

Freethinker

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THE SECOND HOUSE

THE provisions for reform of the House of Lords outlined recently in the Queen's Speech are a step forward but still leave a good deal to be desired. Undoubtedly we need a second house for two main reasons. First, there is the purely practical point that were all the work left to the Commons there would not be time for some of the less important, though not unimportant, laws to be passed. The Lords have often been instrumental in instituting reforms, and are undeniably invaluable for committee work, and tabling amendments.

Secondly, there is the time-honoured argument that the existence of the Lords provides a safeguard against the possibility of the government becoming authoritarian and the even more unlikely result of such a process, the Prime Minister becoming a dictator. Over recent years with the whittling down of the delaying powers of the Lords, the strength of this safeguard has been reduced. Not very long ago the Lords were in a position to delay a bill until the following general election, when the country could express their opinion on the matter. In effect if the matter were important enough the Lord's could have initiated a referendum.

But is it at all likely that the government could ever become authoritarian or the Prime Minister a dictator? Here it is very easy to be complacent, to cast one's mind back over what is generally considered to be our fine record of democracy, unrivalled anywhere in the world, and say, "No, quite impossible". In these days of widespread disillusionment with our brand of democracy, which many claim is not democracy at all, anything is possible. Between now and the year 2000 many problems are going to have to be resolved if life is to be livable. Turmoil seems to be increasing throughout the world and to leave ourselves unprepared for any political contingency is foolishness.

Thus, there are two major reasons why we should have a second house. What is its optimum construction and how great should be its power? In the Queen's speech the government proposed to remove the vote from hereditary Peers, to lessen the number of 'Lords Spiritual' and to shorten further the time that the Lords can delay a bill.

In effect this would create a Lords of greater efficiency but less power. Greater efficiency is of course desirable, but it must be pointed out that the bishops who are left will in effect be life peers and as such retain their voting rights. Now, there may well be some egg-headed bishops who deserve a vote on grounds of their "high qualities of scholarship, intellectual integrity, moral courage and social commitment", as David Tribe, President of the National Secular Society, put it in a recent press release. But why a certain number of bishops should automatically have a vote in the House of Lords, just because they represent a religion to which less than 15 per cent of the population adhere is incomprehensible. Everyone has a representative in the Commons, while the Lords should be chosen according to the prospective members' ability rather than as to who he represents.

Apart from this anomaly the general aim is presumably to create Lords who fill the requirements much as outlined above by David Tribe. This would be admirable were it not for the fact that party politics is liable to load the dice. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition both have large personal patronage. David Tribe suggests that 'experts in certain fields' could be nominated 'by appropriate professional bodies, with all-party surveillance to



ensure this wasn't exploited by vested interests to party advantage'. However, any man, whether appointed by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition or anyone else is bound to favour one political line to another. It can only be hoped that with the removal of the large Tory body of backwoodsmen it will not be felt so important to follow a party line. Despite this we can hope to have a more efficient House of Lords. But what of the extent of their power? While they should not be permitted to interfere with the decisions of the Commons, the people's *elected* representatives, there should be some means by which their presence could guard against the admittedly

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Editor: David Reynolds

SABBATH DAY BIGOTRY

IF you are going to Wales on a Sunday and you want to have a drink when you get there, you need only avoid Anglesey, Caernarvon, Merioneth, Cardigan and Carmarthen. Last week you would have had to avoid Denbigh, Montgomery and Pembroke as well. In the recent plebiscite, the results of which were announced on November 8, the inhabitants of these three counties voted in favour of Sunday opening and joined Flint, Radnor, Brecon and Monmouth who went 'wet' in 1961.

It seems ludicrous that laws, discussions, plebiscites or anything else should relate to whether a pub opens on a Sunday or not. If a publican wants to open his establishment and people want to have a drink, what right has anyone to contest either of these decisions? In the five counties that are still 'dry' the vote against Sunday opening has been greatly reduced since the last plebiscite in 1961. This shows that there must be a considerable number of people in those counties who are prevented from doing as they wish by the quite openly displayed bigotry of the remainder.

This type of bigotry may be thought by many people to be something peculiar to Wales. However, throughout the country no live theatrical performance can take place unless no make-up or props are used. Last year a charity performance in Manchester was ruined by a threat of prosecution being imposed when the authorities learned that one of the performers was to use a ventriloquist's dummy

ANNOUNCEMENTS

National Secular Society. Details of membership and inquiries regarding bequests and secular funeral services may be obtained from the General Secretary, 103 Borough High Street, London, SE1. Telephone 01-407 2717. Cheques, etc., should be made payable to the NSS.

Humanist Letter Network (International) and Humanist Postal Book Service (secondhand books bought and sold). For information or catalogue send 6d stamp to Kit Mouat, Mercers, Cuckfield, Sussex.

OUTDOOR

Edinburgh Branch NSS (The Mound)—Sunday afternoon and evening: Messrs. CRONAN and MCRAE.

