

# Freethinker

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## SEVEN VEILS, SIX M.P.s AND AN 'AFFRONT'

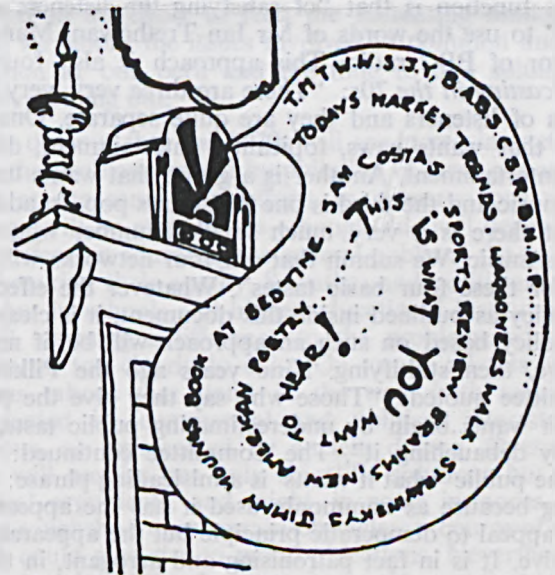
THE UPPER ECHELONS at Broadcasting House have come in for considerable criticism as a result of the BBC's screening on February 15 of a film especially made for television, *Dance of the Seven Veils* by Ken Russell. The film was about the life and music of Richard Strauss, and from an artistic or cinematic point of view cannot but have fulfilled the expectations of the vast number of people who regard Russell as a leader in his field. Protests about *Dance of the Seven Veils* have been made on two counts, first that it distorts the facts, second that it was obscene, disgusting and so on.

Distortion of the lives of people now dead, is at present a major talking point among those connected with the theatre and cinema. Rolf Hochuth's play, *Soldiers*, established this trend, and a court of law is soon to decide whether the play libels the memory of Sir Winston Churchill and others. A play entitled *Murderous Angels* by Conor Cruise O'Brien which is at present running in Los Angeles and which will in all probability come to London, suggests that Dag Hammarskjold indirectly brought about the death of Patrice Lumumba, that Hammarskjold was not just a highly religious man but a fanatic who saw himself at different times as Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate, and that the plane in which Hammarskjold died did not crash by mistake. Of this Peter Barnes of the *New York Times* News Service wrote in the London *Times* of February 9: "This is an impressive play, exciting to watch and engrossing to think about. Forget all red herrings about whether it is true or not. The theatre makes its own truth, and so long as in our own minds we never confuse theatrical truth with historical fact, no harm will be done". Obviously then the distortion of history is a matter, the desirability of which is at present being thrashed out by theatre and cinema-going intellectuals. To attack Russell on this count is therefore to enter into a debate which is rife throughout the serious entertainment world.

Allegations that Russell's *Dance of the Seven Veils* is obscene and shouldn't have been shown have come naturally from Mrs Mary Whitehouse who is at the moment considering whether to sue the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications for allowing his wires to be used for broadcasting the film. A motion has been tabled in the House of Commons by six Conservative members of parliament; James Dance (Bromsgrove), Sir Charles Taylor (Eastbourne), George Currie (Ulster Unionist MP for Down North), Sir Donald Kaberry (Leeds NW), F. Burden (Gillingham), and John Biggs-Davison (Chigwell). Their motions reads: "That honourable members of this House are appalled at the film shown on BBC1 on Sunday evening 15 February, 1970, because of the viciousness, savagery and brutality which the producer described as a comic strip but which showed rape, beatings, flagellation, atrocities against the Jews and was an affront to those who believe in the Christian religion and calls upon the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications to institute an inquiry as to who was responsible for this programme and to stop this so-called entertainment for the future".

This vivid denunciation of the film in sensational terms, reflects more on the minds of six self-appointed moral arbiters, than on the film itself. Having had the privilege

to watch the film in colour I, personally, came away with the impression that it was a considerable artistic achievement of particular interest to music and art lovers. The flagellation, rape and so on fitted in as part of the whole and there can be little doubt added a great deal to the film. How it is that the six honourable members can disregard an artistic achievement, and single out only the parts of the film which portrayed something sexual plus the piece which dealt with Nazi atrocities. Obviously they have something against sex. And perhaps it is the Catholic church's support of Hitler which causes the Catholic, Mr Biggs-Davison to be affronted by references to the perse-



cution of the Jews. Whatever these men or Mrs Whitehouse have against the film, they surely have absolutely no right to attempt to deny viewers the work of Britain's foremost television film-maker. Their televisions have, like everyone else's an on/off switch and indubitably these people have sufficient authority to command such children as may be in their drawing rooms to retire should they feel the need to maleducate them.

As for affronts to those who believe in the Christian religion; what about the weekly affront to the much larger number who don't, generated by the BBC and ITA religious broadcasting policy?



# Freethinker

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The views expressed by the contributors to FREETHINKER are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Board.

