

# Ethical Record

The Proceedings of the South Place Ethical Society

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## CAMP ASHRAF'S IRANIAN EXILES THREATENED



*Iraqi Troops Occupying Camp Ashraf, Iraq*

Since 1986, a group of about 3000 Iranians, ideologically opposed to their country's autocracies, first of the Shah and then of the Ayatollas, has been camped in an officially recognised enclave in a desert region of Iraq. They now fear that Iraqi armoured troops, under pressure from Iran, will repeat their action of 8 April 2011, when they began killing and injuring the besieged civilians there, who lack food, fuel and medical supplies.

Only if the USA agrees to let the UN take charge of the camp can a future massacre of these believers in freedom and democracy be prevented. See [www.iranliberty.org.uk](http://www.iranliberty.org.uk) for further information.

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## SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

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### Obituary

Professor Richard Scorer's obituary is on page 10.

### DATE CHANGE FOR CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE

This has been rescheduled for the day before that announced previously. It will now be on Wednesday 26 October 2011 at 7.00pm

### NOTICE OF THE AGM OF THE SOUTH PLACE ETHICAL SOCIETY

This will take place at 2.00pm on Sunday, 13 November 2011, with registration from 1.30pm. Nominations for the General Committee (the Charity Trustees) will be needed. Members will receive further details.

### THE HUMANIST REFERENCE LIBRARY

The Humanist Reference Library is open for members and researchers on Mondays to Fridays from 0930 - 1730. Please let the Librarian know of your intention to visit. The Library has an extensive collection of new and historic freethought material.

Members are now able to borrow books from the Library. Readers will be asked to complete a Reader Registration Form, and must provide photographic ID, proof of address and proof of membership. They will be issued with a Reader's card, which will enable them to borrow three books at a time. The loan period is one month. Journals, archive material, artworks and other non-book material cannot be borrowed. Full details of the lending service are available from the Librarian.

**Cathy Broad, Librarian**

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

## EMPEROR AND GALILEAN

Theatre review by **Tom Rubens** of Henrik Ibsen's play currently in performance at the National Theatre, London

Ibsen has always been an important writer for secular humanists. His work is continually characterised by rebellion against ossified social convention and orthodoxy, evasiveness, illusion, and refusal to accept hard and challenging truths: all factors which, in one way or another, humanists have had to contend with in their campaign against religious authority, and much else in the social and cultural spheres.

Specifically on religion, Ibsen was a radical for his time – the 19th century—in that he questioned the ethical validity of Christianity. This questioning, plus a consideration of moral and cultural alternatives to Christianity, denotes the closeness of his thinking to that of fellow 19th century thinker, Nietzsche. This closeness is the most extensively evident in *Emperor and Galilean*, written in 1873. It is highly significant that Ibsen always regarded this play as his greatest achievement.

It has been, however, a little performed work. This fact, plus its intellectual content, makes its staging at the National Theatre an event of truly historic dimensions. The National is giving the public an opportunity to see a drama which has hitherto been grossly neglected in a theatrical sense; but which is, at the same time, the work held in highest esteem by its author—the man who actually ranks as the second most performed playwright in the Western world. (The most performed is of course Shakespeare.)

The drama, set in the 3rd century of the CE in the Eastern Roman Empire, focuses on Julian, a young man of high social status who feels within himself a tension between allegiance to the dominant religion, Christianity, and an attraction to classical / pagan culture, with its qualities of virility, dynamism, and intellectual adventure. He later becomes emperor, rejects Christianity, and embarks upon a programme of social reform which demonstrates a moral strength completely independent of Christianity. However, this programme degenerates into self-idolatry and unjustified violence, including violence against Christians, and eventual defeat in war. Finally, Julian is assassinated by a Christian who was once among his closest friends.

As this description of the action suggests, the play is neither completely anti-Christian nor completely pro-pagan. Rather, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of both positions, in the process of charting Julian's spiritual search for an authentic way of life. The strengths of paganism—manliness, energy, freedom of intellect—are captured in the word 'Emperor' while those of Christianity—gentleness, tenderness and a certain kind of moral bravery and steadfastness—are summed up in the word 'Galilean'. The two different perspectives are set side by side and each viewed from a variety of angles.

### **A Daring Act**

This objective exercise in comparison, even without any complete rejection of Christian values, was, for the 19th century, a daring act. What Ibsen was trying

to do was what so many of his contemporaries did not dare to attempt: to achieve a creative moral synthesis between pagan and Christian values. This was what Nietzsche, at certain points in his work, also attempted. For example, in *The Will to Power*, he envisaged a kind of human being who would be “a Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ,” and who would therefore embody the desired synthesis.

Further, it is arguable that this synthesis, or one very much like it, is an ideal relevant to the modern world – or at least to the modern Western world, with its combined cultural heritage from Judeo-Christian traditions and those of classical Greece and Rome.

*Emperor and Galilean* is, then, a play of immense intellectual sweep. No less massive are its visual and geographical dimensions. The action ranges over events in the Empire’s capital, Constantinople, to others in Athens, and others still in additional locations, including the deserts of the Middle East, where Julian’s army fights against the Persians. The scope of action strongly resembles that in two of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. Ibsen may have had these in mind when he was writing his play.

As regards the technical aspects of the production, much is done on the enormous stage of the Olivier theatre to create a sense of vastness: crowds enter and exit from a large, dazzlingly-lit ante-chamber at the back of the stage; video-images of natural phenomena – stars, clouds, flocks of birds – move across wide screens fixed high above the stage-rear; lighting effects of all different kinds are constantly in play; and a spectrum of various stage sets rise up from a huge aperture in the stage floor, whenever the revolving central section of the stage turns in a direction which opens up the aperture. All these techniques create a tremendous, and almost cinematic, sense of mobility and fluidity of action.

The acting is uniformly fine. Each actor projects an intensity appropriate to the epic proportions of the play. A wide range of expressive power is evident in both physical gesture and vocal intonation. It is to be hoped that this production will now, in Britain at least, mean that *Emperor and Galilean* will cease to be a rarely staged play.

#### 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 and freethought  
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 Conway Hall Sunday Concerts of chamber music. The Society maintains a Humanist Reference Library. The Society’s journal, *Ethical Record*, is issued monthly. Memorial meetings may be arranged.

The current annual subscription is £20 (£15 if a full-time student, unwaged or over 65), to be increased to £35 (£25) from 1 January 2012.

# THE BRITISH ENLIGHTENMENT DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Jim Herrick

*Lecture to the Ethical Society, 26 June 2011*

I start with two quotations. The first is from Isaac Watts, a pious hymn writer: he wrote “Reason is the glory of human nature.” This points to the omnipresence of reason as a key to the human process and also an essential element of religion.

Another brief quotation comes from Dr Johnson’s renowned *Dictionary* of 1755. The definition of Freethinker was “A libertine; a contemner of religion.” This freethought, more demotic, down-to-earth sceptical approach to religion was there, if not obvious on the surface. I would add just one other definition from that outstanding dictionary: “to frenchify – to make a coxcomb”. It was unfair, as Johnson often was, but indicative of an aspect of the sometimes unhappy franco-anglo relationship.

Until recently, in contrast to the glory and drama of the French enlightenment, people might ask when considering the British enlightenment – what enlightenment? Until a few enlightened historians recently, it was not thought that the British enlightenment shone very far. Hobsbawm for instance regarded the enlightenment as “a conspiracy of white men in wigs providing the intellectual foundation for imperialism.” I hope we can move beyond that perspective.

I shall make some references to the French enlightenment for there were cross currents and influences across the channel during that period. But one obvious difference is that the French ended up with a revolution, while the British ended up at war with the revolutionary army.

## **Earlier Repression Remembered**

The British eighteenth century enlightenment goes back to the influence of the seventeenth century. There was memory of war and division and religious intolerance. There was the scientific development, which continued perhaps without quite the same brilliance. In the seventeenth century there was the need to contest royal or puritanical repression. The burning of witches and attack on heretics was not a lost memory. In the eighteenth century the internal peace — and for some people the increasing prosperity — brought a changed atmosphere. In science the influence of the Royal Society was persistent. The foremost scientist, who lived well into the eighteenth century, was Newton. He was so well known that the poet Pope could write:

**God said Let Newton be! and all was Light.**

Light is such a key image of this period. Even literally the lighting improved in cities, enormously changing the urban culture.

