

Ethical Record

The Proceedings of the South Place Ethical Society

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THE HEMMING PRIZE ESSAYS 2012



Conway Hall Library, Saturday 22 September 2012.

The three Hemming Prize winners:

1st Prize: Peter Jones, Thomas Whitham Sixth Form (p16);

2nd Prize: Lucy Mahon (right), St Peter's School (p19);

3rd Prize: Emily Dyson (left), Hills Road Sixth Form College (p22)

These essays were established by three humanist organisations in memory of the humanist educationalist James Hemming. This is their fourth year of operation. There were 97 entries for the Hemming Prizes this year from school students under 19 on 1 April 2012. Initial selecting was carried out by persons from the three sponsoring organisations, the British Humanist Association, the S.P. Ethical Society and the Rationalist Association. The final judgment was made by Michael Clark, Editor of *Analysis*, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, University of Nottingham. As usual, SPES supplied the prize money (£1000 for 1st prize, £500 for 2nd and £250 for 3rd), while the BHA administered the project.

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New Members

We welcome to the Society

Jeremy Abraham, Andover, Hampshire; Gabriel Baetz, Germany;
Elizabeth Cooper, Islington, London; Zaccheus Gilpin, Camberwell, London;
Dr. Rummy Hasan, Brighton; Marcus O'Hara, Shoreditch, London;
Martha Osamor, Haringey, London; Sid Rodrigues, Kingston, Surrey;
Michael Stephenson, Skipton, North Yorkshire.

REPORT ON THE SPES GC MEETING OF 12 SEPTEMBER 2012

The meeting heard and discussed reports from the Chief Executive Officer, the Librarian and the Treasurer. The GC resolved that the Librarian's contract be extended for a further 18 months beyond next January in order to progress the cataloguing and promote use of the Library.

The date of the Special General Meeting to consider the possible name change of the society was fixed to be 11 November at 12.30 p.m. This SGM will also consider the new Life Membership scheme and rates prepared by our Treasurer, Chris Bratcher. The AGM will follow the SGM at 2.30pm on the same day. Members should have received official notices of these two meetings.

The next GC meeting is scheduled for Wednesday 10 October at 4pm.

Chris Purnell, Chairman, GC.

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 Library and Archives. The Society's journal, *Ethical Record*, is issued monthly. Memorial meetings may be arranged.

The annual subscription is £35 (£25 if a full-time student, unwaged or over 65)

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Mike Phipps

Writer for *Labour Briefing*

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 8 July 2011

Milan Kundera tells us that the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. But it is also the struggle of truth against falsehood, fact against cover up. It became customary a few years ago to end a protracted period of civil conflict with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, most famously in South Africa – but also in a score of other countries. It seems self-evident that before there can be reconciliation, there has to be truth. If the truth is not acknowledged and understood, then what is to stop the same happening again?

Central America is a small region of the world, but it should occupy more of our attention than it does. It is currently the most violent region on the planet. It is impossible to understand why without examining the recent history of the small countries that make up this area – Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Their violent past raises the question: is the same happening again?

Two of these countries had prolonged civil conflicts followed by Truth Commissions. The one in El Salvador was established by the UN and received thousands of submissions on behalf of thousands of victims. Five days after it issued its report in 1993, the Salvadorean Parliament approved an amnesty law covering all the violent events of the war.

Guatemalan Dictator Faces Genocide Charge

In Guatemala, where an estimated 200,000 people lost their lives in the long civil war, there was a lot more work. Tens of thousands of submissions and years of documentation and analysis produced a stark conclusion: Maya Native Americans accounted for 83% of the victims, and 93% of the atrocities committed during the conflict had been the work of the armed forces.

So much for truth. Reconciliation is more elusive, justice even more so. Martin Luther King famously said that war is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice – and it is this quest for justice that has begun to be a little more fruitful in recent months.

On 28 January 2012, a Guatemalan judge ruled that General Rios Montt, the US-backed dictator who ruled the country in 1982 and 1983, should face charges of genocide for the scorched earth policy he operated. The charges identify him as the intellectual author of crimes carried out in the Ixil Triangle in the El Quiché department. These include the forced displacement of 29,000 people, the deaths of 1,771 individuals in eleven massacres, as well as acts of torture and 1,485 acts of sexual violence against women. Activists from the indigenous Mayan community, which bore the brunt of these atrocities, hailed the decision as “historic and momentous”.

“We can establish these are acts so degrading, so humiliating that there is no

justification,” the judge said after detailing the human rights abuses from survivors’ testimonies. The case was filed against a backdrop of rising danger for those involved in fighting for justice – 2011 was the most violent year since 2000 for human rights defenders, 19 of whom were murdered. It also has major implications for Guatemala’s new president, Otto Pérez Molina, who was a military commander in the Ixil Triangle where the genocide was carried out.

The war of the Guatemalan state against its citizens lasted 36 years. Some 200,000 people were killed and a further 45,000 ‘disappeared’ in this period. It peaked in the early 1980s and involved acts of unbelievable cruelty. One documented case was a massacre of over 200 villagers by government soldiers in the village of Las Dos Erres in 1982. According to the US-based Human Rights Watch, the abuses included “burying some alive in the village well, killing infants by slamming their heads against walls, keeping young women alive to be raped over the course of three days.” In March of this year, a Guatemalan court sentenced former soldier Pedro Pimentel Rios to a symbolic sentence of 6,060 years in prison. He was the fifth to be convicted of this massacre.

This was not an isolated incident, but one of over 400 massacres documented. In 2004, the government of Guatemala admitted to the Interamerican Court of Human Rights that the Rios Montt regime had practised a strategy of genocide. Now the old amnesties are being swept aside and those at the top are going to face charges.

The US-run School of the Americas

The role of the USA in all this is worth mentioning. Human Rights Watch went so far as to say that “the Reagan Administration shares in the responsibility for the gross abuses of human rights practised by the government of Guatemala.” The CIA worked inside the Guatemalan army at this time, operating torture centres and helping to run a unit responsible for thousands of killings.

Guatemalan military officers were trained at the notorious US-run School of the Americas in Panama, which relocated to Fort Benning in Georgia in 1984. Manuals used in the training of officers contain instructions in motivation by fear, bounties for enemy dead, false imprisonment, torture, execution, and kidnapping a target’s family members. The Pentagon eventually admitted that these manuals were a ‘mistake’.

Many of the threads of the Central American story lead back here. The School has graduated over 500 of the worst human rights abusers in the western hemisphere. One of them, a former Guatemalan Defence Minister, gave an address to the School just two years after a US court ruled he was responsible for the gang rape of an American nun as part of his ‘anti-terrorist’ operations in Guatemala. In El Salvador, ten out of the twelve army officers cited in a UN report as responsible for a 1981 village massacre of over 200 people, the majority children, were graduates of the School. The same was true of the officer responsible for the rape and murder of three American nuns and a lay missionary a year earlier.

El Salvador's dark past is also being revisited. The country's foreign minister recently issued an apology for the El Mozote massacre thirty years ago. This was perpetrated by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion of the Salvadorean army, who rounded up the over 1,000 villagers and systematically tortured, raped and murdered them, before setting fire to all the buildings. Girls as young as ten were raped and children had their throats slit and were hanged from the trees.

The Reagan administration dismissed the reports as "gross exaggerations" and the actions of the Battalion were described in the US Senate at the time as "commendable" and "professional". To this day, the US has never apologised for its role in the affair. Nor has it shown much interest in attempts to uncover the facts surrounding atrocities of this kind. As for justice, the US, like Israel and Sudan, refuses to allow itself to be covered by the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

Uncle Sam's Backyard

The US has a long history of treating Central America and the Caribbean as its own backyard. Human rights have rarely been a consideration for the US in this region of the world. It's now acknowledged that hideous medical experiments were carried out by US officials on Guatemalan citizens in the 1940s – including the deliberate infection of individuals with the syphilis bacteria. President Obama has apologised to his Guatemalan counterpart but a test case brought to the US district courts on behalf of seven of those subjected to the experiment was dismissed last month. No justice on that occasion.

