

Ethical Record

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EDITORIAL - A PERVERSE JUDGEMENT

Last week the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Authority (HEFA) delivered a devastating verdict to the parents of a child suffering from a genetic disease. The child might have been cured of his *anaemia* with the help of stem cells taken from the umbilical cord of a sibling. This would require the selection of a suitable embryo, which would be implanted in its mother's womb, later to become the couple's second child.

Permission to carry out this procedure was sought but refused by the Authority. The reason given was that the second sibling might later suffer 'psychological damage' if it decided that it was born just to help its older brother, with the implication that it was not wanted 'for itself'. Other commentators have claimed that the selected sibling was being immorally 'exploited', even though the cord is normally discarded. The expression 'designer baby' has also been thrown into the discussion disapprovingly, but as the genetic composition of the second embryo occurred naturally and was not put together 'artificially', it is a misnomer to call it 'designed'.

Let us attempt a utilitarian calculation. In support of HEFA, I can find only their hypothetical supposition of 'damage'. In favour of the requested procedure, however, one can put the definite benefit to the older sibling, who, upon learning of that, might be more than normally well-disposed towards his younger sibling. Moreover, why should not the second child be happy to know that its birth enabled its brother's relief, at no disadvantage to itself?

Such is the perversity of the HEFA experts that, if, as embryos, they were offered the choice of (1) being born a human and helping their sibling, or (2) not to be born and have their sibling remain ill, they would choose (2).

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Obituary

We regret to report the death of SPES member Peter Neville, who died on 9 August 2002. Suffering from diabetes, he was unable to attend the SPES Sunday meetings as often as he would have wished, but his death, from a heart attack, was unexpected. His funeral will take place at 12 noon on Wednesday 4 September at Golders Green Crematorium, with Barbara Smoker as Officiant. In the 1960s, Peter was the contact for the Committee of 100 in Birmingham and secretary of the then Anarchist Federation of Britain. Later, as a lecturer in sociology in London, he organised the London Anarchist Forum meetings at Conway Hall. He was a frequent contributor, mostly of sociological articles, to *Freedom*, *The Raven*, and *Total Liberty*. **D.R.**

SPES ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 29 SEPTEMBER 2002

The Library, Conway Hall, 1430; Registration from 1400.

Please note the following dates in connection with the AGM:

AUGUST 2002

Saturday 31 Last day for receipt of completed nomination forms for candidates for the General Committee (7 vacancies) and for Holding Trustees. Last day for receipt of Motions for the AGM.

SEPTEMBER 2002

Friday 6 Notice of AGM and of Motions received posted in Conway Hall.
Monday 16 Motions received, together with the Annual Report, will be posted out.
Tuesday 24 Last day for receipt of Amendments to Motions, which are then posted in Conway Hall.

THE HUMANIST REFERENCE LIBRARY

The Library at Conway Hall is open for members and researchers from Tuesday to Friday from 1400 to 1800

NICOLAS WALTER 1934-2000

David Goodway, University of Leeds

Address in Memory of Nicolas Walter, sponsored by the Rationalist Press Association and the South Place Ethical Society. Given in the Library, Conway Hall, 19 May 2002. [For picture, see ER, May 2002]

My Links To Nicolas

It was typical of Nicolas that when I asked him to check the references to himself in a brief memoir I had written of the historian Raphael Samuel and commented that it must have been at a meeting I described at Raphael's Spitalfields house in the early 1970s that we had first met, he retorted, without pause for reflection, that on the contrary that had occurred at the History Workshop at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1969. I say it was typical because he was, of course, entirely right. But although we did not meet until the end of that memorable decade I had known, and indeed been in awe of, his name since its beginning.

A callow eighteen-year-old from a small Midlands town and still a member of the Labour Party, I was among the hundreds arrested in Trafalgar Square on 17 September 1961 at the great Committee of 100 sit-down. In London again a fortnight later, this time to appear at Bow Street, I bought Anarchy 8 at Collet's in Charing Cross Road and read Nicolas's *George Orwell: An Accident in Society* (incorporated in *Orwell and Anarchism*, in *George Orwell at Home* (and among the Anarchists) (1998)). I still have what I must have purchased on the same occasion and would have been my first copy of *Freedom* - for 23 September 1961 - and this contains a long article, 'Literature and the Left', signed by 'NW'. These initials soon were to become exceedingly familiar and reviewing 'one of the most inept books I have ever come across' (yet there were to be many more): John Mander's *The Writer and Commitment*.

I proceeded to spend the winter of 1961-2 in London, attending the Sunday-evening meetings of the London Anarchist Group at The Two Brewers, Monmouth Street and monthly meetings at Laurens and Celia Otter's Notting Hill flat; becoming a lifelong reader of *Freedom* (which in those months I normally bought at Solosy's, the little newsagent's shop across the road from Collet's). Eventually read in the spring Nicolas's major essays in *Anarchy*, *Direct Action* and *Disobedience the New Pacifism* (included in their revised form as *Nonviolent Resistance*). It was in 1963, during my second year at Oxford, that I concluded an essay on Lloyd George by asserting that he had done more to lay the foundations of the Warfare State than of the Welfare State and was interrogated unsympathetically by my tutor, Paul Thompson, as to what I meant by the term 'Warfare State' (but equally I remember Paul congratulating Nicolas - it would have been at that same History Workshop - for his part in the Brighton Church Demonstration of 1966, although it emerged that he had written at the time).

Nicolas's two essays had a tremendous effect on me, contributing powerfully to my continuing belief in the easy superiority of non-violent direct action where it is at all feasible (but without my ever having become an absolute pacifist); and indeed it was Nicolas's articles in both *Freedom* and *Anarchy* which I most admired and was influenced by in the early 1960s, long before I came to appreciate the originality and importance of Colin Ward's editorship of *Anarchy* and own writing.

Nicolas's Family Background

Nicolas Hardy Walter was born in South London, where his father was researching at the Maudsley Hospital, on 22 November 1934. He came to be rightly proud of his dissenting family background over several generations. His paternal grandfather, Karl Walter (1880-1965), a journalist, had as a young man been an anarchist, known Peter Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter, and with Tom Keell been one of the two English delegates to the International Anarchist Congress at Amsterdam in 1907. Three years before he had married Margaret Hardy, an American woman he had met in Italy; between 1908 and the First World War they lived in the States, where he worked on the *Star* of Kansas City. In the 1930s they settled in Italy, Karl Walter as a sympathizer of Fascism, an ideological gravitation common to other erstwhile libertarian revolutionaries and later to be maliciously seized upon by Albert Meltzer; but in old age he returned to both anarchism and London and in the last years of his life was writing occasionally for *Freedom* at the same time as his grandson. Nicolas's father, W.Grey Walter (1910-77), was a brilliant neurologist who created ingenious electro-mechanical robots (which were to be displayed in the Millennium Dome), wrote *The Living Brain* (1953) – widely read in its Pelican edition – was Director for many years of the Burden Neurological Institute in Bristol and appeared, as I well recall, on television in the BBC's Brains Trust. In the 1930s and 1940s, like so many of his contemporaries, Grey Walter was a Communist fellow-traveller, but later he moved towards left libertarianism, prodded I suspect by his son, becoming a member of the West of England Committee of 100 and contributing a piece on cybernetics to *Anarchy*.

S.K. Ratcliffe

Nicolas's maternal grandfather was Samuel Kerkham (S.K.) Ratcliffe (1868-1958), another journalist, who had also known Kropotkin and Carpenter (at whose funeral he was a mourner) and had served on the executive of the Fabian Society alongside Charlotte Wilson (whose anarchist essays his grandson was to edit). Although acting editor of the daily *Statesman* of Calcutta, 1903-6, and editor of the *Sociological Review*, 1910-17, he was essentially a freelance journalist – and a liberal rationalist rather than a socialist – he was also a formidable lecturer, undertaking no fewer than 28 lecture tours of the USA and Canada. He served for forty years as an Appointed Lecturer of the South Place Ethical Society, the history of which he was to write (*The Story of South Place*, S.K. Ratcliffe (1955)) and Nicolas followed him in this role from 1978. On S.K.'s death Kingsley Martin wrote in the *New Statesman*:

I have never known anyone so meticulous about accurate detail since I was taught Greek by a scholar whose interest in particles was as enthusiastic as mine was indifferent. I have always regretted that I did not send S.K. the manuscript of each of my books before publication, instead of awaiting his inevitable list of errors.

S.K.'s brother, William Ratcliffe, became a painter and was a member of the Camden Town Group. Nicolas's mother, Monica, had been one of Ninette de Valois's dancers at Sadler's Wells. Grey Walter (who was three times married) and Monica Walter divorced when Nicolas was nine or ten and he was brought up by his mother and her second husband, a Cambridge scientist.

Nicolas was sent to private schools in the Bristol area and then boarded at a minor and semi-progressive public school, Rendcomb College, Cirencester. On leaving school he did his two years' National Service in the RAF as a Junior Technician in Signals Intelligence. He was one of those bright young men who were

taught Russian as part of the Cold War effort; it is noteworthy that it was on Russia, second only to British history and anarchism, that he was to write most extensively and percipiently - for a considerable period he was contemplating a biography of Kropotkin. In 1954 he went up to Exeter College, Oxford, as an exhibitor to read Modern History. His tutor for Political Thought was in later years to be taxed for having unleashed not only Nicolas on to the outside world but also Colin Jordan and Tariq Ali. From his Oxford years there is a very early letter to *Encounter* in which he defends Hugh Trevor-Roper's assault on Arnold Toynbee and *A Study of History*.

At Oxford he was a member of the Labour Club - he had been 'brought up more or less as a Labour Party supporter - an extreme left-wing Labour Party supporter' - but in the autumn of 1956 the twin upheavals of the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Revolution jolted him into a questioning of the accepted ideologies (as he explains in *Thirty Years' War*). An even earlier letter on Suez to the *Manchester Guardian* resulted in Colin Ward's sending him a sample copy of *Freedom*, although this collective letter betrays no indication of incipient anarchism.

On graduating from Oxford in 1957 he left for London where he was to spend his entire working life, initially as a schoolteacher - among his first pupils was Christine Barnett, who would later become his second wife - but soon moving on to political research, publishing (he was responsible for Duckworth advertizing in an early issue of *Anarchy*) and journalism. He participated in the political and cultural ferment of the first New Left, frequenting the Partisan Coffee House in Carlisle Street and being a supporter of nuclear disarmament before the actual formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in 1958. He would recall seeing Doris Lessing being cuddled at a meeting by Eric Hobsbawm (the great Marxist historian who became one of his bêtes noires, as for so many anarchists, as 'Frogspawn'). Late in 1958 Karl Walter was responsible for introducing him to Lilian Wolfe, who had been Tom Keell's companion and continued to live at Whiteway Colony. He began to visit Freedom Bookshop, which was still in Red Lion Street and to attend the London Anarchist Group's weekly meetings. From 1959 he became a contributor to *Freedom*, an association only to be terminated by his death.