The discovery of gravity as a force which operated throughout the universe brought not only the possibility of many further scientific developments, but also a universalism which was a characteristic hope of the enlightenment. Newton wrote in his *Opticks* of 1704: “Whence is it that nature does nothing in vain, and whence arises all the order and beauty which we see in the world? ...

there is a Being, incorporeal, living, intelligent, omnipresent...”. This suggested that nature’s laws were those of God and Newton’s approach was crucial to the discussion of natural religion.

### **John Locke And Deism**

The first important enlightenment philosopher was John Locke. He was a physician and Secretary to the politician Lord Shaftesbury, who like him was a deist. At a time of plots against the government in which he was implicated, he fled to Utrecht. In the latter part of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century, the United Provinces were a safe and stimulating region to spend time. On his return, where he worked in politics, he became a leading champion of toleration. He was accused, probably accurately, of being a Unitarian – a sect which was never tolerated throughout the eighteenth century. The South Place Chapel became a Unitarian church during the greater part of the nineteenth century.

He wrote his first *Letter concerning Toleration* in 1689 – the same year as the Act of Toleration. This toleration did not include Catholics or atheists – there was limited acceptance for many Non-conformists. Non-conformists could not enter universities because they could not follow the Anglican beliefs. This led to the creation of Dissenting Academies which in fact were intellectually superior to the universities. Tolerance was an essential ingredient of the British eighteenth century enlightenment.

Locke’s work *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) had a crucial influence: it was just right for the deists – one of the key belief systems of the religious in the eighteenth century. It was held that a God might have created the universe in a spirit of benevolence but did not continue to take a part in the everyday life of the people in earth. This suited the period in which the Church of England was very lacking in religious enthusiasm.

Locke believed the mind was from its beginnings a *tabula rasa* and acquired knowledge from experience and reflection. It suited the deists who believed knowledge came from a much more empirical source than a divine input. Hume, the greatest eighteenth century philosopher, was influenced by these ideas.

The three main characteristics of eighteenth century religious thought were deism, clerical latitudinarianism, and the more emotional devotion to be found in Wesley’s Methodism. At first ‘latitudinarianism’ was applied to those clergy who downgraded the church’s dogma and then became more a description of the laxity and indifference of many clergy. Some were well off and lived a life of leisure, with communion to take only a few times a year. Drinking, hunting and politics became occupations rather than theological study. One Archbishop, Tillotson, said of God: “His commandments are not grievous.” This sounds like a very lax God.

### **John Toland, Matthew Tindal & Anthony Collins**

One of the leading deists, who knew Locke, was John Toland, an Irishman, whose book *Christianity Not Mystrious* caused an outrage and Toland was

harangued from the pulpit. I think it is a wonderful title – Christianity without mystery is rather like the air without oxygen. He continued as a writer from the deist angle, travelling to wherever was safe and printing whatever was possible. He posited the idea of exoteric and esoteric thought: there was outer and inner thought and many deistic and even more freethinking people kept out of trouble by keeping their more contentious thoughts covert.

Other deists of importance were Matthew Tindal and Anthony Collins. Tindal wrote on the Bible—*Christianity as Old as the creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730). Tindal pointed out that some of the Bible tales seemed silly. The Bible began to be studied with historical and psychological tools for understanding. Later this dismantling of the sacred work became much more vigorous. Paine's *Age of Reason* at the end of the century was a thorough demolition job on the Bible.

Two instances of what I would call demotic freethought are interesting as an indication that tolerance did not mean tolerance of everything. They indicate that questioning religion could come at less sophisticated levels than found in the deists. In 1697 in Edinburgh an 18-year-old lad was hanged for professing deism, calling the Old Testament 'Ezra's Fables' and denying the divinity of Christ. Penitence did not save his life. In 1733, Peter Annet, a schoolmaster who was perhaps the first freethought lecturer issued nine numbers of *The Free Inquirer*; he attacked the Bible and superstition. He was sentenced for blasphemy and given three spells in the pillory and a year's hard labour. On release he started a school. There may have been much such questioning which has not been recorded.

### **A Century Of Change**

I want to consider some of the characteristics of British eighteenth century society which provided the right atmosphere for enlightenment. It was a century of change: there was the overthrow of monarchical absolutism, population growth, urbanisation, commercialisation bringing wealth to some, industrialisation bringing improvements but also great hardship. Although it was very far from an alcohol free period, the central place of ideas was the Coffee house. Think of the difference between the Coffee houses and the French salons – and you will get an illuminating sense of the difference.

If there is one thing above all which made this period one of lively thought it was freedom and tolerance. It was remarked upon by Montesquieu, and Voltaire. Voltaire and Diderot were both imprisoned for their writing and publishing. Freedom meant a flourishing and growing printing trade, it meant that there was greater freedom for women – to what would now seem a very modest respect, science developed less by genius and more by co-operative endeavours, the arts became intensely human, sexual freedom was visible and did not entirely shock, democracy did not advance in the way Parliament was run, but in the way society moved more inclusively and with more participation by a wide number of people.

Printing grew by leaps and bounds. In the 1710s 21,000 books were printed and in the 1790s 56,000. There was also prolific production of pamphlets

and magazines. There arose that creature a man of letters. Daniel Defoe's *Review* 1704 – 13 popularised the periodicals such as Steele's *Tatler* from 1709, the *Spectator* from 1711 with a tag from Horace *ex fumo dare lucem* (to turn the darkness light). Then there was Ambrose Philips' bi-weekly *Freethinker* 1718-21 with another Latin tag *sapere aude*, dare to know. There was even the *Female Spectator* edited by the dramatist and novelist Eliza Haywood with a group of women running it.

Newspapers also blossomed and the provincial newspaper became important. That celebrated melancholic Christian, Samuel Johnson, wrote "knowledge is diffused among our people by the news-papers". Dissemination of knowledge was an essential part of the enlightenment. The growth of encyclopaedias was notable. In particular the first edition of Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* came out in 1728. Diderot was influenced by this encyclopaedia although his massive work with its outstanding irony was a much mightier work. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* came out in 4 editions between 1771 and 1815. Learned societies began to publish their transactions.

### **Aphra Behn, Eliza Heywood & Mary Wollstonecraft**

The place of women in society was changing – Coffee houses and open spaces became more inclusive. Aphra Behn, the freethinking playwright and novelist of the late seventeenth century is well known, but others such as the playwright Eliza Haywood were not. Female and mixed debating societies proliferated: one debate was on "Does the Clause of Obedience in the Marriage Ceremony bind a Wife to obey her Husband at all times?" Apart from some individuals it cannot however be said that there was much emancipation. Of course there was the great writer and campaigner Mary Wollstonecraft towards the end of the century.

The eighteenth century may not have been one of the great periods of science – there was no one to parallel Newton. An interest in science among the common man and woman is seen by the fact that many households possessed telescopes and microscopes. The meeting of the group of scientists and innovators known as the Lunar Men (because they met in full moon to facilitate the carriage drive home) was typical of the democratic nature of science. It involved empirical examination of the evidence and democratic discussion of evidence and ideas.

One of the foremost of its members was Erasmus Darwin – a doctor of great benevolence, enthusiasm and originality and grandfather of Charles Darwin. He was particularly interested in biology and botany. He often wrote in poetry – and it is notable that the literary and the scientific, the religious and the irreligious were all mixed up in the social groups of the eighteenth century. Darwin was interested in the sex life of plants and he also thought the pleasure of sexual coupling was one of the great glories of being human.

Is democracy an important aspect of the eighteenth century enlightenment? – we should not say so today. Parliament was corrupt and there was no real improvement in parliamentary democracy or demand for human rights. However, although one cannot really talk of greater equality; it was, as in France, a society much divided.

