

Ethical Record

The Proceedings of the Conway Hall Ethical Society

Vol. 118 No. 9

£1.50

October 2013

EDITORIAL - MY COUNTRY IS *NOT* ALWAYS RIGHT

If patriotism ('the last refuge of the scoundrel') ideally means concern for the *true* interests of a country's inhabitants, then it cannot, in spite of the *Daily Mail*, be identified with automatic approval of the country's established institutions. If these result in the complacency and opulence of an 'upper' class amid the exploitation and poverty of a 'lower' class, as was apparent to socially aware persons in the 1930s, such persons should rightly feel rage against those institutions and seek to change a system that was clearly unjust. This would be true patriotism – demonstrated by Labour's victory in the 1945 general election. Ordinary people knew better than to have regard for the *Daily Mail's* jeremiads.



29 September 2013. The Ethicals outside the Leicester's Secular Hall. The local secular society hosted CHES's visit and provided a most welcome lunch. The group then travelled to Northampton and listened to numerous speeches on the traffic island around the statue of Charles Bradlaugh.

WHEN IS CERTAINTY JUSTIFIABLE?	Richard Baron	3
THE RA's 'RATIONAL PARLIAMENT'	Report by David Simmonds	8
THE LITERATE HUMANIST	John Severs	12
VIEWPOINTS	<i>Mazin Zeki, John Severs, Nigel Sinnott, Tom Rubens</i>	17
HEMMING ESSAY PRIZE WINNERS		19
THE ECONOMICS OF KILLING	Vijay Mehta	20
THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY: A GODLESS CONGREGATION	Christopher Tofallis	26
OBITUARY - BILL (W. J.) McILROY		27
FORTHCOMING EVENTS		28

CONWAY HALL ETHICAL SOCIETY

Conway Hall Humanist Centre

25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

www.conwayhall.org.uk

G.C. Chairman: Chris Bratcher **G.C. Vice-chairman:** Giles Enders

Editor: Norman Bacrac

Please email texts and viewpoints for the Editor to: bacrac@fsmail.net

Staff

Chief Executive Officer:	Jim Walsh	Tel: 020 7061 6745	Jim@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Administrator:	Martha Lee	Tel: 020 7061 6741	admin@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Finance Officer:	Linda Lamnica	Tel: 020 7061 6740	finance@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Librarian:	Catherine Broad	Tel: 020 7061 6747	library@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Hon. Archivist	Carl Harrison		carl@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Programme Co-ordinator:	Sid Rodrigues	Tel: 020 7061 6744	sid@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Lettings Officer:	Carina Dvorak	Tel: 020 7061 6750	lettings@ethicalsoc.org.uk
Caretakers:	Eva Aubrechtova (i/c)	Tel: 020 7061 6743	Eva@ethicalsoc.org.uk
<i>together with:</i>	Brian Biagioni, Sean Foley, Tony Fraser, Rogerio Retuerma		
Maintenance:	Zia Hameed	Tel: 020 7061 6742	Zia@ethicalsoc.org.uk

Obituary

We regret to report the death of Dr Alan Rosenberg of Necton, Norfolk, who had been a member of the Society since 1997.

CALLING SACRE* MEMBERS IN CHES

CHES member Zelda Bailey is on three London SACREs and would like to meet to discuss common problems with any other SACRE members who frequent Conway Hall. Please email bacrac@fsmail.net if you would like to join such an informal group.

*Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education

THE HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

The Humanist Library and Archives are open for members and researchers on Sundays to Thursdays from 1000 - 1700. Please inform the Librarian, Catherine Broad, of your intention to visit. The Library has an extensive collection of new and historic freethought material.

When evening courses are running, the Library will remain open on selected evenings. These will be advertised on the website.

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

CONWAY HALL 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)

WHEN IS CERTAINTY JUSTIFIABLE?

Richard Baron

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 8 September 2013, arranged by Philosophy Now

We believe many propositions, that is, factual statements. When can we be certain of the truth of a proposition? Many of our scientific beliefs have been tested to the highest standards, and many of our everyday beliefs seem to be undeniable. But certainty still looks like a step too far. It is the next door neighbour of dogmatism.