The Committee of 100

When in the autumn of 1960 dissatisfaction with CND's legal methods and constitutional agitation spawned within it the direct-action Committee of 100, Nicolas had his first letter published in *The Times* defending the dissidents and as a consequence was invited to become a member of the Committee to help round up the well-known names to the all important figure of one hundred. As he was to write in the Postscript to *Non-violent Resistance*: 'I was never at all important in the Committee of 100, but it was very important to me.' For many years he was intending to write a history of the Committee of 100 and of all his unrealized books this is the one I most regret. For not only was the Committee of 100 the most important anarchist - or at least near-anarchist - political organization of modern Britain; Nicolas, in the grip of the events of 1960-62, and spending as much time as possible during the winter of 1961-2 outside of work and his considerable political activity in the Reading Room of the British Museum - was also the sole individual engaged, in *Damned Fools in Utopia* for the *New Left Review* (and especially in the two *Anarchy* essays subsequently revised in 1963 as the *Non-violent Resistance* pamphlet) in attempting - and with considerable success - to work out the historical lineage and above all the political theory of the Committee of 100. (This was a task performed for the preceding Direct Action Committee by April Carter.) The *Ethical Record*, July/August 2002

Anarchy essays won him the greatly valued friendship of Alex Comfort, whom he properly concluded was 'the true voice of nuclear disarmament, much more than Bertrand Russell or anyone else' and who was their principal theoretical influence, as well as of Colin MacInnes.

In June 1961 Nicolas had resigned from the Committee on account of 'disagreement with its rhetoric and tactics which had worried me from the beginning'. The failure of the demonstration at the Wethersfield airbase on 9 December led the following year to the decentralization of the Committee into thirteen regional Committees (several of which were already existent). Although there was a nominal National Committee of 100, the dominant body now became the London Committee of 100, which Nicolas joined at its inaugural meeting in April 1962. Another member was the 20-year-old Ruth Oppenheim, a microbiologist at Sainsbury's who also worked whenever she could in the Committee's Goodwin Street premises. Barbara Smoker remembers that Nicolas and Ruth at the meetings always sat at the front and together - and in September they married. The long, harsh winter of 1962-3, one of the century's worst, saw renewed crisis, now acted out in the London Committee. The radicals, mainly from or close to Solidarity, circulated the arrestingly-titled discussion document, *Beyond Counting Arses*, advocating radical, subversive action: 'we must attempt to hinder the warfare state in every possible way'.

Spies For Peace

It was essentially this group, joined by Nicolas and Ruth, who constituted the Spies for Peace, locating and breaking into the Regional Seat of Government at Warren Row, producing the pamphlet, *Danger! Official Secret: RSG-6*, and thereby diverting many of us on the Aldermaston March of Easter 1963 to explore the sinister surface buildings of the subterranean bunker (it was Ruth's twenty-first birthday). The disclosure of the preparations to rule the country, in the event of nuclear war, through fourteen RSGs represented, of course 'a substantial breach of official secrecy' and caused, as one had assumed, Harold Macmillan's ministry real concern.

Nicolas, the only member of the Spies for Peace ever to have declared himself publicly, did so unambiguously as early as 1968, remarkably, and on the radio at that (as well as in 1986 in 'Thirty Years' War') - his account, reprinted in this collection as *The Spies for Peace and After*, was unattributed in 1973 in *Inside Story* (and continued so in its Raven version of 1988). For a short time he regarded himself as belonging to the impressively innovative Solidarity Group, participating in the homelessness agitation which they largely initiated, yet as a dedicated anarchist who at that time was also a pacifist he was remote from their Trotskyist origins and continuing Marxist perspectives, though he remained on cordial terms with the leading members, 'Maurice Brinton' (previously 'Martin Grainger') and Ken Weller.

At the time of the Spies of Peace, Ruth was pregnant with their first child, Susannah; and a second daughter, Natasha, followed shortly. Considerably influenced by her increasingly proud father, Natasha Walter has become a prominent literary journalist, controversialist and author of *The New Feminism* (1998). Her tender, admiring obituary in the *Independent* indicates the kind of man Nicolas was. In 1963 he became Deputy Editor of *Which?* and a staff writer for the *Good Food Guide* and from 1965 Press Officer for the British Standards Institution.

It was while working for the British Standards Institution that he underwent

his only spell of imprisonment. The Labour Party Conference was held in Brighton in 1966 as the Vietnam War grew in intensity, as did the Labour government's complicity, and the Vietnam Action Group planned to disrupt the traditional pre-conference service at the Dorset Road Methodist Church. Demonstrators were issued with admission tickets forged by Pat Pottle and Terry Chandler's Stanhope Press (which that year was also responsible for the Merlin Press's facsimile edition of the Chartist *Red Republican* and *Friend of the People*). Terry thought it a good idea to print more tickets than had been asked for and Nicolas was among those he let have one. So it was that Nicolas initiated cries of 'Hypocrite!' too early while George Brown, the deputy prime minister, was speaking and when Harold Wilson mounted the pulpit to read the second lesson 'pandemonium broke loose'. Nicolas and Jim Radford were charged with indecent behaviour in church under the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act, 1866, and each sentenced to two months in Brixton. Nothing was to give Nicolas more satisfaction than to read in Wilson's memoirs the admission that this was 'one of the most unpleasant experiences of my premiership'.

In 1968 he was appointed Chief Sub-Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), a job for which he was ideally suited and which he relished, slipping in short pieces on the Situationists and B.Traven (the writer), and regaling friends with entertaining anecdotes of life at the TLS - such as the peculiarities of another staff member, Martin Amis. He did not, however, approve of the TLS's changing from anonymous to signed reviews and so moved to the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), first as editor of the *New Humanist*, from 1975 to 1985, and then as a Director of the RPA until his retirement at the end of 1999. Work at the RPA enabled him to be paid for propagating the dual cause of atheism and rationalism - together with anarchism, the passions of his intellectual life - and this in part by writing letters to the press. This latter was the capacity in which Nicolas was known to the wider public. It was estimated in 1994 that he had written 14,000 letters to newspapers and periodicals with a success rate of some 2,000 published (or one or two a week). These appeared not only under his own name but under a variety of pseudonyms: Arthur Freeman, Anna Freeman, Jean Raison, Mary Lewis and others. ('MH' in Freedom was originally the abbreviation for the collaborative 'Many Hands', but later used by Nicolas exclusively.) This enormous body of letters, frequently correcting trivial errors, gave the impression of a pernickety and pedantic obsessive; and on retiring as editor of the *Spectator*, Charles Moore included Nicolas in the select group of bores whom he certainly would not miss. The astringency of his extensive book reviewing, from *Freedom* to the *London Review of Books*, contributed to an erroneous public persona of a desiccated and negative crank. The man in reality was the exact reverse: warm, generous, humorous, loved by children, a wonderful friend.

In 1969 Colin Ward turned over the whole of *Anarchy 100* to About Anarchism. *Blasphemy: Ancient and Modern* (1990) and *Humanism: What's in the Word* (1997) are both small books of 96 pages, but *About Anarchism* was Nicolas's most sustained and equally successful anarchist publication. It appeared the same year as a separate pamphlet and went through two further editions before he withdrew it from circulation pending a personal revision that never materialized. *About Anarchism* has been translated into many other languages, including Russian, Serbo-Croat, Greek, Turkish, Chinese and Japanese, and apparently its popularity led some anarchist parents to name their boys 'Nicolas'. It was reading *About Anarchism*, along with Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, that was

responsible for Peter Marshall becoming an anarchist.

Great Gifts And Immense Energy

In the 1960s alone Nicolas had had several contracts from commercial publishers, advances were paid, but the books were never written - even though his young family could have done with the money - and the advances were refunded. It was a mystery to admirers such as myself why he did not produce the books that his great gifts and immense energy amply equipped him to do. The explanation seems to lie in his perfectionism: he completed innumerable articles to his personal satisfaction yet he was unable to do this at book length. The contract which resulted in *Anarchy in Action* was passed on from Nicolas to Colin Ward, but Colin here - and even more in other books - incorporated and built on existing work; and Paul Goodman, Alex Comfort and George Woodcock were obvious exemplars of those who were highly successful in recycling already published material. This was the other puzzle. Nicolas published a vast amount of journalism, much of it first-rate (as I trust the present ample selection makes entirely clear), but he never proceeded to collect any of it in permanent form. I found it particularly odd that Freedom Press failed to enable him to do this and he agreed that he believed the best of his work deserved to appear as one of their volumes. The problem here seems to have been his incompatibility with Vernon Richards, who until his retirement in 1995 was responsible for selecting the Freedom Press titles and went so far as to call Nicolas in the columns of *Freedom* an 'academic snob' (yet despite his entirely proper high intellectual standards nobody could have been less of a snob of whatever kind).

During the first half of the 1970s Nicolas was drawn into working on Wynford Hicks's attractive papers, *Inside Story* and *Wildcat*; and collaboration was something he particularly enjoyed and was good at, for he was a social and sociable person. In 1983 he first came into contact with the German anarchist historian, Heiner Becker, and by the end of the decade such was their rapport that all Nicolas's scholarly output on anarchist and historical subjects was in effect jointly written with Heiner. When Peter Marshall and myself withdrew (presciently as matters worked out) from involvement in Freedom Press's projected new quarterly publication, Heiner stepped in, conceived the *Raven*, and in association with Nicolas brought out a run of seven outstanding issues (1987-9).

'Bloody Bad Luck'

In 1974 Nicolas was diagnosed as having testicular cancer. One testicle was extracted, he was treated with radiotherapy, and for a while all seemed fine. Then he began to have problems with his digestive system, he constantly vomited and his weight plummeted from twelve to eight stone. It was eventually realized that excessive doses of radiation had damaged the adjoining area of his body. A considerable length of intestine was removed and he began to recover his health. In 1983, however, it became apparent that his spine and the upper muscles of his thighs had also been affected and progressive disablement set in. As he announced in a letter to the *Guardian*:

...I contracted cancer in my thirties, began to suffer from the long-term side-effects of radiotherapy in my forties, and am now suffering from progressive paralysis and other complications in my fifties...

First he had to use crutches, but by 1997 this formerly fit and very vigorous man was confined to a wheelchair. When asked in 1994 why he did not sue the NHS, he retorted:

Why should I? It was just bloody bad luck. I'm not complaining. I have only got praise for the people working in hospitals and the social services, even though they are all exhausted and the hospitals are filthy. If I sued the NHS for negligence and won, it would mean there was less money for other people.