Manchester Branch NSS, Platt Fields, Sunday afternoon, 3 p.m.: Car Park, Victoria Street, Sunday evenings, 8 p.m.

Merseyside Branch NSS (Pierhead)—Meetings: Wednesdays, 1 p.m.: Sundays, 3 p.m. and 7.30 p.m.

Nottingham Branch NSS (Old Market Square), every Friday, 1 p.m.: T. M. MOSLEY.

INDOORS

The Conservation Society, Caxton Hall, Caxton Street, London, SW1, Saturday, November 23, 11.30 a.m.—6 p.m.: Annual General Meeting. At 2.30 p.m. Lord RICHIE-CALDER will give the Presidential Address "Hell upon Earth". Details from Jim Ainsley, 38 Beatrice Road, Salisbury, Wilts.

Leicester Secular Society, 75 Humberstone Gate, Sunday, November 17, 6.30 p.m.: "The Future of the Atlantic Alliance", C. T. PERTWEE.

London Young Humanists, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, W8, Sunday, November 17, 7 p.m.: "Your Questions answered on Sex", Dr EUSTACE CRESSER.

South Place Ethical Society, Conway Hall, Red Lion Squire, London, WC1, Sunday, November 17, 11 a.m.: "The Hero: Ancient and Modern", H. J. BLACKHAM. Admission free; Tuesday, November 19, 6.45 p.m.: Discussion—"Iraq". Speaker from Iraqi Embassy. Admission 2s (including refreshments), Members free.

and by the ringing down of the curtain on to a cross-talk act. Also throughout the country no charge can be made for admission to watch any sporting activity. Exorbitant prices for programmes, car-parks and the like serve to resolve the anomaly. There are innumerable examples of similar illogical restrictions. In the light of this the news that John Parker has won a place in the ballot for private member's bills and plans to bring in a Sunday Entertainments Bill is most welcome.

William McIlroy, General Secretary of the National Secular Society, had the following comment to make, "It is very gratifying to hear that the Sunday Entertainments Bill is to be revived by John Parker. William Hamling's attempt to change the law was unsuccessful partly through lack of time and the unscrupulous tactics of the Sabbatarians. The other factor was over-confidence on the part of Secular Humanists but this time we must pursue the matter with far greater vigour both inside and outside the House of Commons. Despite prayers and supplications the Sabbatarians have taken a hard knock in Denbigh, Pembroke and Montgomeryshire, and if they cannot hold their own in Wales with the Lord on their side it is unlikely that even Sir Cyril Black will save them at Westminster".

ALL FOOLS!

THE latest piece of Christian verbal gymnastics is somewhat less highbrow than that which we have come to expect from the New Theologians. Writing in his parish magazine *The Rev. John Heffer of All Saints' Church, Luton*, suggests that his church be renamed "All Fools". He says, "The world laughs at Christians who give time in prayer, worship and service in place of having a good time. But the saints were ready to be made foolish in the eyes of men, for God's sake. If you are one of God's poor fools I hope you are glad about it".

I, for one, don't laugh. I feel sorry, sorry that people waste time praying when they could be doing something practical. And why this disparagement of "having a good time". One would have thought that the Rev. Heffer's "fools" if they sincerely believe in the Christian God, would be having the time of their lives as they pray to him, just as a secular-humanist if he is honest with himself will, one would imagine, consider "having a good time" to be something in the order of either helping someone in need or resolving a problem rationally. Naturally, we enjoy what are commonly termed "the pleasures of this life", simply because we all need to relax from time to time. However, I think it's fair to say that if pleasure could be measured, more is gained from doing something constructive.

So, why should "a good time" be considered to be something sinful, and why this ambiguous, if light-hearted, attempt to convince people of something which is no more than a matter of faith.

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unlikely possibilities referred to above. This could perhaps best be accomplished by giving them the power to call a national referendum if, say, ninety per cent of them voted in favour of such a measure.

In this way we would have a second house of greater efficiency for the running of day to day parliamentary affairs—a house which would be better qualified and better equipped to prevent any government acting too hastily and too drastically—and perhaps ultimately if the current disillusion with our parliamentary system carries a long way further, a house whose existence could take on a whole new significance.

HONEST TO GODISM

G. L. SIMONS

IN the beginning was God, some say, and he was a simple soul. He messed about for a bit and then made a world or two, and finally man—and that was his big mistake. Part of man being impious he began to look at the world with cold, sober rationalism, and started to nibble away at poor old God. First his beard went, and then his arms and legs, and the last that was seen was a waning look of anguish, like the disappearing smile on the Cheshire cat.

God—the creator, the architect, the designer, the person—is dead. In a sense, of course, he was always dead, since there was never a living entity to correspond with the concept. It is only recently however that religious thinkers have been willing to concede that the idea of a personal god is without rational foundation.

The radical theologians who belong to the “death of God” school are doing nothing more than acknowledging the weight of the traditional rationalist case. The “standard” proofs for God’s existence were successfully criticised a long time ago. In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius undermined the Design Argument, and more recently the proofs were demolished in such works as Hume’s *Dialogues on Natural Religion* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. In the absence of rational support for belief in God some people found it convenient to employ the concept of *faith* to justify their position: faith may be defined as the decision to believe what we like whether there is evidence for it or not. But even today, faith is unfashionable, and new subterfuges are sought.