## David Hume

David Hume is one of the greatest philosophers of all time and he wrote with great elegance and lucidity. He was born in Scotland – and indeed was part of the Scottish enlightenment. It is worth noting that when Hume sought academic posts, there was sufficient Presbyterian bigotry to give him much difficulty. Hume was a man of great civility known in France as ‘le bon David’. It seemed that he solved the problem of whether an infidel could live a moral life by his own behaviour.

His philosophy followed on from Locke in proposing that we gained knowledge from sensations. Like Toland there was the overt and covert side to his writings. His first publication was *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1749), which was a complete flop, causing him a mental breakdown. “Never,” he wrote, “literary attempt was more unfortunate... It fell dead-born from the press.” Ten years later he produced *Enquiry Concerning Understanding* which was much more successful. It contains his famous essay *On Miracles* – which much concerned the deists who wondered why they appeared to have ceased. He developed the following maxim: “That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish.”

Some of his writings discussed the arguments put forward by the deists earlier in the century. His book on *Natural History of Religion* (1757) was thought to come close to atheism. Bishop Warburton said that it attempted to “establish *naturalism*, a species of atheism, instead of religion.” He never openly admitted to atheism. When he visited a salon in France he was surprised to meet open atheists.

His last work, published posthumously, was *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. One of the characters is Philo, a sceptic – thought to hold the views of Hume. He is particularly concerned with the deist argument and he is determined to question it. Philo asks: “does not a plant or an animal, which springs from vegetation or generation, bear a stronger resemblance to the world, than does any artificial machine, which arises from reason and design.”

## Edward Gibbon

Gibbon knew Hume. He, like Hume, was far from being a radical, but his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was radical in its approach to the rise of Christianity. This book was so well written and researched that it is even today taken as a model for the writing of history. What it did in particular was to secularise the writing of history. History had been thought to be a progress led by God’s hand. Gibbon indicates that even the rise of Christianity was not the work of God – he does not quite say this but it is quite evident that that is what he thinks.

In his youth he had dabbled in both Catholicism and Protestantism – but it is evident that he came out a rationalist. He acknowledged that God had a hand in the growth of Christianity, but looked at secondary reasons for its actual development. He thought the causes were (i) the zeal of the Jews (ii) the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, (iii) the miraculous powers of the primitive

church, (iv) the virtues of the Christians (v) and the fact that Christians played a part in the government of their church. He used footnotes with the same irony that Diderot did in the *Encyclopedie*. This part of the opus outraged readers – Macaulay said that Gibbon wrote as though Christianity had done him some personal harm.

Gibbon did not believe in progress (he lived to see the French revolution). He wrote in his *Autobiography*: “The present is a fleeting moment, the past is no more, and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful”. I don’t think enlightenment automatically expects progress. Not everything was benign; there were darker sides to the period.

Hume faced the darkness of a long illness as he approached death. But he remained lucid and good-tempered. Boswell visited him during his final months. He was puzzled by the contradiction of the kind-hearted infidel. He asked Hume whether he had changed his views as he approached death. In replying Hume was more open than he had been during his life. “He said he never had entertained any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke... I asked him if he was not religious when he was young. He said he was ... He then said flatly that the Morality of every Religion was bad, and, I really thought was not jocular when he said that when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal, though he had known some instances of very good men being religious.”

Here we have a man of the enlightenment exhibiting its best qualities as his life waned.

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### **OBITUARY – PROFESSOR RICHARD S. SCORER (1920 – 2011)**

Professor Richard Scorer died aged 91 on 21st May 2011 at Pelham House Care Home. He lectured in Applied Mathematics at Imperial College, London, where over fifty years ago I had attended his lectures on mathematics. Richard was proud to be on the Panel (since discontinued) of Appointed Lecturers of the South Place Ethical Society for many years, giving many lectures to it during the 1980s and 90s. Some of the titles of his lectures, showing his range of interests, were:

Population limitation, past, present and future  
Can nature be moral?  
The ethics of aid  
Humanity’s adventure into nuclear power  
Chaos theory – is it any use?  
The price of evolution  
Loyalty – is it nature or nurture?  
Are we in for more weather catastrophes?  
Darwin’s conscience.

Professor Scorer was a keen cyclist, turning up for his lectures wearing his plus-fours. His wife, who worked in the police service, also gave several lectures on crime and punishment to the Society. **NB.**

# A CHILD OF TWO ATHEISTS – VIRGINIA WOOLF’S HUMANISM

Sybil Oldfield

Research Reader in English, University of Sussex  
Lecture to the Ethical Society, 22 May 2011 \*

## Virginia’s Father, Leslie

No-one reading Leslie Stephen’s ‘Apology for Plain-speaking’ in *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*, [1873] or his *Agnostic’s Apology* [1876] or his essay *Dreams and Realities* [1878], could be in any doubt whatsoever that Stephen was, in Noel Annan’s words, a ‘Godless Victorian,...[regarding] his assault upon God and the theologians to be his most important contribution to the intellectual life of his time’.

He had not, of course, started out like that. Born into the high-minded Evangelicalism of the Clapham Sect, he had been ordained as an Anglican clergyman at the age of 33 in 1855, subscribing to the 39 Articles, in order to tutor students at Cambridge. At 37 he had taken Priest’s Orders enabling him to celebrate Holy Communion. But just three years later, in 1862, he declared himself unable any longer to conduct Chapel Services on account of his intellectual doubts and he resigned from Cambridge. By the early 1870s Stephen he had become a fierce *anti*-Christian polemicist. It was an extraordinary trajectory then and it would still raise eyebrows today, should an Anglican cleric change not just into an honest doubter but actually become the leader of the pack attacking Anglicanism, Christianity – and indeed religion in general. Leslie Stephen asserted the necessity of destroying all his culture’s false Christian beliefs that mistook myth for history. He declined, he said, in his *Apology for Plainspeaking* ‘to apologize for being in the right’. He was, quite unequivocally, an atheist and unashamed. (In 1897, at his step-daughter Stella Duckworth’s wedding, he would even refuse to kneel to pray).

## Virginia’s Mother, Julia

Equally unbelieving was Virginia Woolf’s mother. After the sudden death of her young husband in 1870, Julia Duckworth had, in Annan’s words, ‘flung aside religion and become a passionate disbeliever – it was through reading articles of Leslie’s that her interest in him was first aroused although she liked the articles better at first than the man.’

She herself would come to write a forthright, unpublished, unapologetic essay on *Agnostic Women* championing the humanist’s altruistic work ethic in *this* world as opposed to Christian ethics driven by a belief in Heaven and Hell. It is strange but true that had not Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth found a bond in atheism, there would have been no Virginia Woolf.

The aspect of the Stephen parents’ atheism upon which I now wish to concentrate in relation to their daughter is their rejection of the consolation of immortality. The philosopher Feuerbach said in his *The Essence of Christianity*, translated into English by George Eliot in 1854: ‘[Personal] immortality is a characteristic doctrine of Christianity... If there is not another and a better life, God is not just and good... if there is no immortality, there is no God; ... As man

conceives his heaven, so he conceives his God.’ In Victorian Britain, afflicted as it was by the scourge of tuberculosis, by terrible maternal and child death-rates and by the premature deaths of young men in industrial accidents (or in Africa and the Far East serving the British Empire), that conception of heaven was not theocentric, but anthropocentric – focussed on the human. As McDannell and Lang wrote in their recent study, *Heaven: A History*, the Victorians could not ‘conceive of blessedness without being reunited with friends, spouse, children, or relatives’. But Leslie Stephen would have none of it.