Ruth and Nicolas had divorced in 1982. I vividly recall meeting him in the British Museum and his saying, as we were leaving, in Great Russell Street that the decree nisi had just come through and he would never make the mistake of getting married again. Yet, as in other cases where he made an impulsive dogmatic pronouncement (such as writing for the *Guardian* no more after its publication of the executioner's account of the hanging of Derek Bentley), he could be flexible and had the good sense and great fortune to marry Christine Morris (née Barnett), like Ruth Oppenheim a secular Jew, in 1987. Their way of life was during the week to live in the flat on the top storey of 88 Islington High Street above the RPA offices, where Christine also worked for five years, and to spend weekends at her house in Leighton Buzzard. At the end of 1999 Nicolas retired, Christine took redundancy from Relate and they withdrew to live full-time in Leighton Buzzard, from where Nicolas would be able to take the train to St Pancras and work in the new British Library. At just this time, though, the cancer returned; squamous cell carcinoma was diagnosed and at the beginning of 2000 pronounced terminal. With the fortitude that had characterized his entire life, it ended on 7 March 2000.

For many years I jested that I would never publish a book on anarchism since I could not face the prospect of Nicolas's savaging it in a review. When I eventually assembled the collection that appeared in 1989 as *For Anarchism* I sent my draft introduction for his comments and corrections - he was an old friend whose opinion I esteemed - and I was surprised when he requested that his name should not be included in the acknowledgments. His review in *Freedom* was dismissive, particularly of the introduction, and relations between us were cool for several years. What made it all the more galling is that I have come largely to concur with his criticisms. One of the most excoriating reviews I have ever read was Nicolas's demolition in *Peace News* of Richard Taylor's first, co-authored book on the nuclear disarmament movement, *The Protest Makers* (1980) and I was very embarrassed when bringing it to Dick's attention. In contrast he praised *Against the Bomb* (1988) as excellent and the best history of the subject and, knowing that Dick was a friend and colleague, repeated this judgment to me over the years. Richard Taylor now tells me that he considers Nicolas's criticisms of *The Protest Makers* were entirely justified. Scarcely surprisingly, I braced myself for the worst when Freedom Press brought out my editions of the anarchist writings of Alex Comfort and Herbert Read; but in a joint notice Nicolas, while lambasting Read and continuing to esteem Comfort, pronounced my introductions as 'models of their kind - well informed, well researched, well written and well worth reading'. This was praise indeed! My contributions to *Herbert Read Reassessed*, another volume I edited, were also commended by Nicolas. When I rang to thank him for writing such nice things he responded tartly: 'There is no need to thank me. I merely said what I think.'

A projected volume of Nicolas's writings is intended as a tribute to a much loved, but sometimes irritating, friend. He is greatly missed: no more has there been the unmistakable large and sprawling hand on envelopes (latterly usually containing his unexpurgated copy for the 'posh' papers, as he called them) or his rich, warm voice on the telephone. Someone who knew a good deal about our relationship commiserated by saying 'he was like a brother to you - a difficult brother'. I just

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hope that Nicolas would approve of this introduction and my choice of contents and give his book a good review.

Books and Pamphlets by Nicolas Walter

The RSGs, 1919-1963 (London: Solidarity, 1963)

Non-violent Resistance: Men against War (London: Nonviolence 63, 1963)

About Anarchism (London: Freedom Press, 1969) Reprinted in 2002 by Freedom Press with an introduction by Natasha Walter.

(editor) Michael Bakunin, *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State* (London: CIRA, 1971)

Blasphemy in Britain: The Practice and Punishment of Blasphemy, and the Trial of Gav News (London: Rationalist Press Association, 1977)

(editor) Joseph Lane, *An Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto* (Sanday, Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1978)

(editor) Charlotte Wilson, *Three Essays on Anarchism* (Sanday, Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1979)

(editor) Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism and Anarchist Communism* (London: Freedom Press, 1987)

(editor, with Heiner Becker) Peter Kropotkin, *Act for Yourselves: Articles from Freedom 1886-1907* (London: Freedom Press, 1988)

Blasphemy: Ancient and Modern (London: Rationalist Press Association (with the Committee against Blasphemy Law,)1990)

Humanism: What's in the Word? (London: Rationalist Press Association (with the British Humanist Association and the Secular Society (G.W.Foote) Ltd, 1997)

(editor) G.W.Foote, *Secularism: The True Philosophy of Life: An Exposition and a Defence* (London: G.W.Foote, 1998)

(editor) Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism* (G.W.Foote, 1998)

(editor) E.M.Forster, *What I Believe and Other Essays* (G.W.Foote (with the British Humanist Association and the Rationalist Press Association), 1999)

(editor) Charlotte M. Wilson, *Anarchist Essays* (London: Freedom Press, 2000)



ILLUSION FOR THE DAY

The following email was read out on Radio 4's Today programme as 'from Jennifer Jaynes, of the Ethical Society'. It was part of the debate on whether atheists and humanists should continue to be excluded as 'Thought for the Day' contributors:

Dear Today,

The Ethical Society has supported the cause of free speech and freethought for over 100 years. It is quite appalling that in the C21 the BBC is one of the few organisations still supporting discrimination against people who live ethical lives without recourse to supernatural fairy tales. We all admire the high level of robust debate on the Today programme which destroys the pretensions of self important politicians. Yet this rational atmosphere is then ruined when someone - whose only qualification for the slot is a religious faith, totally unjustified by historical and scientific criteria - is allowed to give free reign to banalities, platitudes and slanders on secularists.

*Unless the Governors change the policy forthwith, please rename the slot 'Illusion for the Day' as real thought is conspicuous by its absence. **

* This sentence was not read out. [Ed.]

KARL POPPER'S *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES*: REFLECTIONS HALF A CENTURY ON

Tom Rubens

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 7 July 2002

This text will appear, slightly amended, in Tom Rubens's forthcoming book
A Liberalism Cautious But Active, to be published in Autumn 2002

In fact it is now 57 years since the first edition of *The Open Society* appeared in 1945 and even 36 years since the last revised edition was published in 1966: an ample time after which to assess the relevance of the book's ideas to the present. That relevance is, with some qualifications, manifold.

I shall focus on the book's second volume for three main reasons: Firstly, Volume II gives a critique of Marx² in a range of cogent ways and therefore provides an effective warning against the uncritical acceptance of Marx's doctrines which is rife among many present-day socialists. Secondly, this volume articulates Popper's basic notions of what a democratic system is and how it should function. Thirdly, it extends the argument advanced in Volume I for tentative and piecemeal social engineering, as distinct from the sweeping kind based on Utopianist assumptions. (However, because the 'piecemeal' argument receives its most comprehensive expression in Volume I, I will refer to this when discussing it.)

The critique of Marx, the advocacy of piecemeal reform and the definition of democratic practice (topics I will deal with in this order) all involve attitudes which accord closely with the cautious, liberal humanism which constitutes my own ethical position. My view is that Popper, in presenting his arguments, makes a major contribution to the literature of liberal humanism. At the same time, I have some negative criticisms of Popper, relating to his study of Marx.

In his positive commentary, Popper praises Marx for having made a pivotal contribution to sociology. Marx, says Popper, has helped to show that social phenomena can never be entirely understood in terms of the motives and desires which led to their formation. While psychological factors do produce social structures, the latter, over time, develop a momentum and complexity of their own, giving rise to situations, pressures - indeed, motives, desires and activities - which were often unforeseen and unintended by those who created them. Since these repercussions can only be fully understood with reference to the social structure itself and never solely to the motives for its creation, such understanding is predominantly sociological.

A chief implication of this argument is that human behaviour always has a social context and one which conditions it. Hence, given the variety of contexts, such behaviour cannot validly be regarded as the manifestation of 'human nature', if the latter is seen as something which is both invariable in psychological structure and pre-social. (A logical extension of these points is that even the act of creating social structures is itself conditioned by existing social circumstances. That is to say, no form of human thought or behaviour is absolutely pre-social and free from contextual influence.)

Marx, Popper continues, rightly stressed the importance of understanding the capitalist system from a sociological angle. Marx's sociological, and therefore highly

complex, view of capitalism is to be distinguished from the simplistic outlook of vulgar Marxists, who disregard the logic of situations and attribute the intricate functionings of capitalism as it has evolved over time to purely psychological factors (i.e. to the original motives of those who created the system). Marx's more sophisticated perspective, involving as it does consideration of unforeseen and unintended consequences, is regarded by Popper as indispensable to the modern outlook: a verdict to which we can readily subscribe.

Next, Popper lauds Marx for having given a generally accurate description of the system of unrestrained capitalism as it existed in the latter's day. Popper praises the investigative thoroughness displayed by Marx in his studies and conveys the deeply humanitarian character of his motivation and commitment. Again, we can concur with Popper.

However, in negative commentary, Popper launches an extensive attack on Marx's historicism: his belief in the historical inevitability of the coming of socialism.³ Anti-historicism is the chief element in Popper's critique of Marx (and Hegel) and occupies centre-stage both in this book and in his later *The Poverty of Historicism*. He marshals many effective arguments against Marx's (predominant) view that history has a definite shape and morphology. He shows how this position breeds a totally false sense of certainty⁴ and doctrinaire inflexibility⁵ in those who hold it. Further, he demonstrates the logical contradiction between Marx's historicism and his activist doctrine. The latter can best be summed up in Marx's famous saying that philosophers have only interpreted the world, when the real point is to change it. (Another important activist, even apparently *anti*-historicist, statement from Marx is: "History does nothing...It is men, real, living men, who do all this.") But, as Popper indicates, the attempt to change things is illogical if they are going to change anyway, by virtue of an inevitable historical process.⁶ *

Moreover, he shows the moral problems entailed by Marx's historicism. Because Marx claimed to be descriptive and scientific - and therefore to predict future developments as distinct from recommending them - the question arises as to what moral attitude should be adopted to what is regarded as inevitable. Marx's position was, essentially, that we should approve the inevitable precisely because it is inevitable: a view Popper describes as moral historicism. But what if, Popper asks, we do not like what is inevitable? We are under no obligation, moral or logical, to endorse the allegedly unavoidable.⁷

As regards Marx's view of social classes, Popper stresses that, contrary to the general tendency of Marx's thought, the modern industrial working class cannot be realistically viewed as a homogenous, unitary group, either morally or intellectually. It is a mixed phenomenon, containing both altruistic and selfish people. Popper cogently argues that the victory of the working class in the struggle against capitalism need not, as Marx insisted, lead to a classless society. The sense of class-solidarity, Marx had reasoned, is mainly the result of being involved in class-struggle; yet Marx had in addition assumed that the feeling of solidarity would remain after the conditions which created it had disappeared. This assumption, says Popper, is unwarranted:

There is no earthly reason why the individuals who form the proletariat should retain their class unity once the pressure of the struggle against the common class enemy has ceased. Any latent conflict of interests is now likely to divide the formerly united proletariat into new classes, and to develop into a new class struggle. (p. 138)

Here, Popper echoes Pareto, as he does also when he goes on to say:

The most likely development is, of course, that those actually in power at the moment of victory - those of the revolutionary leaders who have survived the struggle for power and the various purges, together with their staff - will form a *New Class: the ruling class of the new society*, a kind of new aristocracy or bureaucracy; and it is most likely that they will attempt to hide this fact (also p. 138).