We shall call a proposition certain, if we cannot currently doubt it. Even if it is certain, we might one day deny it. We might find new evidence, or a new way of thinking, that we cannot yet imagine. The ideas of three philosophers will help us to explore the relationship between certainty and the possibility of denial.

Quine and Popper

Our first two philosophers are Willard Van Orman Quine (1908 – 2000) and Karl Popper (1902 – 1994). They both thought that there was no such thing as a proposition which we could never come to deny.

In his paper “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, Quine argued that our many pieces of knowledge are woven together in a single fabric. At the edge of the fabric, we have observations: for example, the observation that plant leaves are green. Moving into the fabric, we have theories which explain some of these observations. We have theories about how plants extract energy from sunlight, and the role of chlorophyll, and why tissues with chlorophyll in them look green. We can move further into the fabric, towards its centre. We have propositions about molecules, the bonds within them, and chemical reactions, which explain how chlorophyll does its job. Further in, our knowledge of elementary particles and fundamental forces explains why chemical bonds and reactions work in the ways that they do. Now we are deep into the equations of physics, very near the centre of the fabric. We need to explain why the equations fit together, and why they have the solutions that they in fact have. We find the answers to those questions in mathematics, which sits in the middle of the fabric, along with logic.

We sometimes get evidence that clashes with propositions in the fabric. Suppose we saw a lot of leaves that were not green, but purple. We would create exceptions to the rule that leaves were green. But suppose we kept on finding leaves that were purple, on lots of species of plants. Then it would not be enough simply to say that there were exceptions. We would have to change our theories of how plants worked, in order to accommodate what we had found. That is not a surprise. But what is a surprise is how far Quine would take this. We might find that we could not explain how plants got their energy, using the chemical that gave the purple colour. We could tackle that by changing our general theories of how chemical reactions worked. That would be drastic. It would have knock-on effects in other areas. But we might still decide to do it, if that gave us a fabric of knowledge which was a better fit with our observations overall.

Quine would even contemplate changes to the laws of logic, at the centre of our fabric, if that was the best option. He would not do that to accommodate purple leaves, but he does suggest that playing around with the laws of logic might be worth doing to simplify quantum mechanics. If we contemplate going that far, nothing is safe. Some propositions, like our laws of logic, would be at very low risk of getting changed. But nothing would be immune.

Analytic and Synthetic Propositions

There is a traditional distinction between two types of proposition, analytic and synthetic, which would create major difficulties for Quine's proposal to put mathematics and logic in the firing line. Analytic propositions are true by virtue of meanings. One classic example is "If anyone is a bachelor, he is unmarried". Analytic propositions only show us how our definitions fit together. They tell us nothing about the real world: the example would be true, even if there were no bachelors anywhere in the world. Correspondingly, no facts about the world could show them up as false. Synthetic propositions, on the other hand, tell us about the world. "Ice floats in water" is an example. We have to observe ice, in icebergs or in our drinks, to see whether this is true. If lumps of ice sank, it would be false.

There are two obvious ways to categorize mathematical propositions. The first way is to treat them as analytic. We define numbers, geometric shapes, and so on, in certain ways. Then the propositions of mathematics follow from the definitions. The second way is to follow Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), and to regard the propositions as synthetic, but as unavoidable: we can only make sense of the world, if we see it as complying with our mathematics. Either way would make it very hard to agree with Quine. Analytic propositions cannot be false. And on Kant's view, we cannot conceive a world in which they are false.*

Quine, however, saw himself as safe from this difficulty. He rejected the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. As we move towards the centre of the fabric, propositions get safer and safer from rejection. But there is no secure wall around the centre, which would make any proposition within the wall analytic and completely safe. His views also do not leave any room for a barrier to our coming to look at the world in a radically new way. Such a new way could allow us to conceive the world, even after we had rejected propositions that followed from our current way of making sense of the world.