One of the most popular of these is *Honest-to-Godism* or *Depth-of-our-Beingism*, and is represented by John Robinson, John Wren-Lewis, Jenkins, Werner Pelz, Uncle Tom Cobley and all—all, that is, who are not stupid enough to adhere to an old irrationalism, but stupid enough to want a new one.

In essence the new, revamped, progressive, radical, modern, up-to-date theology consists in the following propositions: there is mystery at the heart of reality which men have testified to throughout history and which they have never fathomed; awareness of this mystery is *religious* awareness; to acknowledge the mystery is to be a believer. Or in short: we don’t know everything, therefore God exists. Freethinkers will recognise this mode of argument—from ignorance to belief. Needless to say this approach gets the modern theologian nowhere. The onus is upon him to show that the “unfathomable mystery” that he detects in his own consciousness is incapable in *principle* of scientific explanation, and is different in kind to the other former realms of ignorance which were subsequently dispelled by rational enquiry. This he is quite unable to do.

It is an interesting reflection on the poverty of modern Christian thought that it has to be grounded in *mystery*. To some extent Christianity was always like this. Regular sources of confusion were termed “mysteries”, and if the puzzled rationalist enquired about the meaning of the Trinity, for instance—how can one be three and three be one?—he was informed sagely, “Oh that is one of the *mysteries*”, as if by such a comment all was made crystal clear.

This attitude underlines an important distinction between rationalism and Christianity. To the rationalist the universe is inherently explicable, even if at any one time our knowledge is limited; to the Christian, old and new, the universe

is inherently incomprehensible in important aspects. The Christian is driven to such a position by the nature of his commitment. He decides what to believe and then looks for reasons for it. If there are none he can either abandon his creed (an unwelcome prospect!) or live with contradiction and proclaim the ultimate mystery of things (quite acceptable!).

Another version of the modern theology concerns the *depth of our being*. This is a curious phrase: depths are usually something unpleasant, e.g. the depths of depravity, to sink to the depths. We are assured that this is not the meaning intended. Quite the contrary, the depths of our being are supposed to be the ultimate, absolute aspect of our nature, to be the part of God in all of us. There is no argument here. It’s proclaimed and that’s an end of it! Thus God is redefined as *depths* or alternatively as “that which we value without reservation”—and since we all value something, we are all believers. A convenient conclusion!

But a God so defined is remarkably limited. He can have no existence independent of human beings: he came into existence when they did, and he would cease to exist if the human race became extinct. A God that is merely a part of man’s conviction or consciousness is a paltry creature! But the modern theologian is driven to positing him in such a form. Today there is little else the religious thinker can do, and what his efforts amount to is an attempt to hang a religious terminology on to a rationalist view of the world.

The radical theologian and the humanist find themselves in general agreement about many aspects of morality and philosophy, but it is important to realise the hypocrisy and subterfuge in the modern religious position. Whilst acknowledging the humanist case the religious thinker is determined to retain the traditional religious language: much of the new theology consists in redefining “God”, “soul” “salvation”, “prayer”, etc., in terms of beliefs to which the humanist would subscribe. By such a device the radical theologian is trying to show that the wide spectrum of modern thought is vindicating the essentials of religious belief. What dishonesty! It’s rather as if a habitual believer in fairies suddenly decided to define “fairy” as “a female MP in a Liverpool constituency”, and points to Bessie Braddock, proclaiming at the same time “Look, I told you fairies exist!” A person acting in this way would be suspected of eccentricity, to say the least.

The situation is that the religious case has been undermined, and the Christian apologists are striving to marry the traditional jargon to a scientific view of the world. But there is no longer any place for the jargon in a serious world-view, and the subterfuge must be exposed.

A polite dialogue of compromise with radical Christian thinkers is quite out of place. *They are on the run and we should flick their haunches to keep them moving!*

TOWARDS HUMAN RIGHTS

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Annual report of the
National Secular Society

PAGAN SURVIVAL IN JUDAISM

OTTO WOLFGANG

RELIGION codifies notions of a previous stage of human civilisation; hence Judaism is built on Stone Age notions, Roman Catholicism on those of the Bronze Age. Negligence or non-observance of rites is threatened with the wrath of the divinity; under such duress religious laws become hardened and petrified throughout the ages, when their meaning and origin are commonly forgotten. The fear of divine retribution is then inherent in people to such a degree that even rational explanations are unable to penetrate their obsessional anxiety. This explains why rational argumentations and discussions with true believers are a waste of time; if cornered on one point they are psychologically compelled to seek another avenue of escape.

Sabbath

Why are Jews not allowed to do any work on the seventh day of the week?