While we may not agree with Popper that this is 'the most likely development', we must concede that it is a possible one - and the one that materialised in Russia in November 1917.

Popper's sense of the problematic character of the proletariat is further conveyed when he contends, in extension of the above points: "there may be anti-democratic tendencies latent among the ruled as well as among the rulers" and that these tendencies are in fact "always present" (p.161). In addition, he considers fundamental differences of interest which might exist, after the overthrow of capitalism, between industrial workers - regarding themselves as the most significant economic group - and other kinds of occupational groups, including agricultural workers.⁸ In short, the question of the nature of a future society inaugurated by the industrial working class is a wide-open one and one which no historicist doctrine can satisfactorily answer.

In the above considerations, Popper performs a vital service: he casts piercing light on areas which, for many Marxists, remain dark and obscure because of uncritical acceptance of literally everything Marx said. Nevertheless, not all of Popper's strictures on Marx are justified. We have already noted his neglect of the fact that Marx's position was not always inevitabilist (which is a different point from Popper's argument about the inconsistency between Marx's allegedly invariable inevitabilism and his activism). Further, though applauding Marx for his criticism of the unrestrained capitalism of the mid-19th century, he argues that most of this criticism is now outmoded because, he says, the era of completely *laissez faire* private enterprise has ended. He contends that we now live in an age of economic interventionism by government, an interventionism which prevents capitalism from wreaking the social havoc for which it was notorious in Marx's day.

While Popper's argument was certainly applicable, in the main, to Western Europe in the 30-odd years after World War II (bearing in mind the publication dates of the first edition and last revised edition of *The Open Society*) it is now much less so. A leading indication of this change is the growth in power of multi-national corporations. The influence these now exert over governments and national economies denotes a major renewal of unrestrained private enterprise, now graced with the name 'neo-liberalism'. It is true that MNC power is exerted most extensively in the Third World, where production environments are low-wage, low-cost, low-tax. However, the Third World is actually the largest part of the world. Also, the impact of MNCs on the Western economies is increasing. Among their widening powers is the ability to create disruption and unemployment in the West by arbitrary decisions about where to site production - decisions which governments have shown no capacity to reverse.

Marx, to his credit, accurately predicted the monopolistic tendencies of capitalism. The burgeoning global power of the MNCs, with the ever-growing concentration of economic might in fewer and fewer hands, is confirmation of that prediction. Moreover Marx was also correct in predicting an overall increase of immiseration under capitalism in the long-term; this immiseration is most extensively evident in, again, the Third World⁹ but is on the increase in the West as

well, with the phenomenon of long-term, so-called 'structural', unemployment and the consequent development of underclasses and social exclusion (a situation not helped, incidentally, by the erosion of public services in countries such as Britain).

What is happening, in essence, is that capitalism, now in a predominantly monopoly form, is re-asserting its independence of political control after the 30-odd year period from 1945 when it was to a significant extent subject to that control, at least in Western Europe. Popper, arguing his case from 1945-66 about the controlled and restrained character of contemporary capitalism, presumably did not foresee subsequent developments.¹⁴

But even aside from this point, Popper should have realised that his picture of capitalism during this period was a highly selective one. Though noting the degree of government intervention, and also the comparatively high standard of living enjoyed under capitalism by most people in the West, he apparently failed to see that the global economy was skewed, as it still is, in favour of the West: primarily in favour of Western industry¹⁵ and big business, but secondarily in favour of Western society as a whole. In addition, he seems to have overlooked the fact that two major capitalist powers, Britain and France, waged colonial wars in the post-1945 period, partly to protect their national economies: Britain in Malaya and France, (supported, be it noted, by the United States) in Vietnam. Hence improvements under capitalism in the West were partly on the back of repressive action in the Third World.

These considerations point to the fundamental shortcomings of large-scale capitalism as a global system, shortcomings which Popper, even in the period under discussion, should have perceived. One wonders what he would say about the current condition of global capitalism, if he were writing now.

Let us now turn to Popper's case for piecemeal forms of social engineering. Popper begins with basic definitions. In Utopian social engineering, an objective or blueprint is fully formulated and then action is taken to realise it. The objective is regarded as a general and ultimate good, the attainment of which constitutes a state of perfection. Action is geared to the total, not partial, attainment of the aim, only complete success is deemed acceptable. In piecemeal engineering, on the other hand, there is no notion of an ultimate good to be striven for. Rather, the objective is to tackle specific evils in the here-and-now, in order, not to deliver some pre-conceived form of happiness in the future, but to reduce suffering and unhappiness in the present. Popper avers: "The piecemeal engineer will, accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good." (p.158)

The piecemeal approach, Popper goes on to say, can be applied at any time, whereas the Utopian stance may involve postponing action to a later period, when, allegedly, the achievement of the ultimate good will be more probable. Furthermore, a campaign against universally recognised evils is more likely to meet with general agreement than one proposing an ideal good which is claimed to be equally applicable to all: people differ in their views of happiness and there is no strictly rational way of arriving at a universal moral ideal.

Piecemeal engineering proceeds step-by-step, seeking to reform single institutions (in my view, one of these institutions is monopoly capitalism). Hence, if mistakes are made, they can be corrected without much difficulty because actions are always focused and specific. Also, in this perspective, reason is preferred to

passion or violence - and democratic methods are regarded as the most appropriate ones for implementing change.

By contrast, Utopianism demands the highly centralised rule of a few, a rule which is either actually or potentially authoritarian. Authoritarianism, by its very nature, is averse to criticism, even when the exercise of authority has benevolent intentions. Hence, in the case of the benevolent dictator who does not brook criticism, there is no way of ensuring that the aims of his benevolence are actually being realised. Additionally, there is the problem of who will succeed the benevolent dictator and in turn wield unchallenged power.

Even without the dictator-factor, Utopianist authoritarianism is still fraught with problems. Those who come to power after the original Utopian plan was formulated may differ from their predecessors in objectives and ideals, with the result that the massive efforts previously made in one direction, perhaps over many years, will be suddenly nullified by a change of direction. Further, all-embracing ideals are drawn up on the basis of what can only ever be, at any given point in time, limited social experience and knowledge. Hence there always exists an area of uncertainty between what is known in the present and what is assumed for the future; but this area Utopianism refuses to recognise.

Such refusal is not, however, to be found among piecemeal engineers. They acknowledge the problems involved in predicting the future; hence their emphasis on gradualism, on one-by-one changes rather than all-inclusive, across-the-board transformations which Utopianists aim at and which, because of their sweeping character, cannot easily be reversed if wrong.

Popper concludes with a point which is re-emphasised in Volume II: that the Utopian attempt to create a heaven on earth - a social reality from which all ugliness has been banished - succeeds only in creating a hell on earth. The extremist and unrealistic nature of the project inevitably leads to dire consequences, no matter how well-meaning the motives.¹² One might perhaps quote the old saying: 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'

Overall, Popper's reasoning is eminently sound. Experience repeatedly demonstrates that the piecemeal approach to social change is the only viable one. This has been especially evident since 1945. We have witnessed the slow but inexorable deterioration and eventual break-up of the Stalinist and neo-Stalinist attempts at creating Utopia in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, in the West, we have realised the need for extensive modification of the heady social-democratic expectations which were rife in the period immediately after 1945; the radical widening of social and educational opportunity has not spelt the end of the vices and perversities found in previous, less egalitarian periods: traditional moral problems persist, at all social levels. A cautiously empirical approach to social issues and what is in effect an eschewal of Utopianism now prevails amongst the most discerning minds. The piecemeal method is the order of the day.

I would only emphasise that this method should include an attack on monopoly capitalism. In line with Popper's criteria, this attack is against a specific source of suffering in the present and does not entail proposing a universal ideal of happiness to be attained in the future. It is an extremely important but nonetheless limited project: one which, if successful, will reduce unhappiness but will certainly not deliver heaven on earth.

Let us now look at Popper's views on democracy. As said, his advocacy of piecemeal reform is bound up with his support for democratic practice. In defining what he means by democracy, Popper establishes a number of key criteria by which all modern democratic systems can be judged:

(1) Democracy is not simply the electoral dominance of the majority; although general elections are an indispensable feature of the system, the rule of the majority which they produce may have a tyrannical character; majorities may, for example, persecute minorities (here Popper strongly echoes J.S. Mill). Hence true democracy protects the rights of all groups - at least all groups who support the democratic principle - and not just those of majorities.

(2) In a democracy, the government is replaceable without the use of violence. Where this is not the case, the government is tyrannical and not democratic; in such cases, violence may be justified to remove the tyranny, but only if the aim is to establish democracy.

(3) Democracy permits not only peaceful change of government but also peaceful reform, resulting as the latter does from institutions which promote the free exchange of ideas and opinions, plus the practices of compromise and mutual adjustment.

(4) A democratic constitution is accompanied by a highly flexible legal system but one not so flexible as to allow changes which would jeopardise democracy itself. For, if democracy falls, so too do the legal rights of its citizens. Also, democratic government is not naive: it understands that the system is never completely safe, that among the population as a whole there may be anti-democratic elements who hunger for tyrannical power and therefore represent a permanent danger.

(5) Democracy recognises that power takes not only political but also economic forms. Whereas political power is accountable to the electorate, economic power may not be; hence true democracy protects those who are economically weak and vulnerable from those who exercise economic coercion.¹³ In a democracy, no group is at the mercy of any other; the rights of all groups are effectively, not just nominally, protected by the state. This protection is underpinned by the physical power the state possesses, power which is more fundamental than the economic kind and which can be legitimately used for protective purposes.

(6) Democracy is concerned not only with the mandated exercise of power but also with the regulation of that exercise. As Popper poignantly puts the matter: the "most fundamental problem of politics" is "the control of the controller" (p. 129); and "the old question, 'Who shall be rulers?' must be superseded by the more real one, 'How can we tame them?' " (p. 133).

I think Popper's criteria for democracy are fully comprehensive. They prompt us to take a closer look at the political systems we live under, to ask ourselves if all the criteria are being met, particularly the one about control over economic power.

Popper's Open Society

Popper's conception of the open society is profoundly thought-provoking in a host of ways. It relates not only to political issues and democratic values but also to the spheres of anthropology, sociology, culture and ethics. It constitutes, in my view,

a most important contribution to the delineation of the position which modern rational man, rejecting superstition, atavism and dogmatism, finds himself in: a position from which he surveys the present and moves toward the future.