Imagine young Virginia Stephen reading the following words in his *Apology for Plain-speaking*: Our ‘clinging to another life ... is simply an expression of the reluctance of the human being to use the awful word ‘never’.’ Stephen continues:

**As the years take from us, one by one, all that we have loved, we try to avert our gaze; we are fain to believe that in some phantom world all will be given back to us, and that our toys have only been laid by in the nursery upstairs. ... [But ...the] whole lesson of our lives is summed up in teaching us to say never without needless flinching....Science tells us -... that what is gone is gone,... the figments of theology are a consecration of our delusive dreams.**

Or think of the passage in his essay *An Agnostic’s Apology* published when Virginia was eleven:

**... There is a deep sadness in the world. Turn and twist the thought as you may, there is no escape.... When some random blow out of the dark crushes the pillars round which our life has been entwined as recklessly as a boy sweeps away a cobweb, when at a single step we plunge through the flimsy crust of happiness into the deep gulfs beneath, we are tempted to turn to Pessimism.**

His daughter will also come to know and write about that ‘flimsy crust of happiness’ – and be tempted by hopelessness. Finally, there is the passage from Stephen’s essay, *Dreams and Realities* of 1878:

**Standing by an open grave, ... we all, I think – I can only speak for myself with certainty – must feel that the Psalmist [who tells us man’s life is but grass...] takes his sorrow like a man and as we... should wish to take our own sorrows; while the Apostle [Paul, who promises resurrection in *Corinthians*] is desperately trying to shirk the inevitable. ... [The] so-called belief in a future life ... has always been in reality a dream, and not strictly speaking a belief at all... [The] fact that death ends life is but slowly forced upon the intellect by experience.... The world of dreams, in fact, ... is moulded by our desires... We cannot and we will not believe in the loss of those whose lives seemed to be part of our essence. ... A belief caused by ... this passionate yearning is so pathetic and even sacred that the unbeliever may well shrink from breathing his doubts in its presence. ... [But there] is no fact to be announced which will alter the truth. In that sense there is no consolation. But it is some encouragement to a brave man to feel in the midst of sorrow that it may bring him nearer to his kind, and fit him to play a worthier and manlier part...**

### **Virginia’s Mother Dies**

And so we come to the death, twenty years later, of Steven’s second wife, the mother of thirteen year-old, nervous ‘Ginny’. What would have been the impact upon his bereft child of her father’s insistent rejection of immortality? For there

was no consolation. They would never see their mother again. ‘Never, never, never, never, never.’ – that word that Leslie Stephen said had to be borne ‘without needless flinching’. One had to be ‘manly’, not full of ‘effeminate self-pity’ in meeting the worst, eternal separation, head on; ‘the Psalmist takes his sorrows like a man’ and a brave man should feel inspired by his terrible loss to play a still manlier role in the life that was left to him. But there was hardly much point in telling an adolescent girl that she should be ‘manly’ and still ‘manlier’. What would have been the impact upon her of the absence of any consoling hope? There are mysterious references to Virginia Stephen’s first ‘breakdown’ at this bleak time, even hints at a first attempt at suicide, a terrible act of despair by such a young girl – not yet thirteen and a half. Certainly her family was acutely afraid for her mental stability ever afterwards. I see the young bereaved Virginia as a child in shock, petrified, haunted, unable to see how she can possibly go on living, let alone ever *want* to live any more. Her immense need to be mothered was answered of course in the immediate aftermath of her mother’s death by her anxious, very loving, eldest sister Stella. [I think it is misleading to call her merely a ‘half-sister’] Only for Stella to die also, just two years later, when Virginia was fifteen.

### **Virginia Did Not Rebel**

But, it may be countered, merely because the parents hold certain beliefs – or unbeliefs – it will not necessarily follow that their children must hold them also. Might not Virginia Stephen have rebelled, in her anguish of bereavement, *against* her parents’ atheism and insisted on *not* rejecting the belief in eternal reunion? But she venerated her parents far too much to reject their convictions. And ‘the Christians’ always remained for her ‘the others’. Think of her powerful *Diary* entry, 4 August 1918:

‘...if I were bringing a case against God [Christina Rossetti] is one of the first witnesses I should call....First she starved herself of love, which meant also of life; then of poetry in deference to what she thought her religion demanded....Poetry was castrated too....And, as a reward for all her sacrifices, she died in terror, uncertain of salvation.’

At the funeral of the Greek scholar Jane Harrison in 1928, Virginia Woolf experienced once again what she called ‘the obstacle of not believing... who is God? What is the grace of Christ?’ [*Diary*: 21 April, 1928] Two years later she made fun of the very notion of Christian immortality in her essay *On Being Ill* as she evoked the experience of a general anaesthetic – how we ‘wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist’s arm-chair and confuse his “Rinse the mouth – rinse the mouth” with the greeting of the Deity’.

### **Humanisms’ ‘Yea’ and ‘Nay’**

On 18 April 1939, as she began her *Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf declared ‘certainly and emphatically there is no God’, and in her *Diary* entry for 9 December 1939 she praised Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion* – ‘His savagery against God [is] good.’ Thus Virginia Woolf was, like her parents, a humanist non-believer either in a Christian God or in a Christian after-life.

Humanism has two contrasting, opposed faces, its everlasting Nay and Yea. On the one hand we are born into a godless, indifferent, often hostile universe which possesses no transcendent, cosmic meaning. We humans are alone in an immense void – ourselves and our dearest ones vulnerable each day to suffering or extinction. Life is ‘a little strip of pavement over the abyss’ as Virginia Woolf wrote in her *Diary*, 25 October 1920. Our unique human relationships are all that we have and yet they are so fragile, so transient. In her *Diary*, 8 August 1928, she wrote: ‘I am so important to myself: yet of no importance to other people: like the shadow passing over the downs’.. [‘What] does the worm know of the car?’ she asked (5 August 1932). Our life is just a ‘short little run into inanity’ (20 July 1937). There is no meaning in existence at all, – unless we humans can lend life meaning. (Compare Goethe writing to young Schopenhauer in 1814: ‘*Willst du dich deines Wertes freuen, So musst der Welt du Wert verleihen.* “If you have a driving necessity to experience and celebrate your own value, you must loan value to the world.” You must project upon the world a value derived from yourself’ . Morse Peckham, *Beyond the Tragic Vision.*)

For there is also the other side of the humanist coin, the humanists’ ‘Yea’. We are so constituted that we *can* feel connected to one another. In her *Diary*, 17 May 1925, Virginia Woolf intuited that ‘humanity was a vast wave undulating with the same emotions’ – and therefore capable of sympathy. And four years later she would write: ‘[We] are somehow successive, continuous, we humans, and show the light through, but what is the light?’ Her answer to that question was human creativity and the human capacity for love. These are *all* that we have to pit against the facts of death and transience. We must leap ‘on the back of life and wring its scruff’ (*Diary*, 10 February 1930) Seize the eternal moment, and ‘fight with our brains, loves, although we *must* be vanquished ...the tremendous feeling at Roger’s funeral’ (*Diary*, 19 September 1934). *Work* – which for Virginia Woolf was the creative work of imagination, forcing her to try to conceive what other people’s lives mean to them – *work* was her only resource in her defiant struggle against pessimistic nihilism. It was her resistance effort. ‘I will not yield a fraction of an inch to nothingness’ she wrote on learning of the death of Julian Bell (*Diary*, 20 July 1937). ‘I cling to my tiny philosophy: to hug the present moment’ (31 January 1940). ‘Now, now, relive the Monday and the Tuesday’ (24 March 1940). Perpetually *re-create* the past, in other words; keep it alive through the effort of memory.

### **Virginia’s Work Of Resurrection**

I believe that Virginia Woolf’s deepest need of all was to give her beloved dead, her necessary ones, the immortality otherwise impossible to hope for in an indifferent, unjust, god-less universe. As Jane Marcus pointed out, in her seminal essay *The Niece of a Nun* ‘Much of Virginia Woolf’s work began as elegies for her own dead. The ghosts of her loved ones haunted her imagination, and she played god, the writer, resurrecting them into fictional life.’

The remainder of this lecture will address that attempted work of resurrection. But I shall refer not only to the novels – or elegies, as she herself called them; I shall include also her *Diary* and her *non-fictional* memoir writing.