Guatemala's most recent problems began in 1954, when the US organised a military coup against the democratically elected Arbenz government. His land reform threatened the agricultural monopoly of the United Fruit Company, the American multinational corporation that owned 42% of the arable land of Guatemala. The power of corporations like United Fruit parallels that of elected governments in poorer countries. In Guatemala, United Fruit was known as 'the octopus', with its tentacles exercising a stranglehold over many aspects of the country. The company lobbied hard for US intervention against Arbenz's reforming government – in fact, one of its board members was director of the CIA, which organised the coup.

US companies continue to exercise similar power today. For the last twenty years, Nicaraguan banana workers have been engaged in a battle for justice and compensation over the use of a carcinogenic chemical pesticide called Nemagon. Long after it was banned in the US because of its links to high levels of male sterility, cancer and other health problems, the Dole Food Company continued using Nemagon in Nicaragua and other Central American countries with devastating consequences.

Legal victories for the workers have repeatedly been overturned on appeal in US courts, often on technicalities and due to the use of secret witnesses. In 2011, the Company finally signed an out of court settlement with over 3,000 of the affected workers. However, a further 13,874 are still fighting for justice and an admission by Dole of wrongdoing.

Much more remote is the likelihood of Nicaraguans getting any compensation from the US Administration for the long campaign of destabilisation it waged against them in the 1980s, including US funding and training of armed terrorists – the contras. These mercenaries were described by President Reagan at the time as the “moral equivalent of our founding fathers”. Their activities included targeting health care clinics and workers for assassination; kidnapping, torturing and executing civilians, including children; raping women and seizing and burning civilian property. Is there a pattern emerging here?

In a 1986 judgment, the International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled that the US had violated international law by supporting the contras and by mining Nicaragua’s harbours. The US blocked enforcement of the Court’s judgment at the UN Security Council and thus prevented Nicaragua from obtaining any compensation. To this day, the US continues to ignore the ruling and has never paid Nicaragua a penny in damages.

I lived in Nicaragua for a while in the 1980s. It is unsettling, to say the least, for the people of a small country to know that a much larger one is devoting vast resources to training people who, for money, will invade in small groups, kill as many civilians as possible, often women and children, before retreating back to safety across the border – all because the people of your country have dared to elect a government that will not, as in the past, follow the orders of the US.

The Nightmare Continues

Even after the Reagan Administration, Central America’s nightmare continued. Under George Bush Senior, US forces invaded directly, in the case of Panama in 1989. It has since emerged that a major war crime took place.

The neighbourhood of El Chorillo housed around 15,000 people, 40% of them children. On the night of the invasion, US Cobra and Apache helicopter gunships, airplanes, warships and land-based artillery bombarded, strafed and set fire to the area, while its residents slept. In the first twelve hours of the invasion, there were 442 explosions. Much of the hi-tech weaponry was being tried out for the first time, in what would prove to be a dress rehearsal for the Gulf War a year later. Some 4,000 houses were destroyed and the ensuing fire engulfed the neighbourhood. Firefighters were not allowed in by US troops. The attack was later compared to Guernica.

There’s no obvious connection between Central America and the Middle East. Perhaps the connection is the US itself. After all, the Reagan Administration continued to fund the contras in Nicaragua, long after Congress ceased to, by diverting profits made on illegal arms sales to the Iranian regime: the ‘Iran-contra affair’. But there are less visible connections too. Like John Negroponte, who served as US ambassador to Honduras, from where the contras operated – they certainly had no base or support in Nicaragua itself. Negroponte oversaw this dirty war. Following George Bush Jr’s 2003 invasion of Iraq, he took his experience and knowledge to that country, serving as ambassador at the height of ‘black ops’ in Iraq - provocations, assassinations and so forth.

Let’s return to Central America. The ‘Uncle Sam’s backyard’ mentality

continues today. Honduras, as we said, was the hub for US military bases in the 1980s, perhaps because it never developed an armed struggle like its neighbours during those years. Like its neighbours, for most of the years since its independence, it was politically dominated by half a dozen key families and economically by, again, United Fruit.

Three years ago last week, in June 2009, a military coup overthrew the popular Zelaya government in Honduras. Zelaya's presidency had been something exceptional. Under his government, free education for all children was introduced, subsidies to small farmers were provided, the minimum wage was increased by 80% and school meals were guaranteed for more than 1.6 million children from poor families. President Zelaya also aligned his country with the ALBA, the Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, and tried to take on the highly hostile and deeply partisan media. Less than two and a half years into his presidency, he was kidnapped by the army in a coup that was condemned by the UN, EU and OAS, and forced into exile.

All Honduran army officers from the rank of captain upward train at the aforementioned School of the Americas, now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Its name may have changed: what it teaches has not. Honduras is today the world's murder capital – with a murder rate four times that of Mexico – and many of the killings involve the complicity of the Honduran state.

Is Obama Like Bush?

The Obama Administration appeared to distance itself from the putsch against Zelaya at the time and pushed for fresh elections. These duly took place under a state of emergency, without the participation of the ousted president, and were subject to widespread fraud and intimidation. Both presidential contenders in the fraudulent election backed the coup. Zelaya's supporters called for a boycott and hundreds of candidates for Congress and local councils withdrew their names and shunned the elections.

Some 800 US personnel oversaw the poll, however, and were quick to proclaim its legitimacy. The Obama Administration hailed the poll as a "very important step forward for Honduras", despite 23 Latin American and Caribbean nations of the Rio Group refusing to recognise the election and Amnesty International proclaiming a "human rights crisis" in Honduras. Abstentions were at a record high and there was evidence of government employees being ordered to vote and some residents being herded to the polls at gunpoint. *Time* magazine headlined its coverage 'Obama's Latin American Policy Looks Like Bush's'.

Yet while activists are shot down in broad daylight, the Obama Administration appears to side with the death squads. "Now it's time for the hemisphere as a whole to move forward and welcome Honduras back into the inter-American community," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in June 2010. Within days, the US resumed military aid to the Honduran regime. Since then, the situation has only worsened.

In March 2012, 94 members of the US House of Representatives sent a letter to

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asking her “to suspend US assistance to the Honduran military and police given the credible allegations of widespread, serious violations of human rights attributed to the security forces”. The Obama administration, meanwhile, is asking for increased military aid for Honduras for 2012.

Just how this ‘aid’ might be spent was underlined by a report in May 2012 from the Honduran human rights group, COFADEH. It reported that agents of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), dressed in military uniforms, killed at least four and possibly six civilians in a raid which took place on 11 May. The victims included two pregnant women and two children. One of the victims leaves behind six orphans. Apparently, the DEA agents fired from helicopter gunships upon a riverboat carrying civilians in the Mosquito coast area of Honduras.

A New Obama Doctrine

We can expect more of this, I think. “The face of American-style war-fighting is changing,” writes Nick Turse. “Forget full-scale invasions and large-footprint occupations; instead, think: special operations forces working on their own but also training or fighting beside allied militaries (if not outright proxy armies) in hot spots around the world. And along with those special ops advisors, trainers, and commandos expect ever more funds and efforts to flow into the militarization of spying and intelligence, the use of drone aircraft, the launching of cyber-attacks, and joint Pentagon operations with increasingly militarized ‘civilian’ government agencies.”