Yahweh, their ranting, wrathful god, is the abstraction of Saturn, the old God of Death, who was believed to "reign" over the "Satur"-Day. Saturn, the planet which was farthest away, is dimly visible and was therefore considered to be a bilious old man with black moods. Cuneiform tablets called the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th day of the lunar month *umu limmi*—days of mishap or Bad Days (UD.HUL.GA'L)—on which it is best to refrain from all work.

A Talmud *haggadah* (story) has it that Moses called on Pharaoh to ask for a weekly holiday for the 'Jewish' slaves. When given the choice of the day, Moses replied: "Let it be Saturday, the day on which no work can succeed".

Certain passages in the Old Testament (e.g. Exod. 31:15; 35:2; against Josh. 6 and Neh. 13:15-20) make it clear that this strict Sabbath observance did not exist before the Babylonian captivity.

Circumcision

Circumcision is very common among primitive tribes, apart from the Semites, but alien to the Indo-Germanic and Finno-Ugri-Mongolic races (unless introduced through Islam). Long considered of some prophylactic value, this has now been forcefully denied by modern medicine and is seen as a primitive sacrifice like the cutting off of a finger or toe, knocking out of a front tooth, etc., as practiced by tribes still in the fetish stage.¹

Apart from the Jews, distinctly religious ceremonies in connexion with circumcision are extremely rare, a fact which underscores the atavistic origin of this rite.

Basically it is a puberty ceremony for the initiation of the young men into the tribal lore when they have to prove that they are fit to join the ranks of the warriors and able to withstand pain and ordeals; they are then trained for production and reproduction, hence the close link with marriage and initiation. This crucial crossroad is expressed in primitive thought by the idea of the individual's death and rebirth as a reincarnation of the clan totem.

Symbolism in Religion

Nature religion, as distinct from abstract (idealistic) religion, was closely connected with fertility rites as instanced by religious 'obscenity'. The pleasures of sex and inebriety excite men to such a degree that they feel possessed by a god.² But sex was not only thought to kindle fertility in man, beast and field, at the same time it warded off the influence of evil spirits.

Hermes, a Pelasgian god, was represented at Kyllene in Elis simply as an erect penis (Pausan vi, 26, 5), hence the phallic effigies called *hermai* to protect the entrance to houses. The same idea prevails in the Jewish *Mezuzah* (meaning "doorpost"), the phallic tube containing a prayer. It must be noted that the Mezuzah is affixed to the doorpost in the slanting position of a *penis erectus*. The *Jewish Encyclopaedia* admits that "In Talmudic times protective powers, specially in warding off evil spirits, was attributed to the *mezuzah*".

Deuteronomy vi, threatens, once again, the wrath of the Lord unless his words are written upon the doorpost (v. 20) and "bound up on your hands and between the eyes" (v. 18), as phylacteria (cf. Matt. 23:5); a long strap from (another) conical tube is long enough to be wound seven times around the arms and fingers so as to form the (Hebrew) letter *shin* = Tooth on the back of the hand (Exod. 13:9-16). When put back into its receptacle, it must be positioned in such a way that it resembles the male organ with its testicles. Another symbol for always having the Lord's commandments in mind is the praying shawl with its fringes (Num. 15:38), resembling the *abayah* worn by the Bedouins.

As in the case of circumcision, the various food taboos, too, were ascribed to hygenics, which is ludicrous if one recalls the very modern origin of hygiene. The term 'kosher' means 'fit' for human consumption after draining away of the blood which was considered the seat of the "Life Spirits". In Gen. 3:10 God asks Cain: "What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground". It was dangerous to shed blood (criminals were stoned from afar), let alone eat it; but it could be sacrificed on the altar since God was immune to this danger. The curious custom—amongst others—to refrain from eating the sinews of animal hind legs (apart from birds) emanated from the story Gen. 32 because an 'angel' fought with Jacob and "touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank"; which seems to indicate that Jacob himself was an animal-god like many Egyptian deities.

Even less understandable is the strict ban on eating meat together with milk products (e.g. butter) for which there is no scriptural inhibition other than the command "thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk" (Deut. 14:21; Exod. 23:19 and 34). The custom of boiling a young lamb or kid in milk is still prevalent among the Arabs who in general observe food taboos like the Jews. This command especially singles out the kind, i.e. young goat and nothing else, which again seems to point to a survival of some pagan Mother cult.

The beasts declared 'unclean' were all taboo to pagan deities. These were such animals as the camel and hare (Deut. 14:7). The pig was taboo, particularly to Set, the Egyptian opponent of Osiris, the saviour god. In addition, these animals were used in fertility rites all over the ancient world and the Talmud (Hul. 115b, Aboda zara 29b) stresses the ban on all objects used for idolatry. "He who truly fears God will observe His commands *without inquiring into the reasons* for them."

Twofold Tolerance

When in Israel I visited a socialist Kibbutz where they had no religious objects and all holidays and festivals were given a secular meaning. But outside, there exists between them and the orthodox minority the great mass of irrel-

gious conformists who no longer believe but consider it necessary to nail mezuzas to the doorpost, have their children initiated³ and attend the synagogue on holidays; and all food has to be kosher since the Rabbis do not tolerate 'clean' and 'unclean' food standing nearby.