Is Rachel Vinrace, the heroine of *The Voyage Out*, an attempted fictional re-incarnation of Stella? No. Neither the personality nor the life of Stella is evoked in this novel but rather the experience and impact of her death. Young heroines have died before in English fiction, but never like this. Think of Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, of Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth, of Maggie Tulliver, of Hardy's *Tess*, each of their tragically premature deaths is given a deep meaning. The whole point of Rachel's death, by contrast, is that it is *meaningless*. (The only comparison I can find is the death of the child Hanno in Thomas Mann's contemporary work *Buddenbrooks*). For me this *meaningless-ness* is the truly revolutionary, modernist 20th century message of Virginia Woolf's defiant first novel.

'[Terence, Rachel's fiancé,] could not get used to his pain, it was a revelation to him. He had never realised before that underneath every action, underneath the life of every day, pain lies, quiescent, but ready to devour; he seemed to be able to see suffering, as if it were a fire, curling up over the edges of all action, eating away the lives of men and women. He thought for the first time with understanding of words which had before seemed to him empty: the struggle of life; the hardness of life. Now he knew for himself that life is hard and full of suffering.... Never again would he feel secure; he would never believe in the stability of life, or forget what depths of pain lie beneath small happiness and feelings of content and safety.'

Virginia Woolf just rubs our faces in the pain of un-fulfilment and loss.

### **Mrs Dalloway A Sceptic**

In *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf gives her protagonist her own atheism. We learn from Peter Walsh that Clarissa Dalloway was one of the most thorough-going sceptics he had ever met..... 'Her notion being that the Gods, who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting and spoiling human lives, were seriously put out if, all the same you behaved like a lady. That phase came directly after Sylvia's death – that horrible affair. To see your own sister killed by a falling tree... was enough to turn one bitter. Later she wasn't so positive, perhaps; she thought there were no Gods; no one was to blame; and so she evolved this atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness.'

The second aspect of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* that I want to stress here is what Virginia Woolf called so memorably in her *Diary* entry, 30 August 1923: 'my discovery; how I *dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth.*' Peter Walsh's memory of Clarissa's atheist response to her sister's death so many years earlier is just one example of such a 'cave' that gives depth. This was indeed Virginia Woolf's 'great discovery', for, as the philosopher Hume said, 'If we had no memory we would have no personality'. And, I would add, a very inadequate idea of any one else's personality. After *Mrs. Dalloway*, almost the whole history of earlier English fiction can strike one as two-dimensional with its memory-less protagonists constantly living in forward-moving time. That is why so many early classic novels had *had* to start with childhood – *Tom Jones*, *Mansfield Park*, *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Wives and Daughters*, *The Way of all Flesh*, *Sons and Lovers*, – where the reader rather than the central character does the

remembering, and stays aware of the reverberations of the central characters' pasts. But now, in 1925, Virginia Woolf is inspired to move in and out of each character's past and present at will, through 'beautiful caves' of memory and because the significant moments in that past are so intensely felt, they remain a vivifying, continuous present. In her *Diary* entry 18 March 1925, Virginia Woolf wrote: '[The] past is beautiful because one never realises the emotion at the time – it expands later – that is why we dwell on the past I think.' And on 19 July 1939 in *A Sketch of the Past* she wrote:

**The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths. It is then that I am living most fully in the present. For the present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else, ... But to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past, peace is necessary ...**

Whenever I read those passages and Virginia Woolf's earlier discovery digging out her characters' 'beautiful caves' of memory, I am reminded of the seminal passage in Wordsworth's 1802 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* which, I think, many critics have got wrong: Poetry is the spontaneous over-flow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: [all too many readers have stopped at that point but in fact Wordsworth's sentence continues] the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually *disappears*, [my emphasis] and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. Hence, in a season of calm weather,

Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling ever more.  
(*Intimations of Immortality* from Recollections of early Childhood)

Similarly, *the tranquillity disappears* in Virginia Woolf, as she herself – or her characters – re-live a significant emotional memory. *Mrs Dalloway* was the first expression of Virginia Woolf's vision that we survive in one-another's most deeply felt memories, and the novel contains the following great articulation of the 'Yea' side of her humanism:

**Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter then that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her... or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home... being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, her-self.**

Perhaps it is the past rather than the future we should think of as eternity.

## ***To The Lighthouse A Miracle***

And so to *To the Lighthouse*. What is there to say other than that it is a miracle whose creation we shall never fully understand? It will ‘have father’s character done complete in it; and mothers; and St. Ives; and childhood; and all the usual things I try to put in - life, death etc.’ (*Diary*, 14 May 1925). What does the book say about ‘life, death etc.’? Every reader remembers the shock of disbelief and bereftness on their first reading of the novel when they came upon the end of the 3rd section of Part Two, ‘Time Passes’ - ‘Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before’. There must be some mistake; *Mrs. Ramsay* could not have died. But she had. How can the death of the indispensable beloved be borne? What meaning can life still have? What of any of us survives? That is the burden of the interior monologue of Lily Briscoe, the artist – and surrogate daughter in Part Three of *To The Lighthouse*. All that Lily now has is memory, and at first it seem enough.

**[There] was that scene on the beach. One must remember that...Mrs. Ramsay sat and wrote letters by a rock. What a power was in the human soul! she thought. That woman sitting there, writing under the rock resolved everything into simplicity.... She brought together this and that and then this, and so made...this scene on the beach for example, this moment of friendship and liking – which survived, after all these years, ... The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark...Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent.**

(Richard Norman cites the above passage in his chapter, *The Meaning of Life and the Need for Stories in On Humanism*, 2004). And yet *To the Lighthouse* preaches no facile ‘Yea’ to human sympathy and memories that can outlive death. The ‘Nay’ remains, the unanswerable questions about suffering and the pain of bereavement. For it is *after* that earlier epiphanic memory of the moment on the beach that Lily finds herself once again assaulted by grief, still unable to endure the absence of Mrs. Ramsay. ‘To want and not to have, sent all up her body a hardness, a hollowness, a strain. And then to want and not to have – to want and want – how that wrung the heart, and wrung it again and again! Oh Mrs Ramsay! she called out silently. The tears ran down her face.’

Tears are very rare in Virginia Woolf; but here there is nothing less than the anguish that has to cry out aloud. Lily Briscoe, you notice, unlike Leslie Stephen, does not take her sorrow ‘like a man’. But out of the acuteness of that very anguish of concentrated wanting, Lily is granted her vision; Mrs. Ramsay is momentarily restored to her – just as Julia Stephen – Euridice – has been brought back to life by her artist daughter. Virginia Woolf thought she had laid her mother’s ghost by writing *To the Lighthouse*. But it was not so.

## ***A Sketch Of The Past***

I shall end with a short discussion of what I believe to be some of Virginia Woolf’s very greatest writing, a truly amazing achievement of imaginative resurrection which I don’t think has yet quite taken its rightful place as a climax in her whole *oeuvre* – her *A Sketch of the Past*. Although Virginia Woolf had believed she had laid the ghost of her mother in writing *To the Lighthouse*, here, in *A Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf demonstrates that she had not finished

her task of remembering. For this memoir, never published by Leonard Woolf, gives the most many-sided and vivid evocation of Julia Stephen yet. It reaches right back to Julia Jackson's young girlhood before evoking Virginia's own first memory of sitting in her mother's lap and 'the red and purple flowers on a black ground' on her dress. She then records her absolute rapture when, as a child, she had made her mother laugh or praise her imaginative writing; 'How excited I used to be when the *Hyde Park Gate News* was laid on her plate on Monday morning, and she liked something I had written!' And at last Virginia Woolf makes herself retell her mother's final moments: 'there is my last sight of her; she was dying; I came to kiss her and as I crept out of the room she said: "Hold yourself straight, my little Goat"'.

What, finally, was the impact on Virginia Woolf of all that premature bereavement? Her grief at 'the stupid damage' (*Sketch of the Past*) stunned and obsessed her; yet it also connected her at the deepest possible level with all human beings, making our short, vulnerable lives more touching to her and more real. Like her father, the editor of the monumental *Dictionary of National Biography*, she too was a biographer; but whereas he concentrated on factual truths, buttressed by external evidence, she focussed on our evanescent inner lives and on our emotional response to one another. Her imaginative creativity was rooted in a lifelong mourning which she did not allow to paralyse her. Instead, she transmuted her memories of her dead, through infinite effort, into life-giving words that would not die. The only immortality she could believe in.