Turse argues that the new approach to conflict - involving the Pentagon, the CIA and other agencies like the Drug Enforcement Agency – using commando tactics, backed up by selective assassination by Predator Drones constitutes nothing less than a new Obama doctrine.

The Obama Administration has used these lethal, and almost certainly illegal under international law, anti-personnel drones, as far afield as Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia and the Philippines. Former President Jimmy Carter has criticised their usage as a violation of human rights. The White House convinces itself that such air strikes are not excessive because it counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, “unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent”, as a recent *New York Times* article so delicately put it. Anyway, the Administration is also using these drones in Mexico, as part of the war on the drug cartels. And now we are seeing similar operations in Honduras.

An article in the *New York Times* in May headlined ‘Lessons of Iraq Help U.S. Fight a Drug War in Honduras’ explores the link between the wars of George W. Bush and Obama’s tactics in Central America. The experiences of Iraq – precisely the need for flexible forward bases, multi-disciplinary missions, involving advisors, CIA ‘kill teams’, mercenaries and local troops – all are being reintroduced into Honduras. One of the US commanders in charge of operations in Honduras noted in the article the ‘insidious’ parallels between crime organisations and terror networks. One important difference he didn’t mention is the fact that the narcotics gangs would not exist in the first place were it not

for the demand for their products in the US itself. As long as that demand exists, any 'war on drugs' is likely to be unsuccessful.

There's one more detail connecting Iraq to Honduras. Significant oil reserves have been discovered in the Mosquito Coast region. The Texas based Honduras Texas Oil and Gas Company, which is seeking to exploit the region, estimate that there are six to eight billion barrels of oil reserves there. For that exploitation to begin, the area needs to be cleansed of any potential troublemakers.

What has the current war on drug traffickers got to do with the massacres of the 1980s? Paul Seils, vice president of the International Centre for Transitional Justice, said recently of Guatemala: "The war was officially ended in 1996 by the demands of the international community to achieve stability and promote investment. As expected, a free trade agreement with the US and privatisation fever triggered greater inequalities. Since then, Guatemala has become a failed country in the hands of drug trafficking routes between Colombia and Mexico, with murder rates even higher than during the war."

Drugs the Effect of Global Neoliberalism

There's no doubt that the region's drug gangs are an abomination. But the trade feeds directly off the atomisation and insecurity produced by global neoliberalism. Cocaine is also one of the few agricultural products guaranteed to reap high profits, even if the associated risks are correspondingly high. Mexico, for example, was virtually self-sufficient in food until 1960, but under free trade arrangements encouraged by the US, it has had to accept more and more cheap imported foodstuffs from the US. It's not a level playing field because the US can afford to subsidise its agribusiness. These subsidised imports undercut local producers, devastating small farmers and making the switch to drug production the only realistic means of survival. The flexibilisation of the labour force that accompanies free trade arrangements is also used by the drugs industry.

Fuelling US intervention in the region today is 'war on drugs', re-launched by George Bush Jr, but in fact reflecting a continuity in policy stretching back to Nixon. It was the principal justification for the activities of the Clinton Administration in the region. By 1997 it had spent \$78 million training Mexican military personnel at the aforementioned School of the Americas, all in the name of fighting narcotics, yet there wasn't a single seizure of cocaine to show for it. In fact, some of those trained defected and joined trafficking organizations, deploying the skills they had learnt at the School in Fort Benning to form paramilitary death squads. Between 1993 and 2009, 217,000 soldiers deserted the Mexican army. Many took their weapons with them and joined paramilitary groups once trained, now targeted by US forces.

Much of the so-called war on drugs at that time was a smokescreen for a clampdown against the emergent Zapatista Army for National Liberation, which gave a voice to some of the poorest people in the state of Chiapas. The Vice-President of Chase Bank in the US called for them to be "eliminated" and Donald E. Schulz of the US War College agreed that an insurgency in Mexico could endanger "access to oil".

“Thus,” argue Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda in their new book *Drug War Mexico*, published this month by Pluto, “the training and equipment apparently intended to crack down on the narco-industry’s billionaires was diverted towards suppressing the rebellion of impoverished indigenous peasants demanding equal rights.” Hundreds of supposed Zapatistas were killed, most notoriously at the 1997 Acteal massacre, where a government-trained paramilitary group killed 49 people - including 21 women and 15 children - at a gathering of a Catholic pacifist group who had been fasting and praying for several days.

The dangers of militarising the fight against narco-crime have not been heeded by President Obama. His statement of support for the Mexican president’s “desire to protect his people from narco-traffickers” is belied by the high levels of official collusion with the illegal trade, documentation of which exists. Meanwhile the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in December 2009 found the Mexican state guilty of extra-judicial execution and torture.

Different rationales, causes and justifications, but the same old methods. The scale and character of Central American violence today cannot begin to be understood without understanding the region’s brutal and traumatic past, when state forces could commit atrocities with total impunity, backed up the military might of the United States. No coming to terms with this experience, no articulation of these truths is complete without an honest and full accounting of the role of the US. The cycle of militarisation has to be broken. This is what is beginning to happen. Bringing the perpetrators of these crimes to book will take time. It is a vital first step towards not just elementary justice but articulating an alternative way forward to the cycle of repression that has so long dominated the region. But if it is to be enduring, the legal process will have to encompass those who funded, trained and armed the perpetrators – and who sometimes participated – and that includes US personnel.

THE MENACE OF SCIENCE WITHOUT WISDOM

Nicholas Maxwell

Reader Emeritus, Philosophy of Science, University College London
Lecture to the Ethical Society, 23 September 2012

We urgently need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of science – and of academic inquiry more generally. Instead of giving priority to the search for knowledge, universities need to devote themselves to seeking and promoting wisdom by rational means, wisdom being the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, wisdom thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how, but much else besides. A basic task ought to be to help humanity learn how to create a better world.

Acquiring scientific knowledge dissociated from a more basic concern for wisdom, as we do at present, is dangerously and damagingly irrational. Natural science has been extraordinarily successful in increasing knowledge. This has been of great benefit to humanity. But new knowledge and technological know-how increase our power to act which, without wisdom, may cause human

suffering and death as well as human benefit. All our modern global problems have arisen in this way: global warming, the lethal character of modern war and terrorism, threats posed by modern armaments (conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear), vast inequalities of wealth and power round the globe, rapid increase in population, destruction of tropical rain forests and other natural habitats, rapid extinction of species, even the AIDS epidemic (AIDS being spread by modern travel). All these distinctively modern crises have been made possible by modern science dissociated from the rational pursuit of wisdom. If we are to avoid in this century the horrors of the last one – wars, death camps, dictatorships, poverty, environmental damage – we urgently need to learn how to acquire more wisdom, which in turn means that our institutions of learning become effectively, rationally, devoted to that end.

My Call For A Revolution

The revolution we need would change every branch and aspect of academic inquiry. A basic intellectual task of academic inquiry would be to articulate our problems of living (personal, social and global) and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible actions, policies, political programmes, philosophies of life. This would be the task of social inquiry and the humanities. Tackling problems of knowledge would be secondary. Social inquiry would be at the heart of the academic enterprise, intellectually more fundamental than natural science. On a rather more long-term basis, social inquiry would be concerned to help humanity build cooperatively rational methods of problem-solving into the fabric of social and political life, so that we may gradually acquire the capacity to resolve our conflicts and problems of living in more cooperatively rational ways than at present.