## AND THE WIDER ISSUE . . .

THE CONTROVERSY over *Dance of the Seven Veils* has come in the middle of the more fundamental dispute over the BBC's policy statement, *Broadcasting in the 70s*. Over the past fortnight the Letters page of *The Times* has been filled with discussion of this document. On the surface the controversy is caused by widely differing estimates of the proposals contained in the policy statement. The signatories to the staff letters to *The Times*, the Campaign for Better Broadcasting, the High Table at King's College Cambridge, 13 Oxford dons, the Radio Writers' Association and the Society of Authors, the Sound Broadcasting Society and the Viewers and Listeners Association, and a host of individuals consider that the policy signals the end of the Third programme and most of the creative experimentation which it inspired. The management of the BBC, asserts either that this is not so, or that it is so to a marginal degree, which is unfortunate but financially inevitable.

What is clear is that the management believes that BBC radio's function is that "of satisfying the listeners at all levels" to use the words of Mr Ian Trethowan, Managing Director of BBC radio. This approach is also found in *Broadcasting in the 70s*: "There are three very, very large groups of listeners and they are quite separate. One is a group that wants news, topicality, entertainment, drama, light entertainment. Another is a group that wants tuneful light music and the third is one that wants pop. In addition to that there is a very much smaller number who want serious music. We submit that our four networks will provide for these four basic tastes". Whatever the effects of the policy as outlined inside this document, it is clear that any policy based on such an approach will be, if not regressive, then stultifying. Nine years ago the Pilkington Committee quoted: "Those who say they give the public what it wants begin by underestimating public taste, and end by debauching it". The Committee continued: "To give the public 'what it wants' is a misleading phrase: misleading because as commonly used it has the appearance of an appeal to democratic principle but the appearance is deceptive. It is in fact patronising and arrogant, in that it claims to know what the public is, but defines it as no more than the mass audience: and in that it claims to know what it wants, but limits its choice to the average of experience".

The arrogance of the current BBC management is hard to distinguish from that of, say, the Roman Catholic church, or an Orwellian 1984-type government—the arrogance which results in a brainless population kept happy by being conditioned not to think. The policy seems a direct contradiction to that which brought in BBC2 television. The same principle applied to television would result in two BBC1 type channels, one of which would broadcast an instalment of Zola once a month and Stockhausen quarterly at three in the morning.

Doubtless the majority of the human race was quite satisfied when it lived in caves and placated imagined deities with human sacrifice. It has always been the dissatisfied minority which has initiated the progress and subsequent increase in satisfaction of the majority. The controllers of such a monumental opinion-former and taste-stimulator as the BBC should surely be people who initiate progress. That they adopt as the basis of their policy the idea of giving the people what they want, signifies either that the BBC is not in the best hands, or that the kind of people to whom society has always looked for progress have arbitrarily decided that 1970 is the time to call a halt.

In view of the importance of the future of the medium which has always been a great educator, and which has limitless potential in this direction, the National Secular Society's meeting on Broadcasting in the Seventies which is to take place on March 5, is timely indeed. Taking the chair will be the playwright, Benn W. Levy. The speakers are to be Stuart Hood, Former Controller of Television Programmes at the BBC, George Melly, *The Observer's* television critic, David Tribe, the President of the National Secular Society and Hugh Jenkins, MP. The current wide-ranging controversies will ensure an important and interesting meeting.

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

Humanitas Stamps: Help 5 Humanist charities. Buy stamps from/ or send them to Mrs A. C. Goodman, 51 Percy Road, Romford, RM7 8QX, Essex. British and African speciality. Send for list.

Humanist Holidays: Details from the Hon. Secretary: Mrs. M. Mephram, 29 Fairview Road, Sutton, Surrey (Tel.: 01-642 8796).

## COMING EVENTS

### 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.

### INDOOR

- Brighton and Hove Humanist Group: Regency House, Oriental Place, Brighton: Sunday, March 1, 5.30 p.m.: "Voluntary Euthanasia". Lord Raglan.
- Cardiff Humanist Group: Glamorgan County Council Staff Club, Westgate Street, Cardiff: Wednesday, March 4, 7.45 p.m.: Annual General Meeting.
- Glasgow Humanist Group: George Service House, University Gardens: Sunday, March 1, 2.30 p.m.: Annual General Meeting.
- Leicester Secular Society: 75 Humberstone Gate: Sunday, March 1, 5.30 p.m.: 89th Anniversary Meeting—Guest Speaker, Hector Hawton (Managing Director, RPA).
- South Place Ethical Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London, WC1: Sunday, March 1, 11 a.m.: "The Individual and the State", Lord Sorensen. Admission free. Tuesday, March 3, 7 p.m.: Discussion—"Psychology and Ethics", Paul Rom. Admission 2s (including refreshments), Members free.



# POLLUTION AND CONSERVATION

R. W. MORRELL

UNTIL RECENTLY the terms pollution and conservation were of interest to a small specialised group. Now a major change has taken place and they are being increasingly discussed at top political levels as well as having been taken up by the popular press. Thus the dangers involved in allowing the indiscriminate discharge of industrial waste into the sea and into rivers, coupled with the destruction of important natural habitats are being brought home to many who might otherwise remain in almost total ignorance of these abuses.