\* This lecture is an abridged version of the Annual Virginia Woolf Birthday Lecture I gave in 2006, published (and revised here with their permission) by the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain. Copies of the full version may be obtained from Stuart N. Clarke, Fairhaven, Charnleys Lane, Banks, Southport PR9 8HJ.

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## VIEWPOINTS

### **Rationality and Religion**

I have reflected on the correspondence section for the February *Ethical Record* and the response by Ian Buxton to an address he heard by theologian Keith Ward, attempting to refute the 'God is a Virus' idea. Ian makes the assumption that there must be a correlation between religion and mental illness. From almost 50 years as a practicing psychiatrist I can say that no such correlation is established. I did read a paper some years ago suggesting some overlap with mental illness in Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia but this was very slight.

Looking at this issue in another way, some psychiatrists recently did a preliminary survey of the religious affiliation of a sample of all psychiatric patients (most of them nowadays will be outpatients with short term depressive illnesses and the like who will return to work and to their families and in total represent a large tranche of the population). I was surprised that this was nearly 99%; only about 1% declaring themselves to be atheists, agnostics and so on. I was surprised because this by no means corresponds to the degree of interest shown in religious activities by patients as I know them. I have worked mainly with children and know only a very few families who have any real commitment to the religious world. Quite a number of people still get married in church and

most burial services are under religious auspices but that is usually as far as it goes. In particular most people seem no longer concerned with issues like life after death.

The only information that most children get about religion is at school. In the small rural town of 15000 where I live, Christmas will be a time of festivity; the large Parish Church is lit up and made to look attractive and children will go to Christingle and people will be entertained by the Salvation Army band. But for most people deeper commitment will be lacking. Part of the difficulty in all this is that religion has no clear definition of the sort that would be useful to a diagnostician.

When we get to discussing rationality we are in deeper water. The psychological world has a knack of reversing the direction of the debate. Firstly an attempt will be made to define 'being rational' and then there will be an assessment as to who is and who is not 'being rational' and when, where and why. Seen from this perspective it does not follow that someone is necessarily being irrational just because they are religious, nor does it follow that someone is always rational because they are atheists (etc). Rationality and irrationality are not properties which someone has or has not but rather it describes a particular kind of argument which someone may use on a particular occasion about a particular issue. Of course some people are habitually rational and others not.

My initial suggestion [for the origin of rational reasoning] is that as we evolved from our ape-like ancestors it became increasingly necessary for us to learn to co-operate in tasks like hunting and gathering food. Managing this group behaviour became increasingly complex and challenging and tricky situations could arise as when a group were hunting down an animal and yet simultaneously sought to avoid a predator. Early rationality would consist in behaviour which helped the enterprise and irrationality as behaviour that did not.

Of course things became much more complex with time but the same fundamental rules are there even today — how to organise ourselves for survival. Finding practical solutions to current problems is the first thing most people think about, long before anyone learns to understand logic, mathematics and so on. Real life provides us with one of the bedrocks for our behaviour and hence of our thinking.

**John Edmondson (Consultant Psychiatrist, retired) – Louth, Lincolnshire**

### **Eastbourne Says No**

Recently Eastbourne Green Party (which I chair) held a poll in the town centre asking people if they thought it was all right to have a nuclear power station within 30 miles of their home, and if they agree to this country having nuclear weapons. Most of the people we asked said No to both questions.

**Dorothy Forsyth - Eastbourne**

To receive regular Society news and programme updates via email, please contact Ben Partridge at [programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk](mailto:programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk). Similarly, if you have any suggestions for speakers or event ideas, or would like to convene a Sunday afternoon informal, get in touch with Ben on 020 7242 8034.

# UNDERSTANDING GRAMMAR A FIRM BASIS OF RESPECT FOR OTHERS

Nicholas Ostler

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*Lecture to the Ethical Society, 3 July 2011*

'Johnny Foreigner' – the outsider does things differently, and less attractively, than we do – is a familiar figure. Ha ha ha: his otherness boosts our in-group togetherness, reminding us of the unspoken things that we all have in common. And it's not just Little England-ers who feel this. Much as a keen linguist like me might like to resist it, there's always something reassuring about being with people who share an ease with what we were brought up with. Even when you live abroad, and speak the local language well, it's undeniably relaxing to get back amongst your kind, have your jokes easily understood.

This deep-seated 'Them & Us' feeling we find expressed in languages the world over. The Greeks had a word for it, of course. And the word was *barbaros*. This word for non-Greek is onomatopoeic: the people who go 'bar-bar', unlike us who make sense when we talk. The word was finely indiscriminating in the 5th century BCE – as applicable to the Global Threat of the day, Persia, as to the useful Scythian archers paid to police the streets of Athens, to hyper-civilized Egyptians as to those living rough in the uncharted northern regions. When urging a pan-Greek alliance in 480 BCE, the Spartans told the Athenians: "Barbarians have nothing trustworthy or true." (Herodotus viii.142)

The Greeks were not alone in taking foreigners as a single breed. Northern Indians of much the same era recognized Sanskrit as the supreme language and often classified the rest of the world, who did not, as just so many *mleccha*. This is another nonsense-word usually focused on linguistic incompetence: *mlecchitam* means garbled.

Arabic too used a speech defect to characterize outsiders: they are '*ajam*, the mumbling, the dumb or unintelligible. At first, this referred to any non-Arabs. But soon '*ajam* came to refer above all to the Persians, the group closest politically to the Arabs. Then a strange cross-over came about: the Persians took over the word '*ajam* into their own language, so describing themselves as 'the numblers'. So their national poet, Firdawsi, could sum up his life's work:

**Much pain I bore in these thirty years passing:  
'ajam I brought to life in this my Persian.**

But that is what was to happen when outsiders would turn themselves into insiders. Then they can pick up the terms used as some catch-all for outsiders, and use them to refer to some people in particular.

## The Romans

What happens if there is a group of outsiders not willing to be left out of the magical circle, when such a group ingratiatingly accepts the insiders' self-evaluation, challenging it only to claim a place with them at the top of the tree? The Persians, we have seen, did this by re-branding the demeaning term as on a par with the rulers. By contrast, the Romans practised a different

substitution on the Greeks. They had long admired Greek *savoir faire* before they effectively conquered them all in the early 2nd century BCE, and in fact they had endeavoured to maintain – rather abjectly – that Rome itself was really a Greek city, if more far-flung than most of the Italian colonies, and a bit linguistically different.

Putting the best face they could on the facts, the Romans thought therefore that they should not embrace the word *barbaros*, but clarify its reference: it should not mean ‘everyone except the Greeks’, but ‘everyone except the Greeks **and us Romans**’. This is the sense it got in Latin – and the term stuck. Hence, seven centuries later, the invasion that finished off the Roman Empire in the west was seen as **barbarian**.

This re-definition, however, had an interesting effect, and one that brings us smack into my central theme today. One of the most distinctive, and rather late-blooming, achievements of the Greeks was **the invention of grammar**. Phonetics and rhetoric had been available since at least the late 5th century BCE, but grammar itself came later. The systematic understanding of all those noun declensions and verb conjugations, which used to terrorize so many pupils in ‘grammar’ schools, was only achieved around 100 BCE. The theory of complex sentences was only to be added by Apollonius Dyscolus (‘the Grouch’) in the second century CE.

Now it was Romans themselves who showed concretely how this system could be applied to Latin, really only a generation after its invention. The compilations of later work on Latin, produced in the 4th to 6th centuries under the names of Donatus and Priscian, essentially crystallized Latin grammar as it would be taught and learnt for the next millennium and a half. Latin was put effectively on a par with Greek even at this, most abstract, level.

But a curious fact was missed. Already by the first century CE, Latin scholars had demonstrated that Greek was not the only language reducible to rule, even if those very rules were inspired by looking at Greek. **Other languages too could have a grammar**. Yet it would be another millennium and a half before Europeans would realize the implications of this for languages at large.