Natural science would change to include three domains of discussion: evidence, theory, and aims - the latter including discussion of metaphysics, values and politics. Pursued for its own sake, science would be more like natural philosophy, intermingling science, metaphysics and philosophy as in the time of Newton. Academic inquiry as a whole would become a kind of people's civil service, doing openly for the public what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments. Academia would actively seek to educate the public by means of discussion and debate, and would not just study the public. Above all academia, internationally, would be devoted to helping humanity learn what we need to do in response to the impending crisis of global warming. This intellectual/institutional revolution, from knowledge to wisdom, has dramatic consequences both for the internal structure and organization of academia, and for its relationship with the rest of the social world.

These changes are not arbitrary. They all come from demanding that academia cure its current structural irrationality, so that reason – the authentic article – may be devoted to promoting human welfare.

The upshot is a new kind of inquiry – *wisdom-inquiry* – of which natural science forms an integral part. Wisdom-inquiry puts into the hands of humanity, for the first time, an instrument of learning rationally designed to help us realize what is of most value to us as we live – rationally designed to help us make progress towards as good a world as possible.

I should perhaps confess that I have been arguing for nearly 40 years now that we urgently need to transform academia so that *knowledge-inquiry* (what we have at present, inquiry devoted in the first instance to the pursuit of knowledge) becomes *wisdom-inquiry* – inquiry rationally devoted to seeking and promoting wisdom. Has my campaign to transform universities met with success? The answer, I am afraid, is: No. I have not even managed to get the idea across to my fellow philosophers, let alone to the rest of my academic colleagues. I have failed, even, to get philosophers to take seriously, as a fundamental problem of the discipline, the question: *What kind of inquiry can best help us make progress towards a wise world?*

The Wisdom-Enquiry Agenda

Viewed from another perspective, however, my call for a revolution, for the implementation of wisdom-inquiry, has been astonishingly successful. During the last ten to twenty years, all sorts of changes have taken place in academia that amount to putting aspects of wisdom-inquiry into practice – even if in complete ignorance of my work. In universities all over the world, departments, institutions and research centres have been created actively concerned with problems of social policy, climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, war and peace, community health and medical ethics. Scientists, especially climate scientists, nowadays actively seek to engage with politicians, the media and the public about issues that arise from their scientific research. At my own university, for example – University College London – there are some 140 research institutes and centres, some only recently founded, many interdisciplinary in character, devoted to such themes as ageing, cancer, cities, culture, public policy, the environment, global health, governance, migration, neuroscience, and security.

In addition, in the last few years, the attempt has been made to organize research at UCL around a few broad themes that include: global health, sustainable cities, intercultural interactions, and human wellbeing. This is being done so that UCL may all the better contribute to solving the immense global problems that confront humanity. There is even an input, here, from my own work. On the UCL website there is a policy document entitled “The Wisdom Agenda” (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/wisdom-agenda/2011-wisdom-agenda.pdf>).

Here, to conclude, is a list of 23 changes that need to be made if what we have at present, knowledge-inquiry, is to become what we so urgently need, wisdom-inquiry.

1. There needs to be a change in the basic intellectual *aim* of inquiry, from the growth of knowledge to the growth of wisdom — wisdom being taken to be the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others, and thus including knowledge, understanding and technological know-how (but much else besides).
2. There needs to be a change in the nature of academic *problems*, so that problems of living are included, as well as problems of knowledge – the former being treated as intellectually more fundamental than the latter.

3. There needs to be a change in the nature of academic *ideas*, so that proposals for action are included as well as claims to knowledge – the former, again, being treated as intellectually more fundamental than the latter.
4. There needs to be a change in what constitutes intellectual *progress*, so that progress-in-ideas-relevant-to-achieving-a-more-civilized-world is included as well as progress in knowledge, the former being indeed intellectually fundamental.
5. There needs to be a change in the idea as to where inquiry, at its most fundamental, is located. It is not esoteric theoretical physics, but rather the thinking we engage in as we seek to achieve what is of value in life. Academic thought is a (vital) adjunct to what really matters, personal and social thought active in life.
6. There needs to be a dramatic change in the nature of social inquiry (reflecting points 1 to 5). Economics, politics, sociology, and so on, are not, fundamentally, *sciences*, and do not, fundamentally, have the task of improving knowledge about social phenomena. Instead, their task is threefold. First, it is to articulate problems of living, and propose and critically assess possible solutions, possible actions or policies, from the standpoint of their capacity, if implemented, to promote wiser ways of living. Second, it is to promote such cooperatively rational tackling of problems of living throughout the social world. And third, at a more basic and long-term level, it is to help build the hierarchical structure of aims and methods of aim-oriented rationality into personal, institutional and global life, thus creating frameworks within which progressive improvement of personal and social life aims-and-methods becomes possible. These three tasks are undertaken in order to promote cooperative tackling of problems of living — but also in order to enhance empathic or “personalistic” understanding between people as something of value in its own right. Acquiring knowledge of social phenomena is a vital but subordinate activity, engaged in to facilitate the above three fundamental pursuits.
7. Natural science needs to change, so that it includes at least three levels of discussion: evidence, theory, and research aims. Discussion of aims needs to bring together scientific, metaphysical and evaluative consideration in an attempt to discover the most desirable and realizable research aims. It needs to influence, and be influenced by, exploration of problems of living undertaken by social inquiry and the humanities, and the public.
8. There needs to be a dramatic change in the relationship between social inquiry and natural science, so that social inquiry becomes intellectually more fundamental from the standpoint of tackling problems of living, promoting wisdom. Social inquiry influences choice of research aims for the natural and technological sciences, and is, of course, in turn influenced by the results of such research. (Social inquiry also, of course, conducts empirical research, in order to improve our understanding of what our problems of living are, and in order to assess policy ideas whenever possible.)
9. The current emphasis on specialized research needs to change so that

sustained discussion and tackling of broad, global problems that cut across academic specialties is included, both influencing and being influenced by, specialized research.

10. Academia needs to include sustained imaginative and critical exploration of possible futures, for each country, and for humanity as a whole, policy and research implications being discussed as well.

11. The way in which academic inquiry as a whole is related to the rest of the human world needs to change dramatically. Instead of being intellectually dissociated from the rest of society, academic inquiry needs to be communicating with, learning from, teaching and arguing with the rest of society — in such a way as to promote cooperative rationality and social wisdom. Academia needs to have just sufficient power to retain its independence from the pressures of government, industry, the military, and public opinion, but no more. Academia becomes a kind of civil service for the public, doing openly and independently what actual civil services are supposed to do in secret for governments.

12. There needs to be a change in the role that political and religious ideas, works of art, expressions of feelings, desires and values have within rational inquiry. Instead of being excluded, they need to be explicitly included and critically assessed, as possible indications and revelations of what is of value, and as unmasking of fraudulent values in satire and parody, vital ingredients of wisdom.

13. There need to be changes in education so that, for example, seminars devoted to the cooperative, imaginative and critical discussion of problems of living are at the heart of all education from five-year-olds onwards. Politics, which cannot be taught by knowledge-inquiry, becomes central to wisdom-inquiry, political creeds and actions being subjected to imaginative and critical scrutiny.

14. There need to be changes in the aims, priorities and character of pure science and scholarship, so that it is the curiosity, the seeing and searching, the knowing and understanding of individual persons that ultimately matters, the more impersonal, esoteric, purely intellectual aspects of science and scholarship being means to this end. Social inquiry needs to give intellectual priority to helping empathic understanding between people to flourish (as indicated in 6 above).

15. There need to be changes in the way mathematics is understood, pursued and taught. Mathematics is not a branch of knowledge at all. Rather, it is concerned to explore problematic *possibilities*, and to develop, systematize and unify problem-solving methods.

16. Literature needs to be put close to the heart of rational inquiry, in that it explores imaginatively our most profound problems of living and aids personalistic understanding in life by enhancing our ability to enter imaginatively into the problems and lives of others.