Popper defines the open society as that which grants the individual the freedom to make personal decisions and to take responsibility for his/her own life. Moreover, the open society allows critical discussion of its *mores* and conventions, of all established ideas. Hence it permits the development of science and philosophy in an unbiased form. This means that intellectual positions are not fixed or final. Further, such a society is structurally fluid; it has no permanent caste or class system, with the result that positions of authority and prestige are competed for, in a just way, open to all, rather than conferred as an hereditary privilege or acquired by corrupt means. Social institutions are recognised as man-made and not expressions of an unchanging natural or divine order of which man is merely part.

All this is in sharp contrast to the closed society, in which each one of the above characteristics finds its polar opposite. The closed society is in fact tribal and based on taboos. The latter are rarely questioned or changed; and, if they are, give rise only to new taboos.

It will be clear that the open society can be identified with the most progressive developments in the West since the 17th century: the growth of science, commerce, religious freedom (and freedom to reject religion) and social mobility; that the closed society is to a large extent identical with archaic societies, as defined by anthropologists. Popper argues that the first major step in human history from a closed to an open society took place in Greece in the 6th-5th centuries BC. It was the work of the great intellectual figures of that period, pre-eminently Socrates.

Open societies, being more intellectually and morally complex than closed ones, both encourage individuality and make extensive demands on it. People have to be self-accountable and self-directing to a far greater degree than is possible under a tribal system. This obligation gives rise to what Popper, equating open societies with fully civilised ones, calls the strain of civilisation: the strain inevitably felt by the individual in coping with cultural and moral complexity. Popper displays sympathetic understanding of this stress and pressure, yet insists that it must be accepted as the price of liberation from tribalism and closed systems. The experience of the problematic is the experience of freedom: the difficulty of making choices and reaching decisions is the occupational hazard of being rationally self-accountable. Liberty and rationality are inseparable from their burdens.¹⁴

Popper's eloquent characterisation of experience in the open society will strike deep chords in every circumspect reader. His words are all the more poignant in the light of his anti-historicism. He contends that bearing the strain of civilisation includes accepting the fact that the long-term future is unknowable: includes, therefore, learning to live with fundamental doubts and uncertainties.

The rejection of historicism and the acknowledgement of doubt, combined as these are in Popper with a focus on the individual sphere, chime with cautious liberalism in virtually every respect. As the new millennium begins, the liberal witnesses a plethora of mentalities which are approximate to, or even identical with, those of the closed society: religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism, ethnicism, fascism, corporatism, even proletarianism. Each is a threat to the critical-mindedness which is the oxygen of the open society and of the universalistic

humanitarianism which Popper and all liberal humanists associate with such a society. The presence of these threats leads the cautious liberal to endorse Popper's argument that the problematic is an ineradicable feature of the human condition and that, therefore, perfect societies are not possible. Hence, in confronting what menaces those attitudes and practices which we can identify with the open society, the liberal seeks, not the heaven-on-earth which Popper repeatedly avers is unattainable, but the social situation which he affirms is attainable: one where improvements are achieved, but in a spirit of realistic and modest expectation.

1 To which I will be referring: publisher, Routledge, Kegan and Paul (London).

2 This critique of Marx is more pertinent to the present than Popper's equally powerful critique of Hegel in the same volume. His comments clearly show that Hegel's views on the state and on international relations contained the roots of modern fascism.

3 Actually, Marx did not invariably argue the inevitability of socialism, but this was his most frequent argument. Popper fails to acknowledge this inconsistency in Marx.

4 This sense can be found among a number of socialists who have an oversimplified and over-schematic view of history, according to which every major social tendency of the past and present is a 'stage' toward the emergence of socialism.

5 The repressive and brutal implications of that inflexibility were evident in the policies of most Stalinist regimes - principally, of course, of the Soviet Union in its heyday.

6 Popper concedes that Marx modifies his historicism by arguing that, while socialism is inevitable whatever anyone does, revolutionary action can hasten its coming and "shorten its birth-pangs". But Popper adds that this does not validate the overall historicism.

* *Surely Marx would say that what is inevitable is that the economic situation is such that sufficient people will be induced to effect the change predicted.* [Ed.]

7 Also, although Popper does not specifically say this, Marx's argument is vitiated by a form of the naturalistic fallacy: in this case, 'whatever is inevitable is right'.

8 Popper notes the enormous changes in Western society since Marx's day.

9 Descriptions of working conditions and pay in the sweatshop economies of many Third World countries parallel those of 19th century Europe, particularly England.

10 Why did not Popper revise the edition in the 1980s, the era of Reagan and Thatcher, whose economic doctrines were emphatically non-interventionist?

11 The West, not wanting industrial rivals, discourages large-scale manufacturing developments of an indigenous nature in the Third World by placing high import tariffs on Third World industrial products. It prefers the Third World to perform a 'service' role to Western industry, by supplying primary products at cheap prices for the West to convert into higher-priced manufactured goods. This policy overlaps with the MNCs' practice of cheaply manufacturing their own goods in Third World countries, to be sold at high prices in the West.

12 In Volume II, he adds that, while one of the first principles of rational politics should be that "we cannot create a heaven on earth", a second should be that "all politics consists in choosing the lesser evil" i.e. evil can never be entirely eradicated (pp. 333-4)

13 This point is especially important in the light of the growing power of the MNCs.

14 Here, reference to Sartre is inescapable. Sartre echoes much of what Popper says about freedom's burdens in his famous phrase that "man is condemned to be free".

□

“I DON’T AGREE WITH THAT” - A DOZEN CONVENTIONAL WISDOMS CHALLENGED

Giles Hart

Summary of a Lecture to the Ethical Society, 16 July 2002

1-The continual improvement of language

There is a conventional wisdom (cw) that language evolves to fulfil the needs of those who speak it, and thus new words and phrases better express the meanings intended than old words and phrases that fall out of use. This is true when there are new inventions which require new names, but in other cases new words or phrases may originate to fulfil the need to obscure meanings, or to denote group identity. Often new words or expressions carry the same meanings as old words or expressions, e.g. “gob smacked” and “flabbergasted”, “right on” and “hear hear”, etc.

2- “Don’t tell Jenny Aldridge”

The c.w. is that nobody should tell a husband or wife that their spouse is having an affair – even when, as in Radio 4’s Archers, the affair has led to a pregnancy and the cheating husband will give financial support. But everyone seems to feel that they have an obligation to help the cheating spouse keep the secret – the cheated spouse has no right to know.

Surely, apart from the question of whether somebody would prefer to know bad news, and be able to decide what they wish to do about it, there is the matter of somebody’s life being at stake - hasn’t somebody got the right to protect herself against possible venereal disease, or even worse, death by AIDS - and how can she if she does not know the facts?

3-No mechanism to explain

All sorts of possible phenomena (e.g. dowsing, homeopathic medicine, worries about radiation etc.) are dismissed because “There is no scientific mechanism to explain it”. In the past Galileo dismissed the theory that the moon controlled the tides as superstition, for this very reason (Newton had not discovered gravity at that time) - but Galileo didn’t dismiss the phenomenon of the tides! For years scientists dismissed the well-observed phenomenon of meteorites - as they had no mechanism to explain how stones could fall out of the sky.

Scientists should learn to say about any strange phenomenon “we haven’t found a mechanism to explain it yet”.

4-Football intelligence and chess intelligence

The c.w. is that chess players are very brainy, while football players don’t use their brains much while playing. A chess player has two parts to his game; 1) consider the best possible move; 2) execute that move. While he considers his move, the “playing field” is stationary – the pieces are not moving; delaying his decision will not change the situation he contemplates. Also there is no skill in lifting the piece and moving it to the position required.

However, a footballer, while considering the best move has a changing situation, e.g. his spatial position to other players, his position to the ball, the angle he needs to hit the ball at to reach the goal, or to pass to his side without interception. He has very little time to make a decision – or if he retains the ball he is making a series of decisions. And when he comes to 2) he needs skill to execute

the decision - unlike the chess player.

5- "Look Back in Anger"

The c.w. was that this play expressed the mood of the younger generation of the time (1956) and thus was rooted in its time. My view is nothing of that time explains the anger of the main character (Jimmy Porter) that this play is a character study of a man who torments himself and all those around him, not because the time is 1956, but because that is his character. As such, this excellent play is in a tradition of plays by Strindberg, O'Neil and Tennessee Williams where people are unpleasant to each other, in a manner entertaining to the audience. I see that some critics, after a recent revival, are coming round to my point of view.

6-The originality of "Pinteresque" dialogue

I read out an extract from "The Lady Vanishes" (a 1939 film, directed by Hitchcock, written by Frank Launder and Sydney Gilliat). Did Pinter see this film, or hear the radio series featuring the two characters that talked in this manner?

7-Films and the auteur theory

The c.w. is that the author of a film is the director, irrespective of the contributions of others. I think this is a theory that appeals to aspiring film directors, those who wish to keep their appreciation of film simple or cliquey and those who wish film to obtain the respectability of the other arts, where generally there is only one artist for a work. The root of the auteur problem is that with plays or music, the work is thought of as a separate entity from a particular performance/ production of it, so the question of the contribution of talents other than that of the writer or composer does not affect the question of authorship. However with film, the work under consideration is not the script, but the actual film version of it - so the other contributions (director, set designer, actor etc) are an intrinsic part of the work, rather than a part of a particular version of it.

8- Russian novels and humour

One does not associate either Dostoyevsky or Solzhenitsyn with humour. I discussed two very funny works - Dostoyevsky's *The Friend of the Family* and Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*. The latter is as grimly funny as *Catch 22* but achieves this without the exaggeration.

9-Orwell and Billy Bunter

George Orwell condemned the Billy Bunter stories by Frank Richards and called for a left-wing literature for children. I read out and discussed extracts from Richards' stories from around 1910, which clearly condemned racialism (both generally, and as practised in the U.S.A), antisemitism and the basis of capitalism (as practised in Chicago).

10-Actors and appearances

The c.w. is that it is unacceptable for a white actor to play a black role, even with black make-up, whereas it is quite acceptable for a black actor to play a white role - and no white make-up is required. That great Black actor of the mid-nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge, played all the great Shakespearian roles with white make-up (except Othello of course) - so what is the problem?

11-Sportswomen and equal pay

Women tennis players are regarded as fighters for women's rights as they campaign for equal prize money at Wimbledon etc. My view is that far from being sexually discriminated against, they are the beneficiaries of sexual discrimination - without sexual discrimination one would not have separate tournaments for women. When

women tennis players campaign to compete in the same tournaments as men, as working women do in the non-sporting world (and as the Polgar sisters do in the chess world), then their complaints of discrimination will be less hollow.