### **Other Traditions**

Sanskrit, in India, was home to Pali’s school of rule-based grammar, which was already complete in its fundamentals by the 5th century BCE; just two other Indian languages were also the focus of similar systems, though each in its own, largely egocentric, world. Tamil, a language of South India, gave rise to its own indigenous system of grammar, in the *Tolkappiyam*. Rather later, in the 7th or 8th centuries CE, a system of grammar was devised for the Pali language of Theravada Buddhism

Independently, traditions of grammatical analysis were also starting in the Near East, for Aramaic, Arabic and Hebrew, languages which (we now know) were structurally and in their vocabulary rather similar. In all these languages, grammatical analysis came, often much later, than the language’s glory days.

Aramaic had been, over eight centuries before the life of Christ, the lingua franca of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires. The tradition of explicit grammar, however, begins only six centuries later still, with Jacob of Edessa (640-708) – and by an irony of fate, it only begins because of the inadequacies in the alphabetic spelling. Next is Arabic, which owes its elaborate grammar to the efforts of a Persian, one Sibawayhi. He was writing his *Kitab* ‘Book’ in 793, some 150 years after Arab conquests had suddenly taken over a vast swathe of the world as the first Islamic empire. Arabic was in rude health at the time, spoken as a lingua franca across a vast empire. Hebrew, the predominant language of the Jewish religious texts which go back to the 5th century BCE, only received its first grammatical analysis in the 10th century CE.

### **The Twittering Of Birds**

Although the Pali (and perhaps) Tamil grammars can be seen as slightly analogous to Latin grammar, in that they were derived from a pre-existing model, not one of these traditions created any universal sense: the sense that every human language must have a grammar, a system of rules that could be written down. Rather, by standing there in solitary magnificence, and being provided uniquely for languages of religion, or of high civilization, they instead gave the opposite sense: that only superior languages deserved – and could be given – grammatical analysis. All the other vernacular languages were more like the twittering of birds – useful and natural perhaps, but rough, evanescent and disorderly.

Towards the end of this long period of some two millennia – when grammar had been invented and was widely known to exist, but only magnificent languages were deemed worthy of grammatical analysis – Dante Alighieri, a poet and politician from Florence in Italy wrote a work *On Vulgar Eloquence* in which attempted to classify and locate the vernacular languages of Italy.

Dante does not go far beyond the idea that whereas the one is unchanging, the others are in a continuous state of flux. As he put it, around 1303: Therefore if over one people the language changes, as has been said, successively over time, and can in no way stand still, it is necessary that it should vary in various ways quite separately from what remains constant, just as customs and dress vary in various ways, which are confirmed neither by nature or society, but arise at human pleasure and to local taste. This was the motive of the inventors of the faculty of *grammatica* [i.e **Latin**]: for *grammatica* is nothing but a kind of sameness of speech unalterable for diverse times and places. (Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, i.9.10-11)

This – and our conception of what language is, and what status languages have – all changed with the Renaissance in the 15th century, some 200 years later. The change when it came started in an unlikely quarter: someone who thought that as yet, justice had not been done to Latin grammar – even though this language had been encapsulated in rules for over a millennium, and the rules had been faithfully transmitted over some 50 generations of grammar schools. Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) was an Italian scholar, and wrote a style guide for Latin, *De Elegantiss Latinæ Linguae*, which was for the first time written

empirically – that is to say, by taking its examples from Latin literature, and generalizing from the texts of the best authors, rather than simply re-stating the rules of previous grammarians, with examples.

It provoked, or at least it led off, a new attitude to grammar and its rules, which was characteristic of European humanists in the Renaissance and after, and was well summed up by an English scholar two generations later. John Colet (1467-1519), in his teachers' preface to *Lily's grammar* (1511), the English standard Latin primer for 200 years, wrote:

**In the beginning men spake not Latin because such rules were made, but, contrariwise, because men spake such Latin the rules were made. That is to say, Latin speech was before the rules, and not the rules before the Latin speech.**

### **The Crucial Leap**

Twenty years before Colet, in the generation intervening between him and Valla, it was a Spaniard educated in Italy who made the crucial leap. He saw that from speech or text in a language – even a vernacular language such as Castilian Spanish – a grammar could always be derived, and went on to demonstrate it. Antonio de Nebrija (1441-1522) actually published grammars both of Latin (in 1481) and of his own language, Spanish (in 1492). The latter he presented to Queen Isabel. Asked by her: “Why would I want a work like this, I already know the language” he memorably answered, in the book’s preface:

**When I consider well, most illustrious Queen, and set before my eyes the antiquity of all the things which remain written down for our record and memory, one thing I find and draw as a most certain conclusion, that always language was the companion of empire, and followed it in such a way that jointly they began, grew, flourished; and afterwards joint was the fall of both.**

But this was, in any case, an incredibly fertile period in European as well as colonial history. As has been pointed out by the French scholar Sylvain Auroux, Nebrija’s Spanish grammar led off a cascade of grammars, which in the next century appeared for many of the main languages of Europe: Italian 1510, French 1531, German 1534, Portuguese 1536, Hungarian 1539, Polish 1568, Dutch 1584, English 1586. The Spanish might think themselves special, and uniquely worthy of a grammar to rival Greek and Latin, but to contending powers, they were just rivals who needed to be cut down to size. Grammars came to be symbols of the separate existence of a language, and languages dignified the powers who spoke them.

The Spanish, meanwhile, were living the dream of the new science of grammar in their new colonies of the Americas. There they seem to have encountered a new language almost on every new coast, and in every new valley – as well as finding some languages, such as Nahuatl in Mexico, Quechua in Peru, which bore out more faithfully Nebrija’s principle that language was the companion of empire. All these new languages were given the respect of supposing them to have rules which could be written down, and then used for foreigners (namely Spanish priests and monks) to learn them. The Spaniards set themselves to invent techniques of field work. And so, as a contemporary described:

And so, laying aside for a time the gravity of their demeanour they would take to playing with straws and pebbles in the break times they allowed, to get rid of their inhibitions in communication. And they always had paper and ink in hand, and when they heard a word from an Indian they would write it down, and the circumstance in which he said it. And in the afternoon the clerics would gather and share their scripts with one another, and as best they could assign to those words the Spanish term which seemed most suitable. And it would happen that what on one day they thought they had heard on the next they thought not... Mendieta, Gerónimo de, 1870 [ca. 1595], *Historia eclesiástica indiana, escrita a fines del siglo XVI por Gerónimo de Mendieta de la Orden de San Francisco* (ed. García Icazbalceta, Joaquin), México, Díaz de León y Whitep. 134

In the final count, taken after over four centuries of missionary work, the Spanish had produced language materials, usually grammars and prayer-books, for 369 languages in all. What the Spanish had achieved, by all this labouring in the vineyards of American languages, was at last to generalize the sense that it was no especial privilege for a language to be enshrined in a grammar, any more than it was a privilege for a place to be represented on a map. Grammars and maps just recorded what there was in the world, and made clear their nature to people who hitherto had not known them.

Although the Spanish, and after them the other imperialist Europeans, were unremitting in their claims of superiority for their religion, and usually other aspects of their cultures, this shows that they were actually much more egalitarian when it came to languages. The natives' languages were there, and they were rule-governed – whether anybody had discerned the rules yet or not. The missionaries' job was to work out the rules.

### **The Equality Of Languages**

This belief has characterized missionary work ever since – in all the remotest parts of Asia, Africa, and indeed North America. The fundamental equality of languages before the grammarian could be said to be distinctive of the European view of the world – since it is much more natural to assume that only some languages deserve the sophisticated grammar treatment – the ones that already have literacy, and are serving to organize large civilizations. But since the 16th century, Europeans have believed otherwise, as they went round the world discovering new unknown peoples, with new unknown languages.

Even the Reformation itself, with its emphasis on reading Holy Scripture in one's own vernacular, can be seen as just one aspect of the grammar revolution of the 16th century. Distinctively, the Protestant faiths which have sprung up since then have no sense of a sacred, primary language for worship. Lutherans do not have a bias towards worshipping in German, nor even the Anglican Communion towards an English liturgy.