17. Philosophy needs to change so that it ceases to be just another specialized

discipline and becomes instead that aspect of inquiry as a whole that is concerned with our most general and fundamental problems — those problems that cut across all disciplinary boundaries. Philosophy needs to become again what it was for Socrates: the attempt to devote reason to the growth of wisdom in life.

18. Academic contributions need to be written in as simple, lucid, jargon-free a way as possible, so that academic work is as accessible as possible across specialties and to non-academics.

19. There needs to be a change in views about what constitute academic contributions, so that publications which promote (or have the potential to promote) public understanding as to what our problems of livings are and what we need to do about them are included, in addition to contributions addressed primarily to the academic community.

20. Every university needs to create a seminar or symposium devoted to the sustained discussion of fundamental problems that cut across all conventional academic boundaries, global problems of living being included as well as problems of knowledge and understanding. In addition, the following three institutional innovations ought also to be made to help wisdom-inquiry to flourish:

21. Natural science needs to create committees, in the public eye, and manned by scientists and non-scientists alike, concerned to highlight and discuss failures of the priorities of research to respond to the interests of those whose needs are the greatest – the poor of the earth – as a result of the inevitable tendency of research priorities to reflect the interests of those who pay for science, and the interests of scientists themselves.

22. Every national university system needs to include a national shadow government, seeking to do, virtually, free of the constraints of power, what the actual national government ought to be doing. The hope would be that virtual and actual governments would learn from each other.

23. The world's universities need to include a virtual world government which seeks to do what an actual elected world government ought to do, if it existed. The virtual world government would also have the task of working out how an actual democratically elected world government might be created.

Note

There is more about the wisdom-inquiry campaign on my website:

www.nick-maxwell.demon.co.uk.

Much of my work is available online free at the following websites:

<http://philpapers.org/profile/17092>

<http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/view/people/ANMAX22.date.html>

If you have any suggestions for speakers or event ideas, or would like to convene a Sunday afternoon informal, get in touch with Sid Rodrigues at **programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk** or 020 7061 6744.

HEMMING PRIZE ESSAY 2012

1st Prize: Peter Jones, Thomas Whitham Sixth Form

No moral system can rest solely on authority. It can never be sufficient justification for performing any action that someone commands it.

(A J Ayer, 1910-1989)

When considering the issue of how a good society should best establish the virtue of morality amongst its people, the debate often produces a particular position from which it is argued that there is a single code of human morality, or at least parts of such a code, that should be enforced from authority. This position is occupied largely, though not exclusively, by those for whom morality is guaranteed in some way, often through adherence to a sacred text or doctrine of religious revelation, and as such it is seen as imperative that the view of morality be upheld as law and enforced institutionally in order to prevent people from acting immorally. Examples of societies which have practised this brand of authoritarian morality are abundant and we need look no further than our own country's recent history to see a state in which people saw what was 'right' and 'wrong' as synonymous with what was legal and illegal. However, in assessing this system of moral authority we can identify serious flaws and indeed dangers that arise from it; and we can propose that a more active involvement in our own moral choices as well as a reduced role for the government in enforcing a common morality is of far greater value to a society wishing to identify itself as truly moral than any moral system which rests solely on authority.

In framing this discussion of morality, it is important to make the distinction between the kind of morality which is seen as immutable and is enforced from authority, and the kind which is seen at every level of society, a living morality which cuts its teeth on the experience and rationality of the individual members of society. This first kind of morality, practised in an authoritarian manner we might refer to as 'top-down morality'; whereas the second kind which does not rest solely on authority can be thought of as more of a 'grassroots' morality. While this distinction may at first appear to be rather arbitrary, in exploring the difference we see that the results for society of each kind of morality are quite different in practice, these differences highlighting the shortcomings of top-down morality.

Firstly, in his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill offers significant grounds to criticise the idea of top-down morality. Mill suggested that morality which is dictated from authority is often ill-founded to begin with, observing that "wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests, and its feelings of class superiority." [1] When it is accepted that one person can command moral authority over another, that person can effectively use their authority to tailor the common morality to their own interests; this is the first significant issue with top-down morality.

Mill also argues that even if we accept that a belief is true, the manner in which the belief is held remains crucial to its value, stating that "however true [a belief] may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a

dead dogma, not a living truth.”[2] It is this criticism which demonstrates the key flaw in the argument for top-down morality – when moral beliefs are enforced from authority they are not questioned, interrogated and experimented with, and as such they become dead dogma. This argument also provides grounds for a positive case for grassroots morality, as it is only through living with moral issues, discussing them, challenging them, and thinking about them rationally that we can know *why* we believe something to be right or wrong, and even then we must not draw a line under our morals but maintain the process of interrogation continually.

As well as these arguments, it is often argued that it is always better to do something positive voluntarily rather than being forced to. When we make our own choices, moral or otherwise, it is almost universally accepted that they are of more value than when they are made for us by others. When the choices we make are correct, we cherish them because we understand fully why we hold them to be correct, and when we fail we benefit too because we have had the opportunity to learn from mistakes and this also helps us to understand the beliefs we hold. As well as this, we tend to uphold our actions with more commitment and enthusiasm when we choose to do them voluntarily than when we are made to do them. Indeed, this is a position often taken by those religious persons who also hold that there is a common morality we should all adhere to. Christian philosopher John Hick articulated this point by stating that “a moral goodness that exists as the agent’s initial given nature, without ever having been chosen by him in the face of temptations to the contrary, is intrinsically less valuable than a moral goodness which has been built up through the agent’s own responsible choices through time in the face of alternative possibilities.”[3] This demonstrates that even if we were to subscribe to the notion that there is a common objective morality, there is no reason to deduce from this that the morality should be enforced through authority.

In the light of these criticisms, we may begin to question and assess what positive reasons there are to support the view that moral issues should rest on authority. The most prominent of such claims is that of Lord Patrick Devlin, who argued that “an established morality is as necessary as good government to the welfare of society...There is disintegration when no common morality is observed and history shows that the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of disintegration, so that society is justified in taking the same steps to preserve its moral code as it does to preserve its government and other essential institutions.”[4] Devlin’s view is that society would in fact break down without morality resting on authority, even calling common morality an ‘essential institution’, and he uses homosexuality as an example of an immoral act which poses a threat to society. Devlin’s views are shared by many social conservatives even in modern societies, particularly religious conservatives.

However, we can critically assess Devlin’s argument simply by observing societies which have tested his claim. Let us consider abortion rights, often denied on the grounds of morality, and Devlin’s own example of homosexuality. One might suppose that if Devlin were correct in his claims, the legalisation of abortion and homosexual acts alone would lead to the disintegration of society, and same-sex marriage even more so. However, in the Netherlands, same-sex

marriages have been legal since 2001 and abortions legal since 1984. We might expect, according to Devlin's views, the effects of this to be socially devastating; however, the Netherlands ranks 3rd worldwide on the 2011 Human Development Index (HDI)[5], measuring standard of living, health and knowledge, and 4th in human happiness (2010)[6]. Similar patterns can be found in Norway, Canada and Sweden, all of which rank in the top 10 in both HDI and happiness and all of which share the same liberal, secular values of the Netherlands in allowing their citizens to decide for themselves what is morally right on a wide range of issues the state could conceivably have claimed authority on.

Similarly, we may consider Yemen, a country whose moral code is fiercely upheld and in which abortion, alcohol and homosexuality, among other things considered immoral, are illegal. Devlin may expect that such a society, in which everyone is singing from the same moral hymn sheet, would be socially prosperous. However, Yemen ranks 154th in HDI and 96th in happiness. Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the same moral enforcements, rank 88th and 56th respectively in HDI and 81st and 58th in happiness[5][6]. This data demonstrates that there are no significant grounds to hold the belief that morality should be tied to authority, and it is certainly difficult to see how these societies can be said to have broken down and disintegrated. The high HDI and happiness rankings would suggest that opening up moral choices leads to the kind of society we should all aspire to live in.