Pollution and conservation are not new problems. Discussion of the issues involved in pollution can be found in the columns of *Nature* of the 1860s. Conservation problems faced the seventeenth century kings of Poland when they attempted unsuccessfully to save the Ure-ox, *Bos primigenius Bojanus*, from extinction. Other examples could be quoted but there is one major difference between the efforts of many years ago and those of today, which is that the problem has now become global in extent and unless it is taken in hand immediately the possibility of defeat becomes very real and this could be a disaster for the human race.

Both pollution and conservation are interrelated. One cannot be taken in isolation from the other. Nuclear explosions have ensured that Strontium 90 abounds. Petrol fumes and chemical agricultural sprays have led to our bodies absorbing substances potentially harmful to us—in fact experts are not at all certain as to the possible long-term harmful effects. Towns and cities expand at an alarming rate eating up valuable agricultural land, while mile upon mile of new motorways radiate outwards destroying at giant's pace the natural habitats of man, small creatures and rare plants. Our own industrial pollution endangers us while we in our turn endanger the balance of nature in the name of progress and efficiency.

Though the politicians might increasingly discuss pollution and conservation their actions often give the lie to the words. Take the case of Aldabra Island. This small speck of elevated-limestone set in the Indian Ocean has one of the last relatively undisturbed ecosystems for this type of island in the world. It is the home of the last Old World population of the Giant Land Tortoise; it has the largest breeding colony of Frigate Birds in the Indian Ocean plus many other distinctive species and sub-species of birds. It was upon this island that the British Defence Ministry in conjunction with their American counterparts decided to place an Air-Force Staging Post. The effect of this plan, which included the construction of a 4,500 metre runway and port facilities for tankers in the lagoon, on the wildlife is not difficult to imagine.

The proposal caused an immediate outcry in scientific circles, but the Defence Ministry remained adamant and rejected all possible alternatives (the Americans for their part were willing to look into the possibility of an alternative site but dropped the onus of action into the lap of the British by pointing out that Aldabra was "sovereign British territory"). Even a delegation from the Royal Society led by its President in person failed to move the Defence Ministry, and massive intervention by organisations of the standing of the British Museum (Natural History), the Smithsonian Institute, the Ornithologists Union, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the American Academy of Sciences, the Section on Conser-

vation of Terrestrial Communities of the International Biological Programme, the National Audubon Society and the Chicago Academy of Sciences, met with a similar refusal to reconsider.

As it was, the proposal to turn Aldabra into an air-base came to nothing. However, this was not because of the pleas of the conservationists or the change of heart among politicians towards conservation. The reason was simply one of economics; the British Government could not afford to put its plans into effect, but in announcing the decision the Minister of Defence was quick to add that when the economic situation improved the proposal might still be given the go-ahead. Thus the threat to Aldabra still remains.

The Aldabra affair is but one illustration of the problems conservationists have to face. There is no reason to think that the fight against pollution will be any easier. Powerful commercial interests do not take kindly to threats of a clean-up which could add considerably to their costs. Such commercial interests will not stand idly by and see their profit margins threatened.

With so many pressing social problems the fate of the wildlife on an obscure island in the Indian Ocean or a badly polluted river in the north of England might seem of secondary importance, if of any concern to us at all. Such an outlook would be shortsighted in the extreme for both are part and parcel of a world-wide problem, a problem that takes in our exploding population and the dangerous agricultural policies which are, being all too frequently adopted in an effort to feed the increasing millions. In short, we ignore the issues involved in pollution and conservation at our peril and the time to find solutions is rapidly running out.

It is obvious that the 1970s will see increasing action to solve the problems raised by pollution of land, sea and air, while at the same time efforts to conserve our natural heritage will be stepped up—though this will depend to a large extent on educating the general public to the problems and breaking their apathy. Scientists and politicians might talk, but in schools and higher educational institutes there is still alarming indifference to the problems which are known all too clearly to exist. On top of all this are the various taboos that stand in the way, both secular, as represented by commercial and political interests, and religious, as represented by ancient dogma. Overcoming these will require not only scientific solutions but philosophical arguments, and might, in some instances, mean riding roughshod over certain obstacles, a course of action which could give rise to moral objections. Nevertheless, if action is delayed the day may dawn when we find it is too late to solve our problems.

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# THE ORIGIN OF MAN

L. BEVERLY HALSTEAD

THERE ARE essentially two ways of looking at man. The most widely held view insists that man is fundamentally different from the rest of the animal kingdom, that he possesses attributes that could only have been derived from someone upstairs. There is little to be said against this, because it relies on faith in a creator.

The other approach is to view man in his biological and historical context without reference to any extraneous influences. First let us consider our physical structure.

Fortunately there is another way of looking at the problem. Most of our physical attributes can be easily understood if we consider our living relatives and their life in the trees, together with their remains in ancient rocks. These animals are the Primates: the tree-shrews, bush-babies tarsiers, monkeys, apes and our very good selves.