Popper also put everything in danger. He said that even the most brilliant, well-tested, successful theory might be brought crashing down tomorrow, if evidence that contradicted it turned up. Of course, it makes sense to rely on our successful

* {In Kant's day, Euclid's geometrical axioms (where parallel lines never meet) were accepted as the only logically possible geometry and therefore certainly true for the universe, believed by Kant to be known to us *a priori*. In the 19th century however, mathematicians invented several equally logically coherent but *non-Euclidian* geometries, opening the possibility that one of these might actually apply to this universe. In 1915, Einstein did adopt one of these new forms for his theory of gravity; it was confirmed by observations made during a solar eclipse in 1919. [Ed]}

theories, in order to build bridges and cure diseases. And they might never run into trouble. But we can never know that they won't one day run into trouble. As with Quine, no proposition is completely safe from being denied at some time in the future.

Popper also exposed mathematics to this risk, although in a different way from Quine. He said that a proposition like " $2 + 2 = 4$ " could be taken in two senses. If we take it as a piece of abstract mathematics, in isolation from the world, we cannot deny it. But if we apply it to the world, it might turn out not to work. It does not work for the addition of velocities, for example. If you move north, at 0.2 times the speed of light, relative to the Earth, and I move north, at 0.2 times the speed of light, relative to you, I do not move at 0.4 times the speed of light relative to the Earth. Relativity dictates that I only move at 0.385 times the speed of light.

On mathematics, Quine's analysis is stronger than Popper's. Quine explains the range of options that we have, to amend our fabric in one place or another. When Einstein introduced relativity theory, he did not change mathematics; he changed the physical description of the world. Changing mathematics, in the sense of denying some formula because it does not work in the world, really is a last resort. We first look for ways to re-describe the world, so that we can find an excuse not to apply the formula.

Wittgenstein

Our third philosopher is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951). The book that concerns us here is called *On Certainty*. We shall make use of a central idea in the book, but we do not pretend to represent his own views precisely.

Wittgenstein distinguishes between propositions that we can doubt, and propositions that are certain. We can doubt that the lines that led to human beings and to chimpanzees branched something like six million years ago. We can ask whether it might have been two, or 20, million years ago. There may be good evidence that it was roughly six million years ago, but it is perfectly sensible to ask the question. On the other hand, we are certain that the Earth has existed for billions of years. If someone wondered whether the Earth came into existence 200 years ago, with all the fossils, historical documents, buildings, people and their memories in place, that would be crazy.

It would be worse than crazy. The proposition that the Earth has existed for billions of years plays a key role in the foundations that support our thought. It gives us the context that allows us to think about evolution, continental drift, and so on. No-one can doubt the long life of the Earth, and remain engaged with the rest of us in discussing such things. Similarly, we cannot engage with anyone who doubts that $2 + 2 = 4$. Propositions like these, about the age of the Earth and about arithmetic, underpin lots of other knowledge. If we denied them, we would not know how to carry on thinking. So even doubting them puts the doubter outside the community of people, with whom we can have sensible conversations.

Other propositions are certain, because of their type. If we doubted them without

specific reasons, we would doubt that we were in touch with reality, and we cannot do that without creating chaos in our thought. These include propositions like “There is a table in this room”, and “Paris is the capital of France”. Sometimes, we may have reason to worry about hallucination. Then we might doubt that there was a table in the room. But if someone regularly doubted propositions of these types – propositions that reported straightforward observations or well-known facts – we would find it very difficult to have a conversation with them.

The propositions which are certain include propositions that we could only discover by studying the physical world. And we could have got that process wrong. A proposition may be certain, but mistaken. It used to be impossible to doubt Newtonian mechanics, with its absolute space and absolute time. Now we know that it was false all along, although not false in a way that we would notice in everyday life.

This example shows that there is no conflict between Quine and Popper, who claimed that any proposition which we currently accept might get denied, and Wittgenstein, who claimed that some propositions could not be doubted at the current time. We can, however, learn more about certainty, by combining the thoughts of Quine and Wittgenstein.

Quine’s Fabric and Wittgenstein’s Certainty

Quine’s image of a single fabric of knowledge can help us to identify propositions that are certain in Wittgenstein’s sense, or that come close to that kind of certainty.

At and near the centre of the fabric, we find propositions which are foundational. If we changed our logic, our mathematics, or our fundamental physics, that would have huge implications, all over the place. We can make changes to our fundamental physics. We did so, about a century ago, with the rise of relativity and quantum mechanics. We have still not finished the task of tying up all the loose ends which those changes created. So although these foundational propositions are not immune from change, the effects of change would be so big that we shy away from doubting them.