In these conditions it may take some courage to be odd-man-out, particularly if you expect some toleration from the other side too. Nowadays we don't get it, but even in Israel the orthodox community grudgingly keeps something of a truce. However, can tolerating *progress* equal that of sense less *retardation*? You cannot at the same time adapt your society to the atom age and remain rooted in grey antiquity. We cannot build socialism and perpetuate pagan superstitions. Yesterday has to make room for Tomorrow.

The believer, of course, would rather die than do like millions of others: viz. eat food that he considers 'unclean'

in a religious sense. We must tolerate the indoctrinated anxieties and fears of the *individual* believer but we cannot extend a static tolerance to his dictates as far as the community as a whole is concerned.

Nobody hinders him being pious and observant at home until such time as technical progress reaches and moulds him also.

¹ It should be noted that the Hebrew term, hotèn or hātàn=wife's father or daughter's husband, denotes a marriage relation: to contract affinity through marriage—a blood seal between God and his followers.

² In Antiquity wine was never drunk undiluted unless in divine service when it served to raise the feeling of 'enthusiasm', i.e. to have the "the god (theos) inside(en-)" oneself.

³ In Judaism the initiation ceremony (Bar Mizpàh) at the age of 13 is separated from the symbolic death ordeals of the circumcision soon after birth.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESS AT MY DOOR

KHAMIS A. BUSAIDY

THERE was a knock on my door at about eleven o'clock in the morning. I went to answer it. The caller's eyes met mine. He was in his thirties, well-built, well-dressed, with a brief case in his hand.

"Hello," I greeted him.

"I'm a Jehovah's witness," he said, "have you heard of Jehovah's witnesses?"

"Yes, I have," I replied.

"I come to proclaim the good news. The end of the present system of things. Look at the world," he intoned, "the increasing earthquakes every year, the mounting diseases, famines, the wars, all this means the end of things. It is the time prophesied in the Bible. Our Lord Jesus will soon come again. It is the time he spoke of."

"But he is your Lord, not mine, I told him."

Here he paused and asked me if I had a religion of my own. I told him I had—the religion of good living, of helping the poor, the needy, the sick and contributing to the welfare of humanity while we are on this earth.

He blinked for a moment. Then he opened his brief case and took out what he said was "The Holy Bible" and two pamphlets. One was entitled *Awake!* and the other *Watchtower*.

"Maybe you will find the path of truth in these," he handed me the pamphlets and then asked me if I had a Bible.

"I haven't got one, but I've read one. It means nothing to me. I accept no dogmas. I'm a freethinker and a rationalist."

The witness said he felt sorry for me. I was in the dark, but I could find Jesus and be saved when the system of things comes to an end. I asked whether this would be soon. He couldn't say. He was merely speculating.

"We are the true witnesses of Jesus," he assured me and then asked another question.

"What do you think of Christianity?" He wanted to hear my views, so I told him frankly that Christianity was based on half truth, speculation, baseless lies, and that to ensure its survival it absorbed the features of ancient paganism.

"This is why you have not found Jesus yet. We, the Jehovah's witnesses, reject all paganism. Our only guide is the scripture."

"But your scripture is full of paganism too. Take for instance the doctrine of atonement. Before Christianity the pagans used to make human sacrifices, tear out the heart

of the victim and offer it bleeding to their deity. The Aztecs did the same thing. Your deity is just as bloodthirsty. Why did he need the blood of his own son?"

The witness answered almost at once, "To wash away the sins of the world".

"If your Lord washed away the sins of the world why then are your children still born in sin? Why are people still punished for their sins? Why confessions? Why hell?"

Well built, well dressed, with a brief case, the witness lost all hope of gaining one more witness. We parted, he with his beliefs and I with mine.

1868

1968

100th Anniversary of Charles Bradlaugh's first election contest at Northampton

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Speakers include

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STEPHEN JAKOBI

REGINALD PAGET, MP

The Rev.

LLOYD JENKINS

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MINDS AND MACHINES

DOUGLAS BRAMWELL

IN recent years there has been a great deal of philosophical controversy over the question whether or not machines can be made to think. The problem has come to the fore because of the rapid advance of computer technology and the science of cybernetics.

The calculating ability of computers is well known, but machines have also been made which learn by experience, play games and imitate other fragments of human behaviour which, until a short time ago, would have been considered to be the result of thinking. Cybernetics, which far outstrips the practical possibilities of machine building, explores the theoretical possibilities of machines which would display even more rational behaviour.

The quarrels over whether a machine could or could not think have been to a great extent, if not entirely, due to lack of agreement as to what constitutes a 'machine' and what constitutes 'thinking'.

In some discussions the word 'machine' has been allowed to apply only to computers, robots and other obviously non-biological artefacts. In other cases the meaning of the word has been allowed to extend to include systems of organic materials artificially produced by controlled biological growth. We need not decide between these usages; their significance for the problem will emerge as the article proceeds.