If we had been created *de novo* by God, we would have a large number of legitimate complaints, as not only did He not really understand what He was about, He made a botch-up of the job. Fancy trying to support the viscera of a vertical biped with a musculature only suitable for a horizontal quadruped. Any undue strain and a thin sheet of connective tissue gives way and the guts drop into the scrotum. Even external genitalia are a bit of an encumbrance for a species that plays rugger. Either the Creator was incompetent or had an exceedingly twisted sense of humour.

The first Primate comes from Cretaceous rocks in North America, 70 million years ago at a time when the giant dinosaurs ruled the earth. This animal was something like the living tree-shrew and when the dinosaurs packed in, they filled the ecological niche of rodents such as squirrels. Now if you're a squirrel-like animal running about in the trees, thin twigs will support you. However, if you can get a bit larger, it will reduce the number of types of other animal that like to eat you. So you increase your size and what happens? The twigs won't bear your weight any longer. You have to jump for it. In this situation it is rather important to be able to judge distance. We find that the eyes gradually move forwards so both fields of vision overlap—hence the animal can see in 3 D. With this turning of the eyes they need protection and a bony bar develops so that the jaw musculature doesn't impinge on the eyes. Coupled with the improvement of sight goes an improvement in musculature co-ordination and sense of balance.

The sense of smell becomes less important and the long snout withers away to the ridiculous nubbin which we all sport.

With still further increase in size, progression through the trees becomes tarzan-like. You have to swing—and you do this with your arms. This is a key stage because, if you hang by your arms you hang upright. Your feet and your hands are concerned with different jobs. If you do drop, you land on your feet. Your hands manipulate the environment. The thumb is opposable. Claws are replaced by nails and the finger-tips become sensitive, for delicate work like social grooming. The carriage of the head also changes—we can no longer simply lower our jaws. It would close off our wind pipe if we did so, in fact the jaw slides forward out of its socket in order to open.

Life in the trees leads to the development of these features. But it can be overdone. It is important to get out of the trees before you end up like a gibbon. And this our ancestors did some 20 odd million years ago.

At this time—the Miocene period—grasslands spread

over large areas and in the savannah country there lived a group of lightly built ape-like animals called the dryopithecines. They are known from Africa, Asia and Europe. They could stand up to see what was going on and when danger threatened could shin up a tree. But they weren't all the same. Most seem to have been just on the line leading to the modern living apes, a few were different and Professor Elwyn Simons has shown that the form known as *Ramapithecus* was one of our lot. The face was foreshortened, the canine teeth reduced. They must have appeared puny and defenceless. As they had no means of defence built into them, their later success can only be explained by presupposing something else. Part of the environment—sticks and stones. Certain broken ungulate bones preserved in the same rocks and found by Dr Leakey indicate the ministrations of sticks and stones.

The dryopithecine story is so remote in time and *Ramapithecus* is demonstrably not man that no-one gets upset over it. In contrast, all later finds seem to be accompanied by an inordinate degree of acrimonious controversy.

Professor Raymond Dart of Wits University, Johannesburg, kicked off with his description in 1925 of the skull of a young individual which he named *Australopithecus africanus*. He showed that the teeth and lower jaw were human-like and also that the animal had an upright posture—albeit a small brain. Dart's interpretation of this pre-human was met by a certain amount of derision. The prehistoric neanderthal man had a human brain and an ape-like posture, and Piltdown man had a human brain but still retained the jaws of an ape. It was firmly believed that man's brain evolved first and that changes in the jaws and posture came later. Dart has failed to understand this and in consequence had got everything back to front. Hence, with few notable exceptions, Dart's interpretations were thrown out of court. Time had its revenge. It is now accepted that Dart was entirely correct in his thesis and all further discoveries have simply confirmed his original views. Piltdown has since been exposed as a clever hoax and the posture of neanderthal man is now known to have been based on the diseased skeleton of a poor old man.

From the fossil evidence now available, it is established that the legs, hands and brains of man evolved in that order. These same views were put forward in 1876 by Frederick Engels, who is perhaps better known by his joint work with Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*. To quote: "Presumably as an immediate consequence of their mode of life which in climbing assigns different functions to the hands than to the feet, these apes when walking on level ground, began to adopt a more and more erect gait. This was the decisive step in the transition from ape to man. . . . The decisive step had been taken: the hand had become free and could henceforth attain ever greater dexterity and skill. Labour and speech were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man".

Finally both Dart and Engels were agreed on the significance of the change to a carnivorous diet. As Engels stated: "Labour begins with the making of tools. And what are the most ancient tools that we find? They are hunting and fishing implements, the former at the same time serving as weapons. But hunting and fishing presuppose the transition from an exclusively vegetable diet to the concomitant use of meat, and this is an important step in the transition from ape to man".

