favour of legalising abortion was to reduce the number of deaths caused by back-street abortions; and I shouldn't think there are many of them now. It's a subject which rouses very strong passions, and I don't want to make any more enemies than I have already; which is a craven excuse I know, but I'm certainly giving the idea more consideration. Maybe I "ought" to contribute something.

I wouldn't feel Anthony Owens was making a serious moral judgement, much more likely a gut-reaction religious or sentimental one. He is presumably never likely to be faced by the actual moral dilemma himself, so how does he know what he'd do in any particular circumstances?

I must remember about the neighbour's cat ! Yes, I should have specified the killing of a human being - I'm thinking here about the assassin as well. I can't imagine any modern state where it would be legal for a citizen of another state to come and kill one of its citizens.

On the whole I think moral judgements are a matter for the individual; but the law could be seen as representing a consensus of the moral judgements of



society as a whole. It would never coincide exactly as there'd nearly always be a time-lag as the attitudes in society changed, before they were translated into law.

I like the idea of trying to find a basic moral ground which would apply in all societies. If there is one, presumably it's evolved because it constitutes the best foundation for the survival and development of society. Would it be subject to being changed by environmental change like other evolution ? It's a fascinating thought.

Best wishes,

Sheila Blanchard

Sheila : I think we agreed it was OK for me to print extracts from our correspondence. The reason I mentioned the neighbours' cat was that people disagree as to the human status of the foetus. If it's a fully fledged human being, then killing it is morally, if not legally, murder. While not wanting to get caught up in the loop on Nazis again, killing Jews was legal in the Third Reich, but it was murder nonetheless.

I'm not so confident about my "universal system of ethics" idea. Professor Hanfling doubts whether the idea even makes sense ! The sort of idea I had in mind was, much as you suggest, a set of generalised ethical principles that evolved because they were necessary for the maintenance of any society. I was attracted to the idea because it might form a natural basis for ethics, which is otherwise left either to divine fiat or human caprice. I've never thought it out in detail though.

Theo

6th February 1998

Sheila Blanchard

ASSASSINATION AND AFTER

I was pleased that Theo considered my reply to **Mark Griffin** in C90 worth expanding on, because I was afraid it was rather too simplistic. I had thought that it might be easier to contribute to what seemed to be a fairly new topic, but then I realised it had connections with previous discussion; so I apologise if I am going over old ground.

It was a bit silly of me to say "Murder is murder" without defining murder, so perhaps that is where I had better start. Murder means the unlawful killing, with malice aforethought, of a human being. Malice is defined as ill-will or evil intention. Assassination refers particularly to the killing of political or religious leaders; and as I cannot think of any modern country where it would not be



against the law for a person from another country to walk in and kill one of its leaders, assassination must be murder.

I agree with **Anthony Owens** (C90 p.7) that assassination as policy is not a good idea because it creates martyrs, which would be likely to prolong and intensify the conflict rather than ending it. Also, in practice it might be impossible to identify the key figure without whom the conflict would collapse. The assumed leader might not be that figure.

Now for Theo's comments, and, as he says, there are complex issues involved as soon as one begins to think of degrees of murder or degrees of guilt. Theo says that it must have to be clear to the guilty party at the time of the offence that the act is wrong. That might apply in a civilised society where killing human beings is considered wrong. But if someone is brought up in a society which includes, let us say, Xs and Ys, where all the Xs believe that the Ys are evil and should be killed, and all the Ys believe that the Xs are evil and should be killed it would not be easy to overcome that kind of conditioning. In fact I don't think it would be even necessary for the two sides to think of each other as evil. I'm thinking here of the Maori Wars when the protagonists apparently not only thought it was quite acceptable to kill, eat and enslave members of other tribes, but to change allies and fight now with and now against another tribe, or even the British army when they were "the enemy".

The most dangerous terrorists are surely those who believe that what they are doing is right.

Enormity: I'm not sure that I can follow this properly. I think that the attitude towards Myra Hindley is not simply hatred, but a deep-rooted fear of something too horrible to comprehend. "Bombers who may also have killed children". Presumably this means terrorist bombers, but it made me think of the RAF men who flew in bombers and suffered nightmares for years afterwards. Leaving that aside, how should we regard someone who placed a bomb in the car of someone he thought deserved to die, but found too late that the man's neighbour had borrowed the car to take her children to school?