Some philosophers have defined 'thinking' in terms of a particular human behaviour pattern and then, after proving that a machine can be made to perform that pattern, have concluded that machines can think. At the opposite extreme are those that maintain that 'thinking' is the inner experience accompanying rational brain activity. Not being able to imagine a computer-like machine having such experience, these philosophers have concluded that machines cannot be made to think.

In this article, 'thinking' will be considered in two aspects. Firstly, the bodily aspect comprising the brain processes and other bodily processes which are the preliminary to, or accompaniment to, human behaviour which is normally considered to result from thought. This bodily aspect is indicated, at least in part, when someone says, "Sh! Can't you see he's thinking". The second aspect, the subjective aspect, comprises the inner accompaniments to the bodily aspect. This subjective aspect is illustrated when someone says, "I was thinking the other day . . .".

There seems to be no theoretical reason why a machine cannot be made to simulate any or all of the processes of the bodily aspect. There are, that is to say, no cybernetic reasons why an electronic-mechanical equivalent to human thinking behaviour cannot be made. On the other hand there are at present, and may always be, engineering or financial reasons why such a theoretically possible robot cannot be made. But that is another matter.

What is more interesting is whether such a robot can be made to think in the subjective sense; whether, that is, it can be made to have conscious accompaniments to its equivalent of bodily thinking behaviour.

Consider why we believe other human beings to have such subjective experiences. I *know* that I have them, why do I *believe* that you have them.

If a complete sceptic holds that he is the only being with subjective experience, there is no argument which can logically prove him to be wrong. The grounds on which each of us believes others to have subjective experiences such as our own, are those of analogy only. Other people behave like oneself, and are of similar materials and construction, hence we instinctively believe them to be like us as far as an inner life is concerned.

At this point we have, perhaps, put our finger on one emotional reason why there is a great reluctance to grant an electronic-mechanical device subjective experience, even if it behaves like a human—it looks different!

But suppose that the maker of the machine skilfully packed his electronics in a human-like wrapping which made the robot indistinguishable, either in behaviour or appearance, from a human. Unless its electronic contents were revealed, there would be no grounds for not believing in its subjective experience.

Further suppose that, with even greater skill, a robot were to be made, not from electronic-mechanical gadgets, but from materials that made even the internal parts indistinguishable from human ones. Perhaps they could be made from silicon compounds instead of carbon compounds. Who could now maintain, without pause, that the creature had no subjective experience?

We have reached a similarity of components, component relationships and component functioning that does not allow a clear distinction to be drawn between man and machine. Now if—closing the gap completely—each component of the robot were constructed of exactly the same material, and in the same way, as a man, who could deny it an inner life? This last speculation is not necessarily science fiction; such an organism would not be put together nerve by nerve and cell by cell, but its creation by growth from artificially constructed genes is within the realms of possibility.

The dividing line between a 'machine' and a 'non-machine' is difficult to draw.

Physiology shows that conscious subjective experience is dependent upon the correct functioning of the immense array of components which make up the human brain. It seems obvious too, that not merely massive numbers of brain cells are needed for consciousness, but also that they must be organised and interconnected in a certain way.

On this basis we can be fairly sure that our present electronic computers are not conscious; neither in number or in complexity of organisation can their components be compared to those of the brain. But as machines become more complex, a stage may be reached when it is difficult to say that the number of their components is not sufficient to be a basis for consciousness. This can perhaps be made to sound more reasonable if it is born in mind that the computer need not be conscious of as many different things as a human being. The machine may be able to perform only a limited number of human-like tasks, but it may be conscious of them.

We must now look a little more closely at the question of organisation. To be a basis of consciousness an array of components, either electronic or organic, must not only be numerous enough but must be organised in a particular

way. A collection of components ten times as numerous as the cells of the brain, if connected in simple series, would hardly be expected to yield consciousness. For a machine to be made conscious it will be necessary for physiology to discover the particular modes of organisation in the brain which are essential for consciousness, and for those modes to be built into the machine.

But there is a further complication to be considered. A brain component, i.e. a nerve cell and its connecting fibres, has an extremely complex integrated functional organisation of its own. The internal structural make-up of an electronic component is simple in comparison. By virtue of its highly complex organisation, a single brain component may already possess some form of proto-awareness which serves as a basis for consciousness when it is organised into a brain. The brain component is already a living system; the electronic component is not.

It may be that the particular organisation of the brain only yields consciousness if the components are themselves of a particular highly organised type. In other words the degree of organisation to be simulated in a thinking machine is organisation between brain cells plus their internal organisation. The prospect begins to look more formidable.

One further aspect deserves our attention. If a machine is ever made which, despite all difficulties, can be said to be conscious, then, it must be asked whether it can also feel. Perhaps consciousness necessarily involves emotion. This is perhaps, for Humanists, the most important point of the whole discussion. For, if machines come to feel, then moral considerations enter into the relationships of man to his machines. The robot becomes a person and must be treated as such.