Subsequent to Dart's original work many more australo-



pitheicine specimens have been discovered. It is now known that there were two types of heavily built form and a more lightly built one. From the dentition it seems likely that the former was still very much a vegetarian—the latter a meat-eater. The pacific vegetarian died out, the aggressive meat-eater went from strength to strength. These remains and the evidence of their culture have engendered a whole suite of angry exchanges in the scientific literature. Dart and his colleagues have described tools made of teeth, bone and horn—the osteodontokeratic culture. Their interpretations have been vehemently denied but now it seems impossible to interpret these remains in any other way.

Of recent years an advanced type of australopithecine has been discovered by Leakey and has set off another storm of controversy—this is the so-called *Homo habilis*. Students of fossil man have a penchant for new names but the view that this lightly built form is really part of the australopithecine story as argued by Campbell and Robinson seems more reasonable than the line taken by Leakey.

The next stage in human evolution is represented by *Homo erectus*, "erect man", Peking and Java man of Asia and Chellean man of Africa. The postcranial skeleton is modern—in fact not much different from the australopithecines. The brain is a bit bigger—halfway to our own. Primitive hand axes were made but the precision grip, with which one wields a pen, does not seem to have yet developed. However, *Homo erectus* had learnt the use of fire.

## A PERSONAL BREAKTHROUGH

SOME RATIONALISTS may, I believe, find it difficult to understand what attraction there is in a nominal adherence to Christianity. Apart from the obvious social pressures due to nonconformity, there are psychological forces which make it quite difficult to break away. I shall try to explain some of these from my own experience and give the answers that I have found to be most effective.

Firstly, the egotistic belief that so complex and potentially beautiful a being as oneself should exist and learn and improve by effort and experience only to be snuffed out like a candle seems such an utter waste that no sensible system would behave in such a way. Secondly, the ever present fear of God and punishment instilled from childhood lurks in the background. Thirdly, none of us likes to feel we have been forced over trivia, let alone one's basic principals of belief and behaviour. Finally there is the fear of the unknown, after the rejection of a personal God. Despite his possibly well earned anger, he has become a personal friend to whom one talks in prayer when there is no sympathetic worldly ear. There is a sudden loneliness and insecurity; a sudden responsibility for oneself and others and a temporary complete absence of sound ethical basis for action. There is an inevitable questioning of one's past behaviour throughout the whole field of one's existence. This is a painful experience and it is perhaps easier to forgo it and return to the confusing but familiar past. It may seem strange that one can exist stably in such a confused state prior to 'enlightenment' but in a busy competitive world the day-to-day business can fully occupy one's thoughts and the anomalies are not seriously questioned especially when one is led to believe that such things are extremely complex.

After what seems a relatively limited amount of serious study the answers seem now surprisingly simple. Taking the first of these; in the vast array of man's existing knowledge, let alone the as yet undiscovered, it is clear that one's own

And it has been suggested that he indulged in cannibalism. If this is so, it suggested a high degree of sophistication. Presumably part of system of beliefs—by eating an honoured person you would acquire some of his spiritual values. This pattern of ritual cannibalism survives in an extant religion called Christianity where symbolic flesh and blood of the human sacrifice are eaten and drunk.

Finally we come to *Homo sapiens* in which species is now included neanderthal man. The precision grip enabling delicate instruments to be fashioned was the last physical trait to evolve.

And, in the last 20,000 years, art made its appearance. To some extent this was another example of man's "religious" nature. A portrayal was a partial capturing of a spirit. The fat female figurines for fertility are familiar to most people, what are perhaps not so well known are Palaeolithic pin-ups which are life-size carvings of young women with quite exquisite figures. Magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* are merely the modern equivalents of such carvings and such a long tradition must surely bestow a degree of respectability on these magazines.

Man the hunter became the herder and then the farmer—settled communities became established, the first at Jericho some 10,000 years ago and this, the Neolithic Revolution, heralds the start of modern times. The subsequent history of man is well documented and need not be repeated yet again.

F. M. SKINNER

collection is a pitiful and distorted lot. Even if it were not the way of evolution, the quiet destruction of the old model and the construction of an improved new version would be but common sense for progress. The compensation for loss of eternal life is that if it really existed, it would, in fact, be eternal boredom (beautifully parodied in the film 'Be-dazzled').

Turing to the second point, 'Big-Brother' God is of course always watching you! He is a figment of your imagination and will, as such, be with you as long as your head is! When recognised as such God rapidly becomes god and is relegated to the realm of fairies, witches and Father Christmas.

There is little to offer on the third point other than that there are a lot of us and at least I am not being fooled now. After all, the pressure is prolonged and at some times intense and little children rely on trust for existence. It is for this reason that I feel most strongly that religious indoctrination at schools should stop. In its worst aspect it is a compulsory 'mental infection' which later in life can cause mental pain and much confusion, however sincere and loving the indoctrinator may be.

However, as a Humanist, like Margaret Green (FREE-THINKER, May 31, 1969) I have no wish to cause mental suffering to those who are kind, but comfortably wrapped up in their unquestioning religious blanket.