In conclusion, it seems that Ayer was correct in his claim that no moral system can rest solely on authority. As a matter of principle, top-down morality runs counter to Hick's defence of freedom to choose our actions, as well as running counter to the important values of diversity and tolerance; and as a practical matter, it would appear that morality which is imposed upon us is in fact a barrier to our human development and happiness. As removing such barriers is surely our primary goal as human beings, this is as good an argument as any against a morality resting on authority

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- [1] *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, Ch. 1.
- [2] *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill, Ch. 2.
- [3] *Evil and the God of Love* by John Hick, p.44
- [4] *Morals and the Criminal Law* by Patrick Devlin
- [5] *United Nations Human Development Report 2011* - Human Development Index
- [6] *Forbes: The World's Happiest Countries* (2010) – Gallop World Poll

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HEMMING PRIZE ESSAY 2012

2nd Prize: Lucy Mahon, St Peter's School

No moral system can rest solely on authority. It can never be sufficient justification for performing any action that someone commands it.

(A J Ayer, 1910-1989)

Authority is defined as the power to give orders and the right to exact obedience. In *Humanist Outlook*, A.J Ayer challenged the notion that submission to authority is a sufficient form of moral system. He demonstrated such contempt for authority in his first book, *The Foundations of Ethics, Language, Truth and Logic*, which changed the face of philosophy in a courageous, iconoclastic attack on accepted academic philosophy. Therein, he rejected all ethical statements as meaningless because they are neither analytically nor synthetically verifiable. His belief in emotivism therefore explains both his rejection of putative views and conventional authority, and his assertion that “no moral system can rest solely on authority”. This ethical outlook poses thought-provoking questions about successful forms of government, the motivation behind moral decision-making, the subjectivity of morality and the inexorable nature of moral progression. However, Ayer’s view ultimately questions whether any power has sufficient authority to justify obedience and the extent to which an individual is accountable for their moral actions.

An effective moral system can theoretically rest solely on authority, so long as that authority is perfect: arguably, a benign and incorruptible dictatorship which supports the interest of the people and maintains justice is preferable to a flawed but egalitarian democracy. Plato’s *The Republic* describes a utopian city in which the political system is controlled by philosophers who are trained to distinguish between real and apparent truths and are impelled by the ‘common good’. They are inspired by justice and are thus motivated to seek justice for others. This ideal political system would have the ability to construct and support successfully a moral system based on truth and justice. However, even Plato questioned whether this would be practically possible. Such a system requires the individual to relinquish autonomy, a fundamental necessity for human fulfilment, to the hands of another. Moreover, in reality, giving a small group or individual ultimate power is likely to be corrupting and therefore cannot be relied upon to establish a moral system of government.

It follows from the traditional philosophical perception of ‘God’ as an omnipotent and omnibenevolent creator that God is the ultimate benign dictator: many would say that religion provides an effective moral system, determined by a divine authority. A Christian makes moral decisions using revealed law in scripture, the authority of the church, natural revelation and conscience. Each of these facilities derives from divine authority and thus reduces the value of moral decision to God’s gratification. The sole motive behind a Christian’s moral action is submission to the divine will. Therefore, without God, mankind would descend into immorality and anarchy. Scientists and philosophers have disputed this premise, and have frequently analysed the question of ‘why are people good?’ In the twenty-first century, militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins are

building on the work of Bertrand Russell and Ayer by challenging religious attitudes and the legitimacy of obedience to divine authority.

The danger of abandoning religious authority is that the absence of belief may lead to a moral vacuum. Ayer had no such concern, and shocked his contemporaries with his overt atheism: Bishop Butler responded to this by saying “Then I cannot see why you do not lead a life of unbridled immorality.”[1] The belief that “If God doesn’t exist, everything is permitted”[2] (Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*) is widespread in religious communities. In fact, Ayer led a moral life as a parent, human rights activist and teacher. Christopher Hitchens postulates that it is actually the Bishop who could not lead a moral life without submitting to religious authority, and implies that the religious might be inclined to immorality, were it not for their faith. In *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens contends that rather than edifying moral behaviour, religion can be positively malevolent. It is and has been used to justify bloodshed and oppression, and incites the rejection of natural compassion by silencing the voice of conscience. Thus, it could be damaging to allow religious authority to inform a moral system.

If religion cannot serve the role, it seems natural to explore the potential of other ethical sources to provide the basis for a moral system. Cultural relativism argues that the concept of morality stems from the *de facto* values of the culture. The theory states that one will always act in a way that is consistent with local customs and ideals. In order to appreciate an individual’s moral decisions, one must first be cognisant of their social and cultural background. Thus, behaviour within a society can only be judged by the standards of that society. Arguably, this is a form of determinism; our culture determines the acceptance of certain values. No successful moral authority can circumvent the pre-existing, traditional ethics ingrained in a culture. Attempts to eliminate the influence of culture on the population have proved futile: during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Mao Tse Tung outlawed religion and traditional Chinese ritual in order to enforce ultimate socialism. However, suppressed practices continued covertly and re-emerged after his death, demonstrating that cultural ideas are impossible to extinguish by authority alone.

Moreover, evidence is accumulating for the existence of intrinsic universal moral laws. Moral Objectivism recognises moral norms but requires the use of reason to justify them. Clyde Kluckhohn accurately observed that “Every culture has a concept of murder... notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behaviour... [and] of mutual obligations.”[3] These common features suggest that there are ethical concepts which are of intrinsic value across cultures. Fundamental, universal values can be identified and are derived from an internal locus. This implies that an objective moral framework is known intuitively and “overarches rulers and ruled alike”[4] (C.S Lewis). However, there are differing interpretations and perspectives of this set of values dependent on cultural background. Therefore, an individual behaves according to an internal value system, which tends to and is motivated by goodness for its own sake. This internal moral compass cannot be completely overridden by authority. Supporting this idea, Dawkins offers a Darwinist theory for the origin of internal and cultural ethics, using natural selection: certain ‘altruistic’ values evolve

because they are in the interest of the propagation of ‘selfish genes’ within the group, given that group members are likely to share genes.

If one accepts that there is an internal moral system, it is evident that the resulting cultural and ethical predilections can be overcome when an individual is under the power of a greater force, such as fear of oppression in a tyranny, or for a greater good, such as the imperative to follow military orders in the pursuit of a just war. However, there are countless instances in which blind deference to authority has resulted in grave injustice and calamity. Indeed, “Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth”[5] (Einstein). Authority is most successful when it serves to exploit or manipulate popular opinion. For example, Hitler’s rise to power in Nazi Germany was possible because of pre-existing public sentiment against minority groups. History shows that regimes that are contrary to universal moral codes and oppress their population ultimately do not flourish. Moreover, the diminution of ignorance and the growth of tolerance have resulted in increasing moral progression that cannot be quashed by any form of superimposed authority. Achever Clausewitz quotes Blaise Pascal: “...violence cannot weaken truth, and its efforts can only make truth stand out more clearly.”[6] Therefore, no moral system can be upheld if it is not congruent with the immediate moral values of the people, regardless of authority’s instruction.

From this it follows that, although laws can be used to shape behaviour, for example banning smoking in public places, in general, successful legislation must reflect moral values in order to be accepted. As William Blackstone states, “Law is the embodiment of the moral sentiment of the people.” Laws that do not mirror prevalent attitudes undermine authority and result in public defiance. This is exemplified in the American Civil Rights Movement in which increasing numbers of Americans were sympathetic to the plight of the African Americans. The force of public support led to the success of Martin Luther King’s campaign. In this way, the populace both fashions and leads society’s moral system, while authority must follow behind, as a means of enforcing law and actualising justice.