The point of this article was not to show that present day computers think, or even that machines of the future will think. Neither was the object to show that some cybernetic machine-on-paper, too large to build, would, if it could be built, be capable of consciousness. The only aim was to show that consciousness may be just a matter of the organisation of materials and, perhaps, to help clear away emotional answers to the question 'Can machines think?'

ART

DAVID KING

A Celebration of Living

THE Van Gogh exhibition now on view at the Hayward Gallery consists of 100 paintings and a 100 drawings. The spectator will find here nearly every aspect of Van Gogh's genius: the painter of brutal reality in "The Potato Eaters", and the master of landscape organisation in the extraordinary "Wheatfield with Crows"—one of his last completed pictures.

This collection of Van Gogh's work—mostly drawn from the Amsterdam foundation set up by his nephew—highlights, for me, an unexpected part of his life. This is the way so much of Van Gogh's artistic vision is a magnificent celebration of living. Thus in "White Almond Blossom against a Blue Sky" I came away elated by the stunning juxtaposition of opposing colour harmonies and paint texture.

I noted with fascination, too, how the paintings with religious subjects expressed just the same qualities. They are mostly copies in their subject matter, of other painters' works; the "Pieta after Delacroix", for example, has not an ounce of mysticism. Rather they and the various self-portraits display a person who found it extraordinarily difficult to live with either the world or himself. But this is not a problem he was alone in facing; it happens to us all sometimes. Van Gogh's struggles resulted in a glowing affirmation of the positive values of life.

The Exhibition continues until January 12, 1969.

BOOK REVIEW

MADELEINE SIMMS

THE POPE, THE PILL AND THE PEOPLE, edited by Brian Murtough (IPC Newspapers Ltd., 2/6).

THIS book is a summary of the birth control debate within the Roman Catholic Church. It serves as a useful reminder for those who have not followed the newspaper reports, but adds little new. It is nice to know that Norman St John-Stevas, MP, who contributes the Introduction, is on the side of the angels in this particular argument, a pleasant contrast to his stand over abortion. He reminds me of an incident I had forgotten. In 1930, when the Anglicans at the Lambeth Conference for the first time gave grudging approval to the concept of birth control, Pope Pius XI seized the opportunity of issuing an encyclical letter describing contraception as a "deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious"—a phrase his successor never sought to use in condemnation of Hitler's butchery of six million Jews. It is perhaps this aspect of the controversy which is most bewildering to non-Catholics. The extraordinary obsession with the sinfulness of private sexual behaviour coupled with a stunning indifference to political behaviour affecting the lives of millions. When the Pope gets round to condemning the police states of Catholic Spain and Portugal, then will be the moment for the rest of the world to sit up and take notice of moral injunctions emanating from the Vatican.

It is clear that the Pope's pronouncement on birth control will be largely ignored by educated and affluent Catholics in Western Europe living under the influence of Protestant freedoms. In the poverty-stricken, illiterate and superstition-ridden lands of South America, the Catholic ban on contraception will still remain effective for a few years to come—though even here, if American aid comes to be tied to birth control plans, as Robert McNamara recently promised, Vatican influence is likely to be short-lived.

Already, since the publication of the book, events have moved on. We now learn that priests who cannot accept the Pope's ruling will be relieved of their duties. If a sufficient number allow themselves to be pensioned off at £10 a week, and the pressures on the Hierarchy increase seriously, then in time some compromise solution will undoubtedly be found. Very likely the next birth control pill to be put on the market will be found to dovetail miraculously with Catholic theology, by being declared a 'regulator' of the natural cycle rather than a straightforward 'contraceptive'. (For good measure, I am also prepared to bet that before Mr Onassis's first marriage to have been 'annulled'. The Church 12 months have elapsed reason will have been found for declaring has a talent for coming to terms with Caesar, and for accomodating itself to the inevitable.)

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LETTERS

Alternative Assembly

I NOTE with interest but not enthusiasm your front page report (November 2) of our new arrangements which allow a secular alternative to our Act of Worship at Havant Grammar School. It is surprising, and can surely be no accident, that no indication is made of the fact that the specific invitation to register a choice has been extended only to Fifth and Sixth Form pupils. It is therefore from these, and not the whole School, that some 25 per cent have chosen to attend the Secular Assembly. Perhaps you may not think me so enlightened after all—especially when it is known that I am a practising member of the Church of England and that the scheme was initiated (with my warm support) by our Head of Religious Education, himself an Anglican Priest.

Although press reports correctly stated that I took this Assembly myself on its first morning, it will in fact be taken, like our main Assembly, by many members of Staff, and others, including our Head of the RE Department.

I cannot endorse by any means all that you say in your article. One paragraph, however, reads:—

"A man's way of life is to a large extent determined by his religion or lack of it. In forming his opinions, whether he forms them consciously or not, his criteria must be the truth. It is the truth that secularists are concerned with and no doubt Mr Rovers-Moore is concerned with."

I can certainly say 'Amen' to that! Our Assembly policy is designed specifically to allow for intellectual honesty for all.