12-Surrealism and symbolism

The c.w. is that surrealism was/is a movement which expresses the unconscious, and is therefore a valuable movement, whereas symbolism was a weak, pretentious art movement. Yet surrealistic and symbolist paintings can look remarkably similar – both contain bizarre or impossible scenes. If one does not know what the symbols mean in a symbolist painting, it becomes, to the viewer, a surrealist painting- if one attributes symbols to the bizarre parts of a surrealist painting, it becomes a symbolist painting. Yet nearly every art appreciation of a surrealist painting does just that - it attributes symbols to it – and thus turns it into a despised symbolist painting! □

VIEWPOINT

Mohammad Ibrahim's published lecture notes (ER June 2002) do not include the most interesting points in his lecture. Expanding on "Of course there are laws", he gave as an example of a Muslim law that Muslims who stop being Muslims must be put to death. Asked if he personally approved of this law, he answered "Yes".

He told a story about a woman who spoke to the Prophet in person, asking to be stoned to death for her adultery. The Prophet made her wait until her baby was born, then until the baby was weaned, before graciously granting her request. As the first stone struck her, he said "Your sin is forgiven", the sin in point being sexual intercourse which did no harm but was arbitrarily prohibited.

Mr Ibrahim, himself a convert from Anglican Christianity, sought to represent Islam as tolerant and benevolent. But a religion which does not allow an adherent to change his mind, on pain of death, is not tolerant. And a religion which forbids a woman to decide what to do with her own body, on pain of death by stoning, is not benevolent. *

I do not think I suffer from Islamophobia. Phobia is morbid, irrational fear. After hearing an educated Muslim speak favourably of such nastiness, I think my fear of Islam is healthy and rational.

Donald Rooum - Stepney

* Note the current case in Nigeria [Ed.]

HIROSHIMA REMEMBERED AT TAVISTOCK SQUARE

150 people older people gathered on Tuesday 6 August 2002 to remember the dates of the first atomic bombs in 1945. Speakers included Michael Foot and Jeremy Corbyn MP. Rose Hacker, 96 year old CND and SPES member commented after the meeting that she felt sorry for the young as they are being trained to be consumers; that is why they are not as politically active as in her day.

The views expressed in this Journal are not necessarily those of the Society.

PROVOCATIVE THEATRE: MISERY, MADNESS AND MAYHEM ON THE LONDON STAGE

Pericles, Frozen and the Lieutenant of Inishmore
Suzette Henke

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In reviewing a contemporary production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, one is tempted to reiterate Samuel Johnson's execrations about women's preaching: one does not ask whether it is done well or ill, but marvels that it is done at all. Stage productions of *Pericles* are exceedingly rare and successful productions are rarer still. Hence the extraordinary quality of the Royal Shakespeare Company's recent staging of *Pericles* at the Roundhouse Theatre in north London. One cannot imagine a more powerful, compelling, riveting and thoroughly moving production of this little-known Shakespearean drama. Ray Fearon is superb in the role of Pericles, which he interprets energetically and with nuanced sensitivity, in the grand tradition of Olivier and Gielgud.

One of the reasons that the play is so rarely performed is that there are many disputes over its purported Shakespearean origins. Oxford Press editors have tried to cobble together a reliable text, even as scholars acknowledge that the play was surely drafted by Shakespeare in collaboration with another writer, most probably George Wilkins, author of a fictional version of *The Painful Adventures of Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608). It seems entirely moot to sort out various plagiarised components attributable to myth, popular oral history, the *Gesta Romanorum* and John Gower's well known *Confessio Amantis*. Gower himself turns up as the "choral" narrator of Shakespeare's drama and offers the audience titbits of plot summary, critical commentary, acerbic interpretative directives, a final recapitulation of dramatic denouement and a parting plea for "patience evermore attending." For any audience from the Renaissance to the 21st century, much patience and suspension of disbelief is certainly required. Add to this perplexed textual history the fact that the first printed versions of the piece were probably based on actors' faulty reconstructions of their numerous roles in the drama and the text itself warrants a dramatic history of its own.

Shakespeare's Postmodern Play

And yet, what strikes a contemporary audience as fascinating about this late Shakespearean work is its astounding narrative polyphony. As Bakhtin would remind us, the play is rife with elements of heteroglossia more recently associated with postmodern writing. For a generation teathed on the outrageous fictions of Robert Coover, Fay Weldon and Graham Swift, the vertiginous improbabilities of plot, geographical dissonance and surrealistic dream visions employed by the author(s) of *Pericles* hardly evince a spectatorial grimace. The play is an intriguing cornucopia of fantasy, adventure, history, romance, dramatic tension, release and eventual reconciliation. It might well be Shakespeare's most postmodern production, and as such, has waited four hundred years for a suitably appreciative audience.

In the Roundhouse post-play discussion of 11 July, one individual queried the cast about the incestuous plot at the outset of the drama. Why did Shakespeare draw

on a topic that was rarely discussed publicly before the 20th century? Why invoke such a taboo subject? The answer seems embedded in Shakespeare's deftly constructed mirror plot. If King Antiochus has violated his daughter through an incestuous liaison that lies at the heart of the riddle her (mostly decapitated) suitors have vied to unravel, then issues of patriarchal power, royal and paternal responsibility, father-daughter affiliation and erotic perversion lie at the heart of dramatic conflict and resolution. As Jennifer Freyd insists in her book *Betrayal Trauma*, it is in the very act of betraying parental/nurturant responsibilities that the incestuous perpetrator causes unspeakable harm to the abused victim. Hence the dilemma suffered by the mysteriously wronged progeny of Antiochus. Ironically, the drama suggests subtle complicity on the part of the abused daughter who is eventually incinerated, along with her father, in a chariot struck by Jupiter's vengeful lightning bolt. Prior to this *deus ex machina*, the murderous wrath of a perfidious Antiochus sets the dramatic machinery in motion and sends the youthful Pericles on his Odyssean journey of quest, trial, suffering and self-discovery.

Like a Renaissance version of the shipwrecked Odysseus, Pericles suffers shipwreck and is washed ashore in Pentapolis, where, like his Homeric predecessor, he wages combat while disguised as an impoverished beggar who fights not with a sword or shield but with a simple peasant staff. His valour wins out and wins the hand of the coveted Thaisa, whose own voluptuous longings are satisfied by the match. On still another sea journey, Thaisa gives birth to a daughter and apparently dies in childbirth. Her coffin, cast into the sea, washes ashore at Ephesus where the kindly physician Cerimon rekindles her vital spirit and brings her back to life--only to send her, as an ostensible widow, to a convent of nuns devoted to the worship of the goddess Diana. Hence Thaisa, like Hermione in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, is consigned to cold storage for the balance of the drama. Her role is convincingly rendered by the American actress Lauren Ward, who confessed in the post-play discussion that her tears of joy at the end of the play were, in fact, signs of genuine emotion.

Marina Retains Her Composure

Marina, the daughter whose parturition occurred at sea, is marvellously reprised by the young Scottish actress Kananu Kirimi, who plays the part with an ingenuous wonder that makes her extravagant virginal virtue credible even to a contemporary audience. Betrayed by her foster mother Dionyza, then captured by pirates, sold to a brothel and tormented by the irate madam of a bawdy house, Marina nonetheless retains her composure and saintly virginity, even as she converts the most lascivious of potential clients (including Lysimachus, Governor of Mytilene) to vows of celibacy and gentlemanly respect for her beleaguered womanhood. Against all odds, Marina manages to guard the jewel of her maidenhead until the end of the play, when she is happily betrothed to the once licentious Lysimachus.

Meanwhile, the spectre of incest is again invoked by further twists of this improbable plot. Pericles, believing that his daughter is dead, vows never again to wash his body or cut his hair. Hirsute and bedraggled, the melancholic traveller is washed ashore on the banks of Mytilene where the local townsfolk bring the blessed Marina to lift his spirits and rekindle a dwindling vital spark. The virtuous adolescent asks to be left alone with the stranger and begins to sing to this prostrate invalid. Here father and daughter encounter one another in a potentially erotic scenario. Will Marina offer her body to the traumatised stranger? Surely that possibility must have titillated a Renaissance audience, even as it tantalises the 21st-

century spectator. A babe from the local brothel sympathetically attends a bereft foreigner. Will incest recur, under the guise of exogamy? The audience waits breathlessly for a slow and painful anagnorisis. Marina confesses her name to the incredulous wanderer, then reveals the history of her birth at sea and finally the name of her unfortunate mother, Thaisa. Father and daughter re-unite in a flood of joy and happiness. The lost daughter, found at last, comforts her ailing father and resurrects him from morbid depression. Filial and paternal love triumph over incestuous congress and the final act unfolds as a positive mirror image of the play's inaugural abominations.

After a stunning scene in which the goddess Diana, played by an aerial artist, descends from the ceiling and instructs Pericles in a dream, father and daughter set out for Ephesus where they discover the resurrected Thaisa and the family is once again joined in domestic bliss. Marina is given in marriage to Lysimachus and the audience is reassured that both Tyre and Pentapolis will henceforth be endowed with just and noble rulers.

Shakespeare Confronts Mortality

Of course, what the play is about is not simply incest and abandonment, adventure and anguish, exile, suffering and eventual redemption. It is Shakespeare's mature effort to confront the spectre of existential anxiety. Having lost his young son Hamnet, who died at the age of eleven, Shakespeare might well have found symbolic compensation in the birth of his daughter Susanna's first child. The bard was conspicuously absent and embroiled in London stage productions during Susanna's formative years, as well as those of his younger daughter Judith. Both female children, emotionally abandoned by an ambitious father, were implicit beneficiaries of their parent's confessional dramatic rendering of journey, sacrifice and reconciliation. Might emotional abandonment be psychologically equated to tacit abuse? And what about Anne Hathaway Shakespeare? Was she not, like Thaisa, lost for more than a decade and eventually found in the country village of Stratford? The triumphal bard returns at last from exile to live out his life at New Place.

Shakespeare's final plays attempt to deal with the conundra of human mortality: the traumatic pain of bereavement at the death of a loved one whose subjectivity is so inexplicably, unacceptably annihilated; and the trauma of individual death, with the unimaginable extinction of personal consciousness. The body of Thaisa, washed up on the shore of Ephesus and revived by a magician/priest/healer, is the emblem of resurrection that replicates the death and resuscitation of the man-god Adonis/Attis/Osiris--cast in the Mediterranean each year at Byblos, then recuperated on the shore by loyal believers convinced of the god's resurrection. (See James Fraser's *Golden Bough* for further discussion of this ancient ritual).

Shakespeare appears to have been sceptical about the claims of Christianity and says very little about Anglo-Catholic doctrines concerning the immortality of the soul. His canon offers one long lamentation on the seven ages of man, the slow and creeping progress of the individual from infancy to old age and the spectre of the grave elicited in comic soliloquy by the skull of poor Yorick in *Hamlet*. Yet Shakespeare thumbs his nose at the grim reaper, even as he seems perpetually to grieve over the short space of temporal existence allotted to every human being. I suspect that he knew that his works would be immortal, even though his only hope of biological immortality lay in his adored grandchild. And this he celebrates, with wan hope and a tinge of melancholia, in *Pericles, the Prince of Tyre*.