In conclusion, a moral system could rely solely on authority only if that authority were infallible and had the support of the people. This fantastical situation is the only one in which it would be acceptable to act unquestioningly simply because it is commanded. Like Ayer, I cannot accept that there is a divine or human authority that should have the power to override an individual’s rational expression of morality. The aim of any authority should be to achieve a synchrony between the moral framework of the individual and universally accepted values, and its sole purpose to realise justice and promote the contemporary common good. In the words of Mark Twain, “Laws control the lesser man... Right conduct controls the greater one.”

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- 1 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, page 185,
- 2 Quoted by John Mayled Routledge (2007) in *OCR Religious Ethics for AS and A2*, 2nd edition, p.79.
- 3 Clyde Kluckhohn, *Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non*, p.276

- 4 C.S Lewis, *The Poison of Subjectivism*, p.108.
 5 R. Highfield & P. Carter, *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein*, p.78.
 6 Blaise Pascal quoted by Achever Clausewitz, *Carnets Nord* preface p.7

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HEMMING PRIZE ESSAY 2012

3rd Prize: Emily Dyson, Hills Road Sixth Form College

No moral system can rest solely on authority. It can never be sufficient justification for performing any action that someone commands it.

(A J Ayer, 1910-1989)

It is true that “no moral system can rest solely on authority”. Any moral system that claims to be based on unquestioning obedience to the commands of an authority has in fact altogether disposed of any kind of system of morality. One must consider the formation of one’s morality, and whether it is even possible to completely avoid the influence of authority. While absolute obedience to an authority is harmful to the self and to society, both can benefit from a wiser, more experienced authority on a certain subject.

A system of morality consists of the principles that govern one’s actions. In its most fundamental sense, morality embodies one’s sense of right and wrong. One could argue that one’s system of morality is based upon one’s innate ability to reason. Descartes, for instance, claimed not only that man has this innate sense of right and wrong, but also that “the power of judging rightly and of distinguishing the true from the false... is naturally equal in all men”. If the reason, perhaps the ‘conscience’, of an individual is the sole basis of their moral system, one could argue that there is no place for the external influence of authority - or indeed for any external influence.

Yet one cannot deny the role of experience in the formation of a moral system. While an individual might claim independence of thought, it is clear that their parents, for instance, have played a large part in moulding their perception of the

world around them. It is impossible to avoid the influence of one's environment on one's moral system. If one is to believe that everyone is born with a sense of right and wrong, there must be a justification for their varying systems of morality. While humans have the faculty of reason, which allows them to form systems of morality, the conclusions which they reach are influenced by their sensory experience of the world. John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* writes that there are "two... fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring"- that is, "our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves". External influence, including the influence of authority, is unavoidable.

However, resting one's moral system solely on authority restricts one's morality to that one external influence, and places this authority above one's own reason. We substitute an independent system of thought with that of another's, thereby eliminating an individual moral system altogether. Blind obedience reduces humans to mere machines, with the sole purpose of carrying out commands. Samuel P. Ginder once said that "If moral behaviour were simply following rules, we could program a computer to be moral." Morality must be more than submitting one's will to another's because they have instructed it. Those who claim that blind obedience is a legitimate line of reasoning neglect the fact that it is not a line of one's own reasoning at all, but the unquestioning adoption of another's. While blind obedience is not a moral system, it is possible for the moral system of an authority, acted upon by another, to produce behaviour that benefits society, which can lead observers to consider the obeyer as moral.

Perhaps this is the origin of the myth that there is an inherent virtue in following orders. However, the behaviour in question is not moral. If an individual chooses to blindly submit their will to the moral system of an authority, they allow another to control actions for which they still have a moral responsibility. The final defence of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi leader who played a key part in the systematic murder of around six million Jews, was that he "was just following orders". Even if Eichmann's actions were merely the carrying out of commands from his superiors, this did not completely absolve him from moral responsibility. Indeed, one could argue that a conscious decision to blindly submit one's will to that of one's superiors is amoral in and of itself, in that it seeks to evade moral responsibility. Stanley Milgram, an American social psychologist and author of *Behavioural study of Obedience*, said, "The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority".

The wilful ignorance of one's own conscience for blind obedience to an authority has been the root of evil throughout history. All dictatorships depend on this eradication of independent thought. Blind obedience to an authority not only damages the freedom and morality of the individual, but endangers the progression of society. On a practical level, it is unwise for every member of a society to blindly carry out the commands of one authority. Any errors made by that authority are magnified on a huge scale. Mao Zedong, Communist dictator of China in the years 1949-1976, clearly exemplifies the danger of unchecked authority. Mao's plans to bring about a 'Great Leap Forward' were overly

idealistic, designed to illustrate the superiority of his belief in mass mobilisation, and ignored simple economic truths. In his role as unchallenged dictator of China, he was subject to little criticism, and any opposition was quashed. His underlings' sole aim was to blindly carry out his orders, rejecting their own independent reasoning. As a result, the errors in Mao's programme were amplified to an enormous extent. The estimated death toll of the Great Famine that followed is 30 million. Society should welcome different schools of thought, as this variation has a balancing effect, and tends to moderate changes in commonly accepted morality.

While one should seek a system of morality based upon independent thought, one should also welcome the inevitable *influence* of authority. It is important to form our own ideas, and to govern ourselves, using the faculty of reason with which we are born. However, we can learn much from the ideas that have already been formed by others, including those in authority. It would be foolish, perhaps impossible, to commit only to those ideas of which we are the author. C. S. Lewis once said that "Believing things on authority only means believing them because you've been told them by someone you think trustworthy. Ninety-nine per cent of the things you believe are believed on authority. I believe there is such a place as New York. I haven't seen it myself. I couldn't prove by abstract reasoning that there must be such a place. I believe it because reliable people have told me so".

It is with our independent thought that we can consider the ideas of others, and choose to adopt or dismiss them. One must accept that the ideas of someone who is an authority on a certain subject have more bearing than the ideas of someone who isn't. While it is healthy, for instance, to question the advice of a doctor, one seeks their advice in the knowledge that they have studied medicine, and will therefore have a greater understanding of the workings of the human body than one who hasn't. In the same sense, it is reasonable to hold the advice of a moral leader or philosopher who has devoted much of their life to the formation of a coherent moral system in greater esteem than one who hasn't. Lactantius held that the authority of philosophers "is of greater weight, and their judgement more to be relied on, because they are believed to have paid attention... to the investigation of the truth". We use our reason and experience to form our own judgement on the advice, perhaps instruction, of an authority. The danger lies in failing to question this advice, and in binding oneself to their commands.

A moral system that rests solely on obedience to authority is not a moral system at all. Unquestioning obedience is an attempt to bypass one's own morality. An individual who claims that they are justified in performing an action simply because 'someone commands it' seeks to evade moral responsibility, and thereby disposes of a moral system altogether. Society benefits from the balancing effect of independent thought, and varying systems of morality. However, while a moral system cannot rest *solely* on authority, one must consider whether authority can serve any function in the search for morality. Although an authority's command provides no justification for an action, the teaching role of a recognised expert in a given field is useful in the formation of an individual's moral system. Allowing authority to be exercised *over* an individual's moral system is fraught, but an individual's consideration of the

teachings of one who is an authority *on* an issue can benefit their own moral reasoning. Authority can therefore play a part in a system of morality, but by no means should it be the foundation of it.