The fear of the last and most unnerving problem of loneliness is slowly dispelled when one sees one's place in an evolving Universe as real as any stone or tree but more important. The freedom and the ability to help steer development towards a greater happiness and fulfilment of man makes the problems of the world partly one's own and an exciting challenge. Personal rights matter less, responsibilities more. The blindfold is off; the way ahead is clearer . . .



## DO COMPUTERS THINK?

G. L. SIMONS

PART OF THE DIFFICULTY of trying to decide whether computers think is that we are not quite sure what we understand by thinking in general. We assume that human beings think, some more than others—but do animals think? Many of us would maintain that some of the higher animals—dogs, cats, apes, etc.—are capable of rudimentary thought, but are more lowly animals in the evolutionary scale capable of such mental activity?

If by studying thought in man we can arrive at a concept of what it really is then perhaps criteria will emerge which will enable us to recognise thought in other living species and in non-living artefacts also. But first it must be stressed that much of the opposition to the idea of thought in non-human mechanisms (living or otherwise) stems from human vanity, and the associated arguments are generally cast in tautological form. Several years ago, when the television Brains' Trust was in existence, I sent in a question which was selected for discussion. Basically the question was: "In some important sense the intellectual faculty of the modern computer is well established: computers can for instance perform arithmetic operations, take decisions and argue logically. Is it likely that in the foreseeable future machines will be created that may be said to experience *emotion*?" The most interesting reaction of the participants was that of Julian Huxley—who many of us may designate as a worthy humanist. He maintained immediately that emotion was necessarily an experience of living matter, and that the idea of an artificial creation having this sort of experience was quite unthinkable. This was an *a priori* assertion. There was no effort to examine the nature of emotion to discover how it could be structured in a technological design. To Huxley, emotion was a thing of living creatures, and this was virtually a matter of definition.

Much the same approach is adopted by many people who do not like the idea of thinking machines. Such people argue that because a machine is a machine it cannot be said to think, even if its processes resemble closely those that happen inside the human skull. If of course this approach is intended to be merely a *linguistic* decision, a resolution to use words in a particular way, then we have no inherent objection on *factual* grounds. At worst the person who wishes to define machine thought (if such there be) in a different way to human thought is using language in a clumsy fashion, i.e. if the processes are similar then why not use the same word? But are the processes similar?

To a philosophical idealism, thought must always be described in terms of images, sensations, pictures and the like. A materialist will readily recognise the existence of such things but will go further in claiming that they are grounded in material activity, i.e. if we knew enough about the brain we could indicate which electrical and chemical events correspond to particular mental impressions. To a materialist—and such am I—thought is largely a matter of a complex brain organisation operating on (stored and incoming) data. It is possible to describe the nature of incoming data in terms of, for example, light falling on the retina, affecting the rods and cones of the eye, and being transmitted along the optic nerve to the brain. Nothing inherently mysterious here, and the operation of the other sense can be considered in a similar way.

The precise nature of memory is not yet understood, but the most plausible accounts relate to chemistry and

physics, not to souls and *alter egos*. Few workers in the field would suggest that human (and animal) memory was grounded in anything other than the *physical* characteristics of the brain. Thus if it is conceded that the data handed by the brain is necessarily materialistic in nature, and that the brain itself operates in a similarly physical way, there is no reason why an artificial analogue of human thought should not be built into a machine. In fact this appears to be largely the case in the modern computer.

Most primitive machines (early levers, wheeled carts, etc.) do not have a 'reflective' capacity in any sense. The modern computer is quite unique among man-made inventions in that a considerable amount of internal 'cerebral' activity can be going on without an outside observer being aware of the fact. This of course is why it is not easy to show a dramatic film to convey the real import of the computer—there just are not enough filmable moving parts. All we can see are the magnetic tape spools whirling round and a few lights flashing on and off; but the spools generally only carry data to be used and the lights are quite superfluous to the operation of the machine (they are only incorporated to tell us what is going on inside). Most of the significant computer activity goes on in the central processor, and since this activity consists of electrons buzzing down wires and through other solid material, there's a lot going on that we can't see—we can only deduce it from flashing lights and the program we have written. This I maintain is a process essentially similar to human thought.

The nature of the brain cell has been analysed in electrical and chemical terms. Information is transmitted, it seems, when groups of cells fire a burst of electrical energy in organised fashion (when the firing is random we may arrive at such a condition as epilepsy). The connections between cells are complex, and it is this complexity that provide the brain with its remarkable flexibility of operation. But there is nothing inherently strange about the functioning of a brain cell: it is essentially a two-state logical device (on or off), like the basic electronic components of the computer, and (again like the artificial machine) it is only the complicated linking of the basic elements that give the brain its computing power and its capacity for decision-taking.

When we think we manipulate our data. Sometimes we mix up our information and make mistakes or have imaginings. When we manipulate our data into relations that did not previously exist in the outside world we may be said to be 'creative'. But there is nothing here that the modern computer is not already doing—it inspects its memory banks and takes appropriate action according to its program. And of course the computer is capable of creative action, as many a technological designer has discovered to his benefit.