Further out, in the middle range of theories of non-fundamental physics, of chemistry and of biology, we have theories that would be reasonably easy to change, without having disruptive effects right across the fabric. We can, for example, discard the view that crystals all have patterns that repeat exactly, when we discover quasi-crystals. Dan Shechtman did that in 1982. There was a lot of fuss at the time, but the idea was eventually accepted, and he got a Nobel Prize in 2011. Propositions in this region are not certain, in Wittgenstein’s sense.

When we get to the edge, and simply report our observations of the world, we find propositions which Wittgenstein would regard as certain, because of their type. We just have to accept an observation that when we mix two given chemicals in some water, the water turns blue. We also have to accept readings that we get from sophisticated instruments, like the detectors at a particle accelerator. We have to do that, because those instruments work on the basis of

well-established facts, such as the fact that a magnetic field will bend the path of an electron. Those facts are observed consequences of accepted physical theories. Wittgenstein would not let us doubt these observed consequences, because they themselves embody straightforward observations.

There are propositions of one more type that Wittgenstein should not let us doubt. These connect our scientific theories with observations. They state that our existing theories correctly predict the observations we will get, at least across the range of temperatures, concentrations of chemicals, and so on, over which we have tested them. These propositions combine data from our observations, and logical implications of our theories. Our theories imply that we should observe such and such. The data match those observations. All we have to do is recognize the match. Any doubt would have to be a doubt about our observations, or a doubt about the logic that allowed us to deduce the implications of our theories. Neither kind of doubt would be allowed by Wittgenstein.

Finally, Quine's fabric can allow us to doubt some propositions that Wittgenstein told us we could not doubt. Suppose that we doubt something foundational, like the great age of the Earth. We imagine denying it. Then the big interwoven fabric would support us. It would show us how we could adjust and realign our surviving beliefs. We would not have to throw away huge chunks of our knowledge, and be left with no idea of how to carry on thinking.

Note: Richard Baron is an independent philosopher in London. His website is at www.rbphilo.com

A PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF ENGLAND EVENT

Albert Camus
a philosopher for everyone?
a talk by
Dr Jean-Baptiste Dussert

Jean-Baptiste Dussert is a member of the Philosophical Society who lives in Paris and writes on French and Francophone Philosophy. In this talk, he explores the relation between Camus' novels and his philosophical status in comparison with better known philosophers such as Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, and with movements such as Marxism and Existentialism. He asks whether Camus should be regarded as a popular philosopher and, if so, whether he should be seen as one of a long and respected line of French intellectuals who belonged to a tradition now in decline.

1430 Saturday 12 October 2013
Conway Hall -- All welcome

INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE RATIONAL ASSOCIATION'S
'RATIONAL PARLIAMENT', 10 September 2013
Report by David Simmonds

The motion debated was: **'That genetic modification of crops is a rational approach to meeting food demand.'**

The Rational Parliament is an experimental debating society, free and open to all. At its first session in Conway Hall the above motion was debated. The format and procedure of the event was somewhat muddled, but this was the first of a series, and the organisers intend to refine the procedure and to learn from mistakes. The debate was lively and interesting and the idea has much potential. A few times the 'rhetoric officer' would remind contributors to back up statements with evidence, to avoid emotive or derogatory language, or to avoid technical jargon. As it happened everyone appeared to listen respectfully, and there was no name-calling! Contributors to the debate are referred to as MRPs (Members of the Rational Parliament).

The following account does not pretend to be an unbiased representation of the proceedings, and reflects my own pro-GM leanings. I have added a few examples of what I consider to be good practice in GM which were not covered, or only briefly touched on in the debate. I would be interested to read any opposing arguments in subsequent issues of the *Ethical Record*.

The Importance of Evidence

Everyone appeared to agree that evidence was of the utmost importance. Some MRPs argued that the evidence in favour of the benefits of GM cannot be trusted, as it comes from giant biotech companies with vested interests. A motion that these companies were not to be trusted was passed with a large majority. Others pointed out, however, that much research is also being done by universities and other non profit-making institutions, with their products usually offered without strings to farmers in the developing world. A good example is golden rice – see case study below.