Autonomy: I can agree with Theo here. Ordering someone else to kill must be more morally repugnant than accepting the blame and the guilt oneself. However, getting back to the simplicity of my statement "Murder is murder", at the back of my mind was a strong feeling that one should beware of romanticising assassination and thus appearing to condone it. I have a similar distaste for hearing convicted murderers described as "political prisoners".

Of course, I also have a dislike of hearing something described as murder when it does not fit the definition. If I may go back to C89 p.21, **Anthony Owens** says, re abortion, "If the state..... wants to legalise murder, fine, but why not call it what it is?"



So I come back to the (legal) definition of murder: "the unlawful killing of a human being with malice aforethought." If abortion is legal, it is not murder.

This does not mean that abortion should be taken lightly, and I doubt very much whether it ever is taken lightly. But falsifying one's terms is no help to rational discussion.

Sheila Blanchard

Sheila : we've covered much of my thoughts on the above before. For reasons of time & space I'll forebear making further comment for the moment.

Theo

21st February 1998

Roger Farnworth

DUALISM

If you switch on an electric fire a number of kilowatts of thermal energy will be produced per hour. If you sit by the fire you will be warmed. That is dualism. Physicalism insists that the world consists of physical processes that take place outside and within our bodies. Dualism insists that in addition there is consciousness of sensation and that between subjective experience and the objective world there is an unbridgeable chasm. I will try to narrow the gap. This is in order to make a bridge more conceivable though I offer no such bridging concept.

As nearly all the signals received by the conscious mind are visual I shall confine my remarks to that form of perception mentioning the other senses only in passing.

I hope to show that:

- (a) The phenomena of consciousness are more minimal than is generally believed.
- (b) That they are peripheral though sometimes crucial to the brain's decision making process.
- (c) That changes in the phenomena of consciousness are determined by physical phenomena.

We can find out how minimal the phenomena are by dumbing down consciousness to its simplest form. In a thought experiment suppose the whole screen of consciousness to be featureless darkness of unknown duration. If we subtract memory and emotion, such as fear of the dark, from the situation we will be unable to make a positive descriptive statement. In this respect it is similar to not having experience.

If the screen of consciousness is then filled with darkness that is the same in every respect except that it is minimally lighter and if comparison with the prior experience is not allowed then there is still no statement that can be



made about it. The same applies to any subsequent undifferentiated illumination of consciousness to the brightest perceivable. Likewise, it would not be possible to describe the experience of undifferentiated red light without recourse to memory. If a pinhole of light appeared in a dark screen the brain would compute the relative sizes of areas, co-ordinates of position and degrees of brightness but the retinal image would still consist of two areas which previously in this thought experiment were found to be devoid of describable content. Yet all visual knowledge lies in the ubiquity of colour coded light composed of elements which are themselves almost as void of information as is the absence of experience.

It is only by means of a brain mechanism external to consciousness that the hardware of the brain computes the differences between the contents of consciousness and uses that knowledge to construct a virtual reality. Semantically speaking consciousness remains as dumb as the world with which it liaises. It is only through being processed by the greatest complexity in the universe that the "real" world emerges from the raw data of consciousness. That we can see this virtual reality is our illusion. It never enters consciousness. We merely function as though the virtual reality was there present before us. We interact with its computed dimensions; its amenities and dangers. This virtual reality is a tool for making use of the unseen world that originally emitted signals some of which were translated into the markers such as red and green that the senses use.

The more minimal the markers of consciousness are, the more they have the plasticity of potters' clay. Specific brain locations have been found for the analysis of these markers in terms of edge, tone, colour and movement. Through the use of these analytical tools objects are constructed and appear in "real space" in perspective.

Consider a black and white film of a day's outing. Shifting white light conveys the totality of all data. Predetermined patterns of interpretation operate away from the screen but the raw data itself has been entirely controlled by the physical world. The distribution of light on the film varied directly in accordance with the light waves on the day of filming. The contents of consciousness are determined by the outside world in the same manner as the surface of the film.

The markers of consciousness are, however, novel. In the literal darkness inside the brain chemical and electrical messages convey the presence of light and are monitored on our screen by markers coloured in an entirely arbitrary way. It has been conjectured that a bat could hear by echo location its mate as red or brown, thus using the same limited store of markers as visual perception uses.