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VIEWPOINTS

Putin's Russia True to Form (Editorial, *ER* Aug/Sept)

Around the time that the Russian Geographer was seeking the Tsar's permission to travel abroad, A J P Taylor reminds us that (at about the beginning of the last century) an Englishman could travel abroad without a passport. Has any reader tried to come back – even from France – without one recently?

Also, as regards the 'Pussy Rioters', their femaleness in itself was surely not the only factor contributing to their offence (if in fact it did at all). It was that their behaviour was outrageous, given the setting. How would we expect to feel if someone performed in such a way on, say, the tomb of the Unknown Warrior?

John Hyde – Kidderminster, Worcs

But would we send them to prison for two years? [Ed.]

'Lost' my faith? Not me!

A contributor to the NSS website who recently complained of the way he was often described in the media as having 'lost' the faith he was born into, asked for a stronger word. I replied,

"We atheists have definitely not 'lost' our immature beliefs: we have outgrown them, confronted them, retracted them, spurned them, vetoed them, shaken them off, abrogated them, repudiated them, quashed them, shed them, rebuffed them, overcame them, invalidated them, abandoned them, rescinded them, expelled them, scrapped them, dropped them, discarded them, renounced them, rejected them, cast them off, disowned them, disdained them, ditched them, overturned them, dispensed with them, dumped them, remedied them, counteracted them, rectified them, overhauled them, transformed them, modernised them, replaced them, survived them, regurgitated them, even abjured them... Just a few suggestions."

Barbara Smoker – Bromley

Don't anyone dare accuse Barbara of having *lapsed*. [Ed]

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

81st Conway Memorial Lecture 2012
7.00pm Monday 12 November 2012

ARE WE SEEING SIGNALS FROM BEFORE THE BIG BANG?

Sir Roger Penrose

*Emeritus Rouse Ball Professor of Mathematics at the Mathematical Institute;
Emeritus Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford*

Chairman: Michael Rowan-Robinson

*Professor of Astrophysics at the Blackett Laboratory, Imperial College, London;
Past President of the Royal Astronomical Society and a Gresham Professor of Astronomy*

In this year's Conway Memorial Lecture, Sir Roger Penrose will put forward an alternate view of the history and origin of the universe. Current cosmology takes the origin of the entire universe to be that overreaching explosion referred to as the Big Bang*. There is indeed much evidence for the actual occurrence of such an event, but was it the actual beginning?

The proposal of conformal cyclic cosmology (CCC) takes what we currently regard as the entire history of the Universe, from its Big Bang origin (but without an 'inflationary phase') to its final exponential expansion, to be but one aeon of a continual succession of such aeons. The big bang of each is taken to be a continuation of the exponentially expanding remote future of the previous one via an infinite rescaling of space and time.

Events involving supermassive black hole encounters in the aeon previous to ours would have important observational implications for CCC, detectable within the ubiquitous cosmic microwave background. Some intriguing new evidence for this will be presented.

* A term coined by Fred Hoyle, who gave the 47th Conway Memorial Lecture in 1956 entitled *The Time Scale of the Universe*. {Ed}

Admission Free

THE HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

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

The Library is now open to the public Sunday to Thursday, 10 am to 5.30 pm. When evening courses are running, the Library will remain open in the evenings until the start of the classes. The Library will be closed on Fridays. Check the website for details or contact the Librarian.

Cathy Broad, Librarian

Tel: 020 7061 6747. Email: library@ethicalsoc.org.uk

SPES EVENING COURSES 2012

All sessions are from 1900-2100h

DEATH AND DYING

Author **Peter Cave**; Tutor: **Sam Fremantle**; £10 a session

- 9 Oct: Respecting the Dying; Respecting the Deceased
- 16 Oct: Meaning of Life

APPLIED ETHICS.

Author **Richard Norman**; Tutor: **Shahrar Ali**; £10 a session

- 10 Oct: Concern for Others - Charity, Justice and Equality
- 17 Oct: Concern for Others - Animals, the Environment and Future Generations
- 24 Oct: Sexual Relations
- 31 Oct: Is Life Sacred?

EXPLORING HUMANISM

Tutor: **Jane O'Grady** £10 a session

- 23 Oct: What Do Humanists Believe?
- 30 Oct: What Are the Historical Roots of Humanism?
- 6 Nov: Where do Humanists Get Their Moral Values?
- 13 Nov: How Do Humanists Handle Moral Dilemmas?
- 20 Nov: What is the Meaning and Purpose of Life for Humanists?
- 27 Nov: What Do Humanists Do? (Celebrations and Campaigns)

ASPECTS OF HUMANISM

Author **Brendan Larvor**, Tutor: **Mark Fielding** £10 a session

- 7 Nov: What Do We Mean By Humanism?
- 14 Nov: The Scientific, Historical and Moral Cases Against Theism
- 21 Nov: Humanist Ethics
- 28 Nov: Liberalism
- 4 Dec: Human Rights and Tolerance
- 5 Dec: Religion and Faith
- 11 Dec: Nihilism, Naturalism and Nietzsche
- 12 Dec: Meaning, Ritual and Ceremony

THE 80th CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE

JEREMY BENTHAM: PROPHET OF SECULARISM by **Philip Schofield**

Copies available at £4 inc post from the
South Place Ethical Society



PROGRAMME OF EVENTS AT THE ETHICAL SOCIETY

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

Tel: 020 7405 1818 Registered Charity No. 251396

For programme updates, email: programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk

Website: www.conwayhall.org.uk

Admission to Sunday morning lectures is free for members of SPES and £3(£2conc) for non-members. For other events, no charge unless stated.

Sunday meetings are held in the Brockway Room.

OCTOBER 2012

Sunday 7 **FREE SPEECH! LIBEL REFORM IN THE LAST CHANCE SALOON**
1100 **Mike Harris** from *Index on Censorship*

Sunday 14 **A SCIENTIFIC ODYSSEY ACROSS AMERICA**
1100 **Neil Denny** reports on his 39 interviews with American scientists

Saturday 20 CFI UK and CONWAY HALL
10.30-1600 **HEALING POWERS OF THE MIND?**
Chris French, Andy Lewis, Mike Heap, Serena Roney-Dougal
£10 (£5 students / concessions).

Sunday 21 **EPIGENETICS: THE MISSING LINK IN THE NATURE/NURTURE**
1100 **DICHOTOMY?**
Nessa Carey, author of *The Epigenetics Revolution*

Sunday 28
11.00 **OUR PUBLIC RELATIONS, THEIR PROPAGANDA: ENGINEERING**
CONSENT IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY
Graham Bell

NOVEMBER

Sunday 4 **8 PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL OPTIMISTS**
1100 **Mark Stevenson**, author of *An Optimist's Tour of the Future*

Sunday 11 **INVISIBLE ENGLAND: THE USE OF HOLDING THERAPY IN THE UK**
1100 **Anya Chaika**, British social worker

1230 **SPECIAL GENERAL MEETING OF SPES** (for members only)

1400 **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF SPES** (for members only)

Monday 12 81st CONWAY MEMORIAL LECTURE
1900 **ARE WE SEEING SIGNALS FROM BEFORE THE BIG BANG?**
Roger Penrose (for details see page 26 of the *Ethical Record*)

Sunday 18 **PHARMAGEDDON**
1100 **David Healy**, psychopharmacologist, website RxISK.org

SPES's CONWAY HALL SUNDAY CONCERTS 2012

7 Oct, Artea Quartet	28 Oct, Mira Quartet / Hiro Takenouchi (piano)
14 Oct, Tempest Trio	4 Nov, Callaghan Trio
21 Oct, London Haydn Quartet	11 Nov, Aristotle Ensemble

6.30pm Tickets £8; under 18 £4

Full details on: www.conwayhallsundayconcerts.org.uk