Bryony Lavery's *Frozen*

If themes of trauma and recovery, cast in terms of suffering and redemption, constitute the focus of Shakespeare's later plays, a similar dynamic (perhaps motivated by 11 September anxieties) seems to dominate the contemporary London stage. Bryony Lavery's play *Frozen*, currently playing at the Cottesloe theatre, focuses on the sexual abuse and murder of a prepubescent girl by a serial killer and the long journey through post-traumatic stress disorder and murderous rage, to reconciliation and spiritual healing on the part of Nancy, the child's bereft parent. The play sets out to examine the subject positions of three intriguing characters: the traumatised Nancy; the perversely impassive serial killer Ralph, himself the victim of physical abuse imposed by a brutal father; and Agnetha, the Icelandic-American psychologist interviewing Ralph and lecturing on physiological changes found in the brains of serial murderers and measured through MRI scans.

In a National Theatre programme interview, Lavery claims to have "gleaned the material about the brain from text books and articles." Perhaps my own book, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (Palgrave 1998) was one of the texts she consulted. In *Frozen*, Lavery has the psychologist Agnetha explain that J. Douglas Bremner, a Yale researcher in cognitive science, found in the brains of chronic abuse victims a 12% reduction in hippocampus volume from long-term bombardment by cortisol, a toxic chemical evinced by the "flight or fight" response to danger. Bremner's name, unlike Freud's, is hardly a household word. Only one spectator in a hundred thousand might have recognised it - and I happened to be that one.

Did Lavery Distort Bremner's Results?

As some members of the Ethical Society might recall, I spoke about post-traumatic stress disorder in a November 1998 lecture at Conway Hall and mentioned Bremner's work. Earlier that year, I had heard the Yale psychologist discuss his research findings at a conference on Trauma and Cognitive Science at the University of Oregon. I subsequently cited his work in *Shattered Subjects*, where, in a chapter on literary representations of incest, I described Bremner's experimental discovery of "a 12 percent reduction in hippocampal volume in the case of abuse survivors, as well as memory deficits, hormonal brain damage and neurobiological disturbances almost identical to the effects of combat neurosis" (p. 184). Lavery, however, incorporates a subtle misprision into the pivotal premiss of her drama. What the playwright fails to report via her psychological spokesperson Agnetha is that Bremner's research subjects were not serial killers but females who experienced chronic sexual abuse in domestic situations throughout childhood and adolescence. These women suffered severe cognitive dissonance and emotional disturbance - but not one went on to become a serial killer in adult life.

In distinguishing between the "symptom and the sin," Lavery implies that the psychopathic Ralph, subjected to physical abuse and psychological torment by a sadistic father, is a sick man morally exonerated of responsibility for his crimes. Such an impression severely distorts the scientific evidence provided by Bremner's research and, paradoxically, vindicates the adult perpetrator of sexual abuse and murder, rather than exposing the psychological damage suffered by the victims' families. After all, the bourgeois housewife Nancy has experienced a traumatic loss and has had to cope with years of cortisol bombardment on her own beleaguered hippocampus. Her brain and psyche have been mightily assaulted, and despite moments of homicidal fantasy, she eventually works through her grief to the point

of tenuous acceptance and psychological recovery. I found her ostensible "forgiveness" of her daughter's killer somewhat contrived and Ralph's subsequent suicide melodramatic. My main objection, however, is to Lavery's shocking distortion of Bremner's scientific research. Very few audience members will be likely to question the play's pseudo-scientific conclusions and its implicit ethical exoneration of a disturbed serial murderer.

Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

Finally, I want to comment on still another contemporary play devoted to the hopelessly contorted reciprocal effects of violence--Martin McDonagh's sensational new drama, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. McDonagh has been hailed as the Irish successor to Brian Friel, and this RSC production of a black comedy about terrorism has elicited a good bit of attention in recent press reviews--all of which have been duly circumspect about revealing the skeletal and farcical plot. So let the reader be warned: anyone who plans to pay £20 to see a play filled with scabrous dialogue, crude humour, and plenty of tomato ketchup spread about the stage, should cease reading at this point, lest my review spoil the surprises wrought by this fairly predictable plot. Having twice taught courses on contemporary drama to students in London, I should confess that McDonagh's play struck me as one of the most irritating (as opposed to thought-provoking) productions that I have seen in the last decade.

The first act is dominated by two stage Irishmen--one a timorous fool, the other an alcoholic idiot. The dramatic action pivots on the mysterious decapitation of a black cat, Wee Thomas, who happens to be the "only friend in the world" to Padraic, a passionate but sentimental Irish terrorist who belongs to the INLA, but is so power-mad and narcissistic that he perpetually goes off on his own bat to punish local drugdealers by tearing off their toenails and slicing their nipples, as they helplessly hang upside down in a torture chamber of Padraic's own making. Grief-stricken by the death of Wee Thomas, Padraic threatens to kill his own father, who is rescued by the sudden appearance of Padraic's terrorist compatriots, now determined to dispense a bit of vigilante justice of their own. Padraic, in turn, is rescued by the timely appearance of the besotted Mairead, a shorthaired female marksman whose own political program includes the blinding of cows from 60 yards, and who subsequently turns her vicious airgun on the nefarious gunmen gunning for Padraic. Mairead blinds her prey and leaves them easy targets for the enraged Padraic.

A Mound of Bloody Corpses

Amidst a mound of bloody corpses (including that of the self-confessed catkiller tortured before being allowed to die), the two young terrorists pledge their troth and plan to form still another political splinter group together in the North. But as they prepare to march off into the sunset and plant bombs strategically in chip shops, the bride-to-be discovers that Padraic has, in a fit of rage, blown off the head of her own beloved feline companion, Sir Roger [Casement]. And what is a fair damsel to do in such a situation but wreak her own Medean justice by splattering the brains of her unwary lover over a nearby armchair (and ruining her beautiful yellow dress with bloodstains) even as the poor, besotted bloke fantasises about their future happiness and Ireland's freedom? A triumphant Mairead claims political priority in Inishmore, leaving her brother in the company of her dipsomaniac never-to-be father-in-law, and ordering both stunned survivors to chop up the corpses, file off their fingerprints, and remove the teeth of the hapless victims now littering a blood-drenched stage.

And just in case the audience has not yet had their fill of farce, paradox, and melodrama, a live black cat (the real wee Thomas, or dramatis persona thereof) creeps through a window, meows, and begs for a bowl of frosted flakes. The stage Irishmen react with predictable aggressive-frustration displacement and threaten to shoot the gallivanting tomcat. But they ultimately find themselves unable to execute the helpless animal and conclude, in their own dim-witted way, that there has been enough killing for one day (and one play). (Besides, how could they possibly convince this particular actor to play dead, without evincing complaints from the R.S.P.C.A.?) Could their change of heart and small act of mercy suggest a fragile promise of hope--even as the audience is appalled at the sight of four slain terrorists who died in vain, to avenge the murder of a wrongly identified cat?

James Joyce: No Need To Represent Cruelty

Quite frankly, the feline performer who played Wee Thomas was my favourite character in the play, and certainly the only likeable personality to appear onstage. By the second act, the farce proved so broad and senseless that I lost interest in the dramatic action and simply cowered in my seat, with half-closed eyes, peering occasionally over audience heads to catch a glimpse of the bloody spectacle.

Of course, McDonagh is dragging out all the old platitudes about terrorism: "Violence breeds violence"; "Vigilante justice, perpetrated by irascible individuals who consider themselves above the rule of law, eventually wreaks havoc for both perpetrators and targets"; "What goes around comes around".

Although the play sounds a minor note of spiritual transformation in the mercy espoused by the two Irishmen who survive the carnage, I myself found little redeeming value in the production. It was, at best, boring and tedious and; at worst, needlessly repulsive.

When James Joyce was criticised for his refusal to enliven his fiction with a more adventurous plot, he commented acerbically that the violence of birth and death made the human condition so existentially fraught that he saw no need to represent humanly generated cruelty. In a school essay on "Force," he insisted that the use of political violence perpetrates nothing but general misery, that force breeds force, and that pacifism is the only reasonable political stance for an ethical and intelligent person. Perhaps Martin McDonagh would be well served by emulating his fellow Irishman's pacifist stance. This reviewer, at least, was not particularly impressed by a play that pivots on a series of tasteless dead cat jokes and only goes downhill from there, even as it pillories the paradoxical image of a sentimental terrorist who has lost the ability to identify with the pain and subject-positions of either tortured victims or erstwhile compatriots, and whose empathic capabilities have been restricted to emotional identification with a dark furry friend.

And what, one might wonder, was the condition of the demented Padraic's cerebral hippocampus in McDonagh's play? Might all these maniacal terrorists claim to have been traumatised by childhood misery as British subalterns? Wherein lies ethical responsibility for the volatile eruptions of private fury and political anguish represented on stage? And has the contemporary world, in some respects, cynically outstripped the possibilities of spiritual transformation and psychological recovery so prominent in late Shakespearean drama?

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HUMAN NATURE AND ITS PERVERSION
Issues raised by one of Thomas Nagel's "Mortal Questions".
Chris Bratcher

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 21 July 2002

Two months ago I gave a brief overview of Thomas Nagel's writings and discussed his thoughts on the conduct of war (ER, May 2002). As we saw it is relatively easy to moralise on consequences; that a course of action will harm third parties, or infringe their rights, however complex and contestable in war these may be: because harm and infraction are inherently wrong. We are now to consider his much more controversial essay on the notion of Sexual Perversion. Nagel ultimately appeals here to what is 'natural'; a highly dangerous concept, that can become the last refuge of a scoundrel. It can easily be invoked to condemn any old missionary disapproved position, homosexuality or indeed any deviant behaviour.

Nagel's fourteen page 1969 article, the earliest, I think, he has had collected, is a rare eccentricity for a professional philosopher. We might treat it just as an end of term hoot: he clearly found the problem demanding his attention. I hasten to say that I visit the piece purely from philosophical prurience and I have no perverted axe to grind! I do however fancy sharing its serious wackiness, the odd irresistible pun, and gems such as its opening sentence: "There is something to be learned about sex from the fact that we possess a concept of sexual perversion"!

Nagel takes the view that, if there are such things as perversions, they will be unnatural sexual inclinations rather than just a label for peculiar practices which might be adopted for other reasons [such as contraception]. Perversion for him is a psychological [not biological, or social] concept; and is not as such an emotive expression of disapproval or distaste but supposedly something objective on which such attitudes may be grounded.

He says that the contrary view is that sexual desire is simply one of the appetites, like hunger for food and as such, simply has objects, none of which are in any sense "natural". We may fail to empathise with some desires and some, like sadism, may be objectionable on extraneous grounds; but qua sexual, there is nothing more to be said: *chacun a son goût*. Nagel's response is to say something more about food!