So all the semantic complexities that constitute our understanding of the world are derived from sight. (But see my prior reservation about the other senses). As the markers of light in consciousness take the same ever



changing forms as light in the physical world then the dualistic divide is narrowed, though not, of course, bridged.

The markers of consciousness are less important in the brain's decision making process than is generally believed. Through brain function, the stomach releases or withholds gastric juices in the absence of consciousness of the food being digested. In a recent experiment described in Guy Claxton's book 'The Dark Room', a man had to raise a flag when an event was observed. Muscular tensions that initiate flag raising began momentarily prior to the conscious decision to act. When a person is scared, he may react to an element in his situation without being conscious of it, hence he feels confused. Later, this reaction may be described as involuntary, instinctive, intuitive or even acting upon the sixth sense. It is conceivable that lower forms of life such as ants are reacting appropriately to their environment without consciousness. Car drivers may drive on automatic pilot using visual information without being aware of it.

So why does the brain need consciousness or is it just a by-product of brain activity? One reason may be that it enables one sense to alert another so that having looked we then listen or having seen the rose we then smell it. For the senses of touch and hearing friction and vibration would enable and generate highlighting as chemical detection would do for taste and smell.

Perhaps the most important function of consciousness arises from the conjecture that the brain is composed of separate unconnected computing systems. Consciousness may act as a beacon to alert all systems to information they may find useful. Other system would not of course see the beacon as this would involve infinite regression. Rather there would be a gate that is either open or shut to such information entering, a binary system controlling the consequences of consciousness. Information would initially only generate an image to be highlighted if it passed through a lattice of previously determined significance such as food or danger. Consciousness would then be a cog in a mechanistic process it neither began nor concluded.

Now that consciousness has been separated out from the determinist mechanisms that extract information from it and is seen to be an entirely simple set of markers provided by the brain, is there a case for saying that it is part of the furniture of the world albeit reproduction furniture ? We know that the markers are not "seen" because the evidence of this sighting would itself have to be seen and an infinite regression would ensue. Are we aware of them in any other way? Consider the difference between smelling a rose and being aware of the smell of a rose. Sometimes we are distracted from fully appreciating the smell of a rose and thus not fully aware. If however we give the smell our undivided attention it is clear that there is no difference between the smell and awareness of the smell, otherwise we could specify the difference. We can conclude that the phenomena of consciousness are neither seen nor are we aware of them. They simply exist, provided by the world, controlled by the world and used by the world and thereby sharing the same realm of discourse.



Roger Famworth -----

Roger : Thanks for the above paper. There's much food for thought, which, in my case at least, must be left until another time.

Theo

THE PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

(MONTY PYTHON)

Picking up on a point from **C89/30.7**, I decided to hunt out the text of Monty Python's famous song, a matter of 30 seconds searching using Yahoo!, with key-words 'Python', 'Philosopher' & 'Drink' producing a direct hit at Website **www.laughnet.net**, at URL :-

<http://www.laughnet.net/archive/misc/monty3.htm>.

The immortal text reads :-

Immanuel Kant was a real pissant
Who was very rarely stable.
Heidegger, Heidegger was a boozy beggar
Who could think you under the table.
David Hume could out-consume
Schopenhauer and Hegel,
And Wittgenstein was a beery swine
Who was just as schloshed as Schlegel.
There's nothing Nietzsche couldn't teach ya
'Bout the raising of the wrist.

John Stuart Mill, of his own free will,
On half a pint of shandy was particularly ill.
Plato, they say, could stick it away
Half a crate of whiskey every day.
Aristotle, Aristotle was a bugger for the bottle,
Hobbes was fond of his dram,
And Rene Descartes was a drunken fart:
"I drink, therefore I am"
Yes, Socrates, himself, is particularly missed;
A lovely little thinker but a bugger when he's pissed!

This site also contains the full script of other Python classics, including *The Meaning of Life* (.../meaning.htm) and *The Life of Brian* (... /brian.htm), and much else besides.

Anyone care to delve into the philosophy of humour ? Why is the above funny (if it is) ? Does it matter that most of those who heard it on the original show had never heard of half the philosophers mentioned, let alone knew what they taught. Does this matter ?

Theo Todman