C. R. RIVERS-MOORE,

Headmaster, Havant Grammar School.

The Bauhaus

AS A NEW reader of your lively weekly, and one who is particularly interested in the visual arts, I would like to say how much I am enjoying the section on the arts.

E. Franklin White on the Bauhaus Exhibition is excellent and illuminating. With such a large and important exhibition it is clearly difficult, due to restricted space, to cover all the effects which the Bauhaus is still having on the life of today. For instance, there is the building in Park Lane and a school in Cambridgeshire designed by Gropius. Then, there is the effect of Bauhaus design on many other buildings, on furniture, on advertising, packaging, window dressing, materials, clothes, to mention a few.

Equally important for humanists is the attitude of the Bauhaus to the place of the artist in society, and to his place within the community of his fellow artists. Here, the Bauhaus was firm in its conviction that 'creative work should not be pursued in egocentric isolation; that the artist, his work and the public all benefit from greater communication between one another.'

Gropius himself describes the Bauhaus idea of human relationship as 'humanistic, and still worthy of consideration today'. He adds that, 'art is a basic requirement of life'.

I suggest that an awareness of this is insufficiently realised among humanist or, indeed, in our wider materialistic society. So, carry on, Freethinker.

FRANCES CLAY.

Where to draw the line?

WE smile impishly at times over confused Catholics trying to do a 'rethink' about sex—but Mr R. J. Turner is also perturbed (September 23) about candid reference to sex in FREETHINKER. Is it overdone?

Although I have long since thrown off all Victorian prudery, I feel a bit uneasy about the trend of public decencies. After Shaw's solitary "bloody" won the day, there followed novels with for'castle language—and now loud insistence that nudes show pubic hair to be more truthful in art.

Someone else wants to make a movie of sexual intercourse for an instructive documentary!

I'm wondering how long it will be before some movie producer seriously claims the right to make slap stick comedy in a brothel.

Neither Queen Victoria nor Chapman Cohen would be amused at excessive preoccupation with sex today.

A saucy joke cleverly told now and then—all right—but to act it on stage in films I'd say "Not bloody likely"—must draw the line somewhere.

BOB TINDALL.

Graveyard Masonry

MR A. E. SMITH'S comments on my article: "A Dreadful Heritage", call for a rejoinder. I cannot regard them as rational. I do not like his term 'railing', to describe my attitude towards tomb furniture, nor his insinuation that other causes than those I mentioned were responsible for my youthful horror of funebral trappings. I insist that the most immaculate of such have power to frighten sensitive juveniles with their suggestion of death and the grave. That Mr Smith placed a headstone on his mother's plot is evidence of his love and respect for her. I find it difficult, however, to understand his assertion that such memorials are there as emotional outlets of grief. Real sorrow, it seems to me, is not dependent on the contemplation of stonework, however beautiful or tastefully inscribed. My deceased wife although cremated twenty-seven years ago, and having no memorial to prompt reflection, often recurs to me in sweet sadness.

Mr Smith has missed the main points in my article. Our burial grounds are, almost if not quite, a Christian monopoly, and make special pleading for a heavenly hereafter and belief in the god of the emotional and unthinking. Mr Smith can hardly have failed to note that my chief objections are to the preponderance of those memorials whose corrupt state suggest the corruption underlying them; and the foisting of virtually unscreened graveyards on the public view. Like the stupid religion that still hagrades this scientific day and age, and in stark contrast to the discreet and happily increasingly popular crematoria, burial grounds confront us as grisly spectres from a nauseous past, and in my contention, and with all respect to Mr Smith, are a standing insult to modernity.

F. H. SNOW.

J. M. Robertson

MAY I take the liberty of congratulating you on the publication of Mr Martin Page's concise and informative article on "J. M. Robertson—The Radical" in your issue of Saturday, September 28. This sort of contribution to your paper makes very interesting reading and is historically most illuminating.

I have been in correspondence with Mr Page on this subject since my late husband T. W. McCormack, JP, had the pleasure of knowing J. M. Robertson at the National Liberal Club and was a great admirer of this fine rationalist scholar and politician. Naturally I appreciate this masterly summary of his achievements and should welcome any further contributions on the subject.

May I also record my appreciation of the excellent little article on Art entitled "Darkness Now?" As an amateur artist in Cornwall I entirely agree with this and might add that modern "obscurantist" art is sometimes justified as having religious significance.

Mrs. E. E. MCCORMACK.

Dogma in Advertising

A NEIGHBOUR of mine complains that recent advertisements by the Milk Marketing evangelists in one of the national Sunday papers have so indoctrinated her son that he insists on measuring his daily intake of milk to the nearest teaspoonful to agree with the amount these authoritative scriptures lay down as being 'good' for his age group.

Being myself strongly allergic to milk and wheat, I think dietary dogmatism in advertising is as misleading and dangerous as any other dogmatism. Children should be brought up to understand that what suits one person, or even most people, is not 'good' for all.

ISOBEL GRAHAME.

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