The objection that a computer cannot be said to be conscious is easy to counter. Consciousness, in this context, would merely consist of incorporating additional circuits so that the computer could monitor its own processes. In such a way it could be arranged that the computer could check on its own 'thought patterns' and modify them if programmed to do so. Many computers have checks of this kind already built in, e.g. a component suddenly faulty can be automatically switched out of circuit.

(Continued on next page)



## RETHINKING RELIGION

FAYE AINSCOW

WOULD you call a four-year-old a Conservative if his parents were right wingers? Could a little girl be tagged a leftist if her father was a Socialist? "Ridiculous!" is the overwhelming response. Yet isn't it just as ridiculous to consider a child a Catholic, Protestant or Jew because of the parent's religion?

Before they can even walk or talk children are classified according to their family's belief. Mothers who are incapable of caring for their babies have the right to demand that their children be adopted by couples of a particular faith only. Why should this specification be put on a pedestal? Why curtail the infant's chances for adoption in any way?

Many parents who encourage their children to develop individually stop short at religion. This is not to suggest that church-going people should avoid taking their children along to worship or abstain from communicating their faith to them. Learning about the Bible, as all other learning, can only have a positive effect on the child. This benefit would be heightened if certain limiting assumptions weren't imposed by the parents upon the youngster.

The child shouldn't be made to feel that by virtue of having been born to parents with a particular faith he has a lifelong obligation to follow it. He should be encouraged to find out all he can about other beliefs. A religion cannot be inherited like blue eyes or high intelligence. While guiding a child along with certain beliefs there's no need for parents to label him with a specific faith. Often this brings grief to children from minority groups and complacency and a sense of righteousness to the majority 'in' group. Both feelings are exaggerated and tend to inspire unnecessary division among children.

Children who believe in God do so because their parents told them to. "But no," says one mother, "my Julie is a real Christian see how earnestly she's praying." Well Madam, she just as 'earnestly' believes in Father Christmas, so why not call her a Santa Clausian also? And if she believes in ghosts, does that make her a spiritualist?

Most Britons seem to think that everyone should decide for himself who or what to vote for. This generous sentiment isn't, unfortunately, extended into the spiritual arena. While freedom of religion is everyone's right, the majority never get around to choosing but assume the religious stamp of their parents.

Often, if a non-believer answers "atheist" when queried about his religion, he is then asked—"But what about your parents?" The questioner implies that the answer he got was inadequate since it didn't reflect the 'religious background' of the person. This attitude is quite irritating. It suggests that tagging an individual according to his parents' faith is more meaningful than the belief (or lack of it) that the person has arrived at by himself.

Some people shy away from calling themselves atheists since there's still a certain stigma about the word. Instead they say that they're non-practicing C of E or whatever they once were. This self-labelling can also be seen as a response to our society's insistence on grouping people into religious categories.

A young journalist told me he was a non-practicing Catholic. He didn't believe in God. I asked him why, then,

didn't he just say atheist? He answered that his phraseology gave a better description of his Catholic upbringing and his eventual rejection of it.

While this is true, it wasn't a direct answer to a direct question. I'm sure that if this man left journalism and became a doctor he would answer "doctor" if asked his profession and not non-practicing journalist.

Those who don't believe in a divine being must feel free to say so, without any of the restricting social attitudes that still remain. Those who do have a faith could contribute significantly to everyone's spiritual well-being by helping to cut the red tape of religious labelling. Then no one would say "he's marrying outside of his religion" but "he's marrying within humanity".

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### DO COMPUTERS THINK?

(Continued from previous page)

Hence unless we define thought in such a way that *by definition* it can never exist in machines, it is clear that its essential nature can be duplicated artificially. The precise nature of thought has yet to be determined but it is no exaggeration to say that whatever feature of it we care to highlight we can find such a feature, albeit in a simplified form, in the modern electronic computer.

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## LETTERS

### Celtic Nationalism

IN YOUR ISSUE of January 24, L. B. Halstead gave a review of my booklet—*The Creed of the Celtic Revolution*. May I be allowed space to comment on this diatribe?

While quite accustomed to English and French people disagreeing with the views expressed in "The Creed", I was most surprised at the one of Halstead's review. If his views are representative of your publication I can only assume that your title "Freethinker" is shortened from "Freethinking English Imperialist"!

It is odd, but extremely odd, that Halstead finds it "sinister" that a people want to be free from cultural, political and economic exploitation.

The childish cracks about the Fascist regime in South Africa, with whom Halstead seems to have a deal of sympathy because they too are suppressing various national groups, are put in for emotive showmanship and are not logical argument. Incidentally, it should be pointed out to Halstead that the term "Bantu" is a derogatory one with the same connotation as "kaffir". Bantu is a bastardisation of the Zulu word "abantu" which simply means "people". I have a great many personal friends in South Africa suffering imprisonment, probably torture (and three have actually been shot) in the struggle for those freedoms which Halstead finds so "sinister".