This sense of all languages on a par makes them equal in the same sense that (since the Enlightenment) all humans have been seen as equal: they are systems of the same kind, even if they are accorded very different status in our societies. Languages, whether classical media of long literacy and great

refinement, or homespun vernaculars learnt at mother's knee or round the campfire, all work in the comparable ways to enable thought and communication.

All in all, this has been a comforting story, as mankind seems to have awoken from its deep-seated linguistic slumbers and congenital blindness at the end of the 15th century, and thereafter – once we started looking for it – grammar was everywhere. Not just in the books that taught us Latin, Greek and Hebrew, but in every language under the sun, once they were viewed correctly.

All too many of those 7,000 languages with their distinctive grammars are now in danger of disappearing before anyone has really had a chance to get a picture of them. We need to register this fact, and to act sympathetically to small language communities, wherever they may be, as they seek to use their languages more, and indeed to learn more about what makes them tick – in a word, their grammars.

But before the grammar revolution of the 15th century, there could have been no concept, even, of what is there to be lost – namely, all those equally valid and interesting grammars of all those languages. The perception of the diversity of human languages as rule-governed – as a highly abstract thing that distinguishes one group of people from another – was a necessary part in the growing understanding, by humanity, of just what it is.

Once this was recognized in history, the first – and highly complex – goal was to try to understand another's language enough to give its speakers the power to read our Scriptures in their own words – the self-appointed task of jungle linguists and missionaries. A better and later step may be to respect their language enough to let them keep it, and develop it as they will. If we do that, Johnny Foreigner might pay yet us back, and tell us something about ourselves that we didn't know.

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## MY HUMANIST VERSE

Jay Marcham

Some people tell you  
That there's an afterlife  
Where you will meet your missed ones  
Like your granny, mum or wife  
But please do not believe them  
This life is all you've got  
You will not reach the pearly gates  
Nor burn in brimstone hot  
Your days are no rehearsal  
Preparing for a play

So follow Kipling's sound advice  
Make full use of each day  
That's it, that's it, that's it  
Your story has an end  
Each moment that you waste is lost  
On that you can depend  
You won't go up to heaven  
Or down to the fiery pit  
When you've had your allotted span  
Alas my friend – that's it!

## MARXISM 2011

Tom Rubens

From 30 June to 4 July this year, the Socialist Workers' Party held its annual Marxist event of lectures and discussions, this time at University College, London. This year's attendance was, incidentally, a record one. As usual at the event, the Marxist perspective was presented in extensive detail, with a focus on its economic aspects; and the perspective was offered as the key way of understanding the main features of the contemporary world.

It is important to emphasise the weight which Marxists inevitably place on their particular angle of vision. For them, the course of world events since 1945 is to be comprehended chiefly in terms of the dominance of capital — industrial and financial — in the world economy, and especially the capital-dominance of the United States. In the same terms is to be understood the present economic crisis in the West, varying in degree though it does from country to country.

Now it is unquestionably the case that this outlook discloses a host of crucial facts. For example:— Germany's relative economic success in recent years has resulted partly from a long-term policy of driving down wages and exploiting a large pool of Eastern European cheap labour; significant redistribution of wealth in the West is emphatically not taking place, with the super-rich minority of 10% increasing immensely in income, while the remaining 90% experience falls in income; capitalism is becoming more and more geared to accumulating financial assets rather than capital-stock and profits from industrial output; since the 1970s, there has been a continual decline in capitalism's rate of profit; throughout the 20th century, capitalist firms have become increasingly monopolistic and wedded to the state; a vital distinction is to be drawn between political revolution, which changes only a country's political regime, and a social revolution, which is deeper because it alters the country's mode of economic production; and, finally, new accumulations of capital, in different parts of the world, are creating new geo-political and imperialist rivalries.

The massive import of these facts is undeniable, facts which are more likely to be presented, or emphasised, in Marxist and other Left-wing publications than in those of the mainstream media: which is why most people in the West are minimally aware of them, or totally unaware. Attendance at Marxism definitely increases that awareness.

### **What Is The 'Working Class'?**

However, while the Marxist event does achieve consciousness-expansion, it does so only to a limited extent. Firstly, most of the speakers continue to use the term 'working class' in a vague way; it is unclear whether the term denotes all those who sell their labour power in a labour market within the framework of a capitalist economy, or only those of relatively low-level qualifications and skills who do so. Whichever of the two denotations applies, it must be said that the people in question do not collectively display the unitary and homogenous outlook which is attributed to them by use of the class term.

Secondly, no distinction is drawn between levels or scales of capitalism. Almost all the major problems which capitalism produces, and which are talked about at Marxism, emanate from the large-scale variety: big business and big finance. Now if the Marxist argument is accepted that a socialist economy is the best kind, there is still a case for saying that such an economy should have a place for small-scale private enterprises, provided their scope is stringently controlled.

Thirdly, a point needs to be made about the general complexity of Western societies which have capitalist economies. Marxists intense focus on the economic system sometimes give the impression that they are insufficiently aware of the social and cultural complexity which co-exists with capitalism and which cannot be adequately explained in terms of the latter. For example, many developments in the humanities and sciences cannot be chiefly accounted for in this way, and some cannot be at all. Hence it is reasonable to assume that there is no way of knowing what developments in these fields would take place under a socialist economy, and especially no way of knowing what calibre these would be.

These considerations raise the issue of what many people regard as fundamental differences between individuals in level of natural ability, particularly intellectual ability. If it is agreed that these differences exist, and if it is further agreed that they produce major difficulties in present-day society, then it must be assumed that the disparities, and the problems they cause, would continue to exist even with a change in economic system. This point links to the previous one about non-homogeneity of outlook among that enormous number of people called the 'working class'.

### **The Complexity Of Western Societies**

These have aspects which even an exhaustive study of the capitalist system would not sufficiently explain. If we take, for example, British society since 1945, we can instance the following:—the preponderant decline of religious belief and the growing influence of scientific and secular modes of thinking; the demise of the extended family; the radical changes in sexual attitudes, including those toward homosexuality; the feminist movement; the growth of meritocratic values as a result of the huge expansion in public education, and (despite what many on the Left say) the consequent erosion of a good deal of the traditional mentality of class-hierarchy; the increase in audience for the arts (for example, more people go to theatres than attend football matches); and the experimentation and new forms in the various arts. These are among the facts which indicate that a society's economic system is only one of several important features of its whole way of life and culture; and that these other features have, to a major extent, a life of their own, requiring kinds of explanation and analysis which are in large measure different from those appropriate to the economic system.

Such observations will, it is to be hoped, find a bigger space at the annual Marxist event, and in Marxist thinking generally, than they have so far. Social reality is always manifold, and many diverse phenomena must be seen in tandem.

## PROGRAMME OF EVENTS AT THE ETHICAL SOCIETY

Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, WC1R 4RL.

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For programme updates, email: [programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk](mailto:programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk)

Website: [www.ethicalsoc.org.uk](http://www.ethicalsoc.org.uk) No charge unless stated

Sunday meetings are held in the Brockway Room.

### JULY 2011

**Saturday 16** HUMANIST PHILOSOPHERS' DAY CONFERENCE  
1000 – 1600 **THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE**  
Tickets £5 from the BHA tel: 020 7079 3586

**Monday 18** JAZZ APPRECIATION CLUB:  
1900 **EARLY BIG BAND AND SWING** All welcome

\*\*\*\* Summer break \*\*\*

### SEPTEMBER

**Sunday 4** SUMMER DISCUSSION  
1100 **THE NOTION OF JUSTICE.**  
**Christopher Purnell**, Barrister

**Sunday 18**  
1100 **HUMANISM AND THE IDEA OF EUROPE.**  
**Simon Glendinning**, LSE. £4 (£2 concessions, FREE for members of SPES)

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**Date for your Diary** (Please note date change):

On Wednesday 26 October 2011, the **CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE** will be given by **Professor Philip Schofield**, Director of the Bentham Project at University College London on the latest findings on Jeremy Bentham's writings.

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