Food Fetishism

He makes the point that some grossly inappropriate food fancies [like cravings for coal, which I think is a not uncommon fancy in pregnancy] are not perversions. Some conceivable eating habits may be naturally thought of as perverted e.g. only eating if you were force fed [other than for reasons, say of protest]. In such a case, it is "the peculiarity of the desire, rather than the inappropriateness of its object [the food] to the biological function served by the desired", that makes it fetishistic, exhibitionist, masochistic, or whatever is the label for the particular perversion. Nagel, I think, is right in this instance, but wrong in what he then makes of it.

He first, all too sketchily, attempts to put flesh on the bones of a "relationship" that, he thinks, one has with food. Essentially, he says, the direct relationship I have with what I eat, which is the "natural expression" of hunger, has got "displaced or seriously restricted" in food fetishes. He then suggests that the same may happen

with sex: only in that case, the object “is usually a person rather than an omelette and the relation is considerably more complicated...allowing scope for correspondingly complicated perversions”!

Nagel claims to have diverted into food simply to show that “being an appetite is no bar to admitting of perversions”. The real agenda is to develop a non-sexual example of a perversion where the site of perversity is a kink in a relationship. If we swallow this, we are then more likely to agree with his conception [below] of proper human sexual engagement as itself a relationship. What he in fact will do, is play fast and loose with that notion. We trivially have a “relationship” with food, as a matter of logic [subject to object]. Otherwise, I doubt that I have one with grub [though gastronomes may!], or that if one does, it is inherently a “natural” expression of hunger. Comfort eating, or its more drastic form, bulimia, where talk of a food relationship is almost plausible, is precisely not about hunger.

Nagel becomes preoccupied with what he considers is displaced and rendered dysfunctional in perverted behaviour. This seems to me to beg the question that he half asked at the beginning: whether we have a natural, quasi-medical, category of perversions to explain. We should first consider why we call some behaviours perversions, and some not. All sorts of disorders – bulimia, as mentioned, for example - fall short of being a perversion. That we don’t think of them as such, may well point to what really governs the term. I think it more revealing to look at what behaviour that is commonly termed a perversion is held to reveal or express, rather than at what it may [on Nagel’s theory] fail to achieve that it somehow ought.

The wannabe “force fed” perverter of food plausibly regresses to a state of infantile sensual gratification, which we have come to consider proto-sexual. A Freudian might also root bulimia in a similar displacement but because the behaviour is neither wilful, nor obviously sexually satisfying, but is rather a sign of distress, there is no temptation to consider it “perverted”. I will come to the ‘wilful’ aspect in a moment. I air one more example of my own, that may have special resonance for humanists, of what Nagel would term a non-sexual perversion. Consider a Christian, who on his own terms is in a relationship with God, who practises extreme mariolatry and flagellation. The temptation to label either of these tendencies a “perversion”, rather than perhaps a heresy, depends, I suspect, on how plausibly they are seen as providing him with strange sexual satisfactions; it is not sufficient, or even necessary, that an actual relationship with God or Mary has been distorted.

“Perverting” The Course Of Justice

This is not an area into which Nagel strays; but I mention it, as part of my chipping away at his picture of perversion as a natural process gone awry. Why does the law term jury nobbling, perjury and the like, “perverting the course of justice”? It is a strangely emotive phrase for an area of discourse that tries to remove emotion; and a revealing use of language. If a rock falls in a stream, the latter is diverted. Acts of perversion and subversion are conceived as wilful. Subversion undermines; perversion, perhaps, frustrates by polluting. We are pretty near to sex here.

I conclude at this point that the non-judicial notion of perversion has two necessary conditions: self-evidently that some activity is a departure from a behavioural norm; and that the behaviour it expresses is sexual, and considered abnormal in that light. It is a highly charged, and socially conditioned, notion [of which more anon].

But to return to Nagel's essay. He says that "the object of sexual attraction is a particular individual, who transcends the properties that make him/her attractive... We take a sexual attitude towards a person through the features we find attractive, but these features are not the objects of that attitude. .. This is very different from the case of an omelette [!] .. where any omelette with the crucial characteristics would do as well". "The natural development of sexual attraction (and its dislocation in perversion) can only be understood if its object is a particular person, rather than a person of a certain kind – like an omelette." As one who is not passionate about omelettes, perhaps I am not qualified to comment; but leaving aside eggs, I suspect he is describing the onset of a more enveloping human attachment than raw fancy.

Requisite Reflexive Mutual Recognition

Talk of raw [not to say cooked] items can bring one perilously close to unintelligible French philosophy; and it is no surprise that Nagel confesses that he finds Sartre the best writer on his topic. For Sartre, the hopelessness of human sexual relations lies in the attempt to both possess and be possessed by the other, but not as an object. Nagel discards the metaphysics, but borrows the notion of sex as a physical relationship, in a lengthy and moving account of immersion in mutual bodily arousal, summarised as "requisite reflexive mutual recognition".

This may be true of the ideal course of requited fancy. But it seems to me that if the notion of sexual perversion is to be based on a departure from appropriate behaviour when attracted, then requitedness is irrelevant. Nagel is in danger of turning, say, self-masturbation, or simply fancying some erotic image, into a perversion because at best the counter-party is only in the mind. The final, far too brief, step in his argument is : "If humans will tend to develop some version of reciprocal interpersonal sexual awareness unless prevented, then cases of blockage can be called unnatural or perverted." He clearly does so call them. Should we then take his semantic prescription?

He does recognise the difficulty in making discriminations solely based on "requisite reflexive mutual recognition", but asks us to see if "cases of blockage" in fact equate to what we would call perversions. He suggests that "some familiar deviations" [another undefined term]: paedophilia, fixations on animals, voyeurism and exhibitionism, are clearly perversions because they are not about reciprocity. He now really begins to dig his grave, when he ought to stand back and stop shovelling.

He says that "The really difficult cases are sadism, masochism and homosexuality. The first two are widely regarded as perversions and the last is controversial. [really?] In all three cases the issue depends partly on causal factors: do these dispositions result only when normal development has been prevented?" He does at least realise there is some difficulty in the enterprise, as the next sentence reads: "Even the form in which this question has been posed is circular, because of the word 'normal'. We appear to need an independent criterion for a distorting influence and we do not have one." Quite ! Then why bash on with it? Why not abandon the article as misconceived ?

However, he presses on, to make a rather forced case that sadism and masochism primarily treat the other party as an object. He seems painfully ignorant of those who practise "perversions" on each other out of mutual recognition of each other's unusual sexuality. You will be glad that I draw a veil over his uneasy discussion of homosexuality, which in unconscious condescending fashion concludes: "For these

reasons, it seems to be doubtful that homosexuality must be a perversion, though, like heterosexuality, it has perverted forms.”

His analysis leads him to the comment that “a creature incapable of developing the levels of interpersonal sexual awareness I have described could not be deviant .. (Though even a chicken might be called perverted in an extended sense if it had been conditioned to develop a fetishistic attachment to a telephone).” Words almost fail me. Bracing myself to adopt his vision, I suggest any such ‘phone-freak chickens [unlike human adolescents] can rest safe from being labelled perverts, because we are dispassionate about them: we are not [if we are not perverts] engrossed by their practises, natural or otherwise. His comment does however give me the opportunity to say something about the term ‘deviant’. It is a term of social psychology. To the extent that one can talk of avian society when birds of a feather flock together, deviant behaviour is possible; and may well, for all I know, be the subject of PhDs.

Homepun Speculative Psychology

What, at bottom, is wrong with the essay is that it is a piece of homespun speculative psychology – and not philosophy. Nagel is positing a general causal theory for a bunch of behaviours, and then is making a plea to call any behaviour with that cause [and presumably no other] a perversion. But he consciously makes no logical case for doing so, and simply offers his account as a ‘persuasive definition’; i.e., as fitting the behaviours referred to in our actual use of the term.

The small band of you who have stayed with these talks will recall G E Moore’s general objection to defining ‘good’ in terms of the common properties of the objects to which it is applied; which he termed the ‘naturalistic fallacy’. Nagel has committed himself to a naturalistic account of “perversion”, if not to the fallacy itself. To repeat, his psychological account is of damming and diversion, not perversion. The added meaning conveyed by the latter is the negative view we take of the behaviour. We, as well as the Courts, label a piece of twisted misrepresentation a “perversion” of the truth. Because we so universally value the truth, acts that undermine it rate a term of opprobrium: the common factor in assertions of “perversion”.

Nagel genuflects towards the charge of committing the naturalistic fallacy in his closing remarks. He says “the concept of perversion can hardly fail to be evaluative in some sense, for it appears to involve the notion of an ideal, which the perversions in some way fail to achieve.” However, he seems promptly to draw back from this, in some throw-away concluding comments that may provoke you – if nothing else does – to further discussion: his evaluation of perversion is not necessarily moral evaluation; unperverted sex is not necessarily preferable to the perverted kind; bad sex is generally better than none at all!

What of the wider picture? Nagel’s account of a “pervert” is of an incomplete, damaged or dysfunctional person. Those said to be damaged are often vehemently opposed to both that label and to moral evaluation. At root is Nagel’s *bête noire*, the clash between objective and subjective viewpoints. This is a big issue with recalcitrant paedophiles [where of course we have overriding moral concern at the damage they cause]. Is it enough to say, “They would say that, wouldn’t they?”; or do the so-called damaged have, in some cases a valid philosophical point, that of respecting differences in behaviour, within a continuum of human nature ?

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1815h

BOOK LAUNCH: *Freethoughts* by Barbara Smoker.

A selection of some 80 of her Freethinker articles 1966-2002.

Also the launch of two more Freethought Classics, edited by

Nicolas Walter. *Refreshments*

OCTOBER 2002

Sunday 6

1100h

ON BLOOMSBURY

Malcolm Holmes, Camden Council Archivist.

1500h

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Is any military action against Iraq justified? No, argues **Tom Rubens**.

ETHICAL SOCIETY EVENING COURSE
FROM DISASTER TO DEMOCRACY

Politics and Ethics in Modern Germany

Tutor: **Dr. Ian King**

6 Tuesdays, starting 15 October. 1830-2030h

£2 per session including refreshments.

SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

Reg. Charity No. 251396

Founded in 1793, the Society is a progressive movement whose aims are:
the study and dissemination of ethical principles based on humanism,
the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life, and
the advancement of research and education in relevant fields.

We invite to membership those who reject supernatural creeds and are in sympathy with our aims. At Conway Hall the programme includes Sunday lectures, discussions, evening courses and the renowned South Place Sunday Concerts of chamber music. The Society maintains a Humanist Reference Library. The Society's journal, *Ethical Record*, is issued ten times a year. Funerals and Memorial meetings may be arranged.

The annual subscription is £18 (£12 if a full-time student, unwaged or over 65).