To be truthful, I do not know why Halstead bothered writing the review for it is so painfully obvious he has no knowledge of the Celtic peoples and their problems. For example, his remarks on language restoration in the Irish Republic, which he claims has met with scant success: in 1921, when the English so kindly allowed the Irish natives to try their hand at running their own affairs, the Irish speaking population stood at 19.2 per cent. Today the figure is 27.2 per cent, allowing for the appropriate deductions for population increases. These figures have just been published in a Strathclyde University review. True, it is not the magnificent language restoration success of Finland, Faroes, etc., but an improvement nevertheless.

The language situation in Scotland can be said to be following the example of Wales thanks to Comunn na Cànain Albannaich. And as for Cornwall (which Halstead laughs at) well, this is a lesson to all Celtic countries. The last native Cornish speakers died out in the latter part of the 19th century. Today—thanks to voluntary education bodies such as Kesva an Tavas Kernewek—some 2,000 Cornish have a knowledge of their own language.

While Halstead admits his ignorance about "Y Wladfa" (Patagonia) there are many other things which he states as solemn fact and which he should also admit ignorance about. Take the howler about pre-Celtic peoples . . . I quote "yes, they do still exist in Ireland and Scotland". By golly, there will be a great number of electrified anthropologists, ethnologists, not to mention sociologists, scouring these islands. Can he tell us where these ancient people live, what language they speak, and why we have overlooked them for nearly 4,000 years. Or is this ridiculous statement just another typical piece of Halsteadian claptrap.

I must urge Halstead, also, to awaken from his imperialist cocoon and have a closer look at what is happening in the Celtic countries today before he makes such assertions that Celts are unmoved concerning the struggle to rid themselves of imperialism and exploitation. No . . . on second thoughts such neo-fascists should be rudely awakened. Sleep on, Mr Halstead.

Finally, unscrambling the pathetic omelette of Halstead's "Brave New World" one finds he advocates a melting pot in which one nationality will emerge dominant and subdues all others. Which one—English, Chinese, Russian? Some 25 years ago the Nazi Germans thought it would be theirs.

It is indeed fortunate that there are really few people who think in this manner. The majority now have a growing respect for the human individual. They realise that world peace and unity will come by pacts between nations (not imperialist states) with recognition of the fact of nationality, not its repudiation. People are rejecting Halstead's world empire, that awful world of unity through uniformity, the horrifying melting pot from which an Orwellian world of zombies will emerge.

P. BERRESFORD ELLIS.

### The Blackboard Jungle

THE THREAT of anarchy in the schools of Britain can no longer be disguised. Parents' suspicions of a breakdown in classroom discipline are now sustained by firm and authoritative evidence.

Four organisations, representing head and assistant teachers, have produced a frightening report on vandalism, pilfering, violence, truancy and neglect of lessons. We now have to deal with a Blackboard Jungle. And the problem is to do so without sacrificing any of the real advances made in British education in the last 50 years.

Children cannot be terrorised into learning. But, can any reasonable parent object if his child collects a couple of strokes with the cane for disrupting the work of his class?

A sharp lesson—in good time—may well prevent a mischievous child turning into a delinquent. Discipline in the schools would be more easily maintained if parents assured teachers they support this well-tryed philosophy.

Surely the vital point is that children, teenagers and students must not be allowed to think they can make their own rules.

The above statements, I need hardly remind secularists, were made neither by Dr Eickoff nor myself. F. H. SNOW.

### Subjectivism in Morals

I WOULD make three points in reply to Mr John L. Broom (February 14):

1. Whether I consider I have a right to change other people's moral views is *itself* a moral position, and is based on emotion. For the subjectivist no other justification is necessary.

2. Contrary to Mr Broom's belief, societies have embodied cruelty and falsehood as moral principles—Aztec priests were thought immoral if they did not tear out the hearts of sacrificial victims, and Spartan children were praised when they learned to lie well.

But even if a moral principle is universal (and no such principle has been detected), the principle is not objective thereby. We cannot make a love of Beethoven objective by killing off all those who do not care for him.

3. Mr Broom admits that he *assumes* that objective moral standards exist. This is hardly satisfactory. I like the idea of objectivity as much as he does, but I cannot say I believe in something unless there is evidence. Mr. Broom has provided none.

G. L. SIMONS.

### RATIONALIST PRESS ASSOCIATION GENERAL EDITOR (Designate)

Applications are invited for the newly established post of General Editor (Designate) of this educational charity which exists to promote Rationalism, chiefly through the publication of periodicals and books by its subsidiary, the Pemberton Publishing Company Limited.

Date of appointment and salary will be agreed in discussion with the successful candidate, who will assume executive responsibility for these activities, including Editorship of HUMANIST magazine, on the retirement of Mr Hector Hawton early in 1971.

Applicants must be able to show evidence of deep personal commitment to the aims of the RPA and of possessing the skills, experience and personal qualities necessary to pursue them effectively.

Mr Hawton will be pleased to answer inquiries from intending candidates. Applications by letter should reach the General Secretary, RPA (Dept. GE), 88 Islington High Street, London, N1, by 31 March, 1970.

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