One MRP referred to a survey carried out by the Joint Research Centre (the European Commission's scientific body) of 402 Spanish farmers who grow pest-resistant GM maize (Bt maize – see below). This is the only GM crop allowed for commercial cultivation in the EU at present. The survey concluded that the crops produced higher yields and earned up to £50 more per acre than conventional maize.

16 million farmers around the world continue to grow GM crops on 15 million hectares, and the numbers are increasing. We have to ask whether this would be so if the benefits to the farmers were not real?

The Destruction of Crops

At least two MRPs who were opposed to GM admitted supporting the destruction of GM field trials, since there was not enough evidence that GM posed no threat to the environment. The field trials posed a risk, it was argued, of contamination to neighbouring non-GM fields, and also to wild life in the area, as well as the growth of super weeds. Other MRPs expressed puzzlement at this contradictory

position, for how can we complain of a lack of evidence while at the same time going to great lengths to destroy the very trials which are designed to provide such evidence? About 90% of the 54 attempts to grow experimental GM plants outdoors in the UK between 2006 and 2012 have been destroyed.

In 2008 a field of potatoes designed for their pest resistance (the nematode worm, which costs British farmers £65 million a year) was ripped up, causing £25,000 of damage. Now the potatoes are being grown again by a research team from Leeds University. High security fences had to be built and CCTV cameras installed at great cost. But will this keep the anti-GM campaigners out, and will the scientists be allowed to complete this important and perfectly legal project? Some voiced the opinion that the time had come for the law to take a less softly-softly approach to such illegal tactics. A motion to this effect was won with a big majority.

An Ex-Crop Destroyer Apologises

Author, journalist, environmental activist and one of the founders of the anti-GM movement, Mark Lynas, has publicly apologised for opposing the planting of GM crops in Britain. “The first generation of GM crops were suspect, I believed then, but the case for continued opposition to new generations – which provide life-saving vitamins for starving people – is no longer justifiable. You cannot call yourself a humanitarian and be opposed to GM crops today.”

Professor Jonathan Jones of the John Innes Centre agrees. “When I started making GM plants 30 years ago I did wonder if there might be unknown unknowns. But the evidence now is clear. GM food and crops are as safe as non-GM food and crops.”

World Development: Fair trade or GM?

A number of contributors argued that GM should have little or no role to play in meeting food demand, since there is enough food in the world for all, and so we should rather be focusing on fairer trade policies, fairer distribution of resources, and so on. Others, while agreeing that fairer policies are needed, and that GM is unlikely to be a ‘quick fix’ to feed the world, pointed out that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Why should a campaign for fairer trade exclude farmers from benefiting from GM seeds, especially where this is done voluntarily and without strings? The World Development Movement and others have been campaigning for over 40 years, but have made little tangible progress in reducing poverty in the world. We should not exclude *any* potential vehicle for achieving higher yields, reducing pesticides etc.

Some referred to the ‘bullying tactics’ of biotech companies, naming Monsanto in particular, with their terminator seeds or ‘zombie crops’, which encourage the dependency of poor farmers; as well as other dubious practices such as the patenting of genes. In reply to this it could be argued that, while any bullying tactics should of course be resisted, why throw out the baby with the bath water? The MRP from the Rothamsted Research Centre argued that any questionable behaviour by the biotech companies should not discredit the potential of GM technology itself. For Harvard Professor Calestous Juma, a Kenyan specialist in sustainable development, “There is now overwhelming evidence that the

technology can boost food production.” He expressed anger that African farmers have been held back by European pressure on them to ban GM crops. Several MRPs argued that there is no simple black and white choice. Each case should be examined on its merits. Sometimes GM may be harmful or inappropriate, and sometimes beneficial.

The Monarch Butterfly and The Hungry Caterpillar

Concern was expressed over the possible threat to butterflies and bees. In America a gene from a bacterium (referred to as Bt) was inserted into maize (Bt maize). This makes the maize poisonous to the corn borer, a tiny caterpillar, which burrows into the stem and kills the plant. This GM technology has saved farmers hundreds of millions of dollars. There was some initial evidence that the monarch butterfly larvae would also be damaged by the Bt. Not surprisingly this provided considerable fuel for the campaign against GM, especially in Europe. However, a team of scientists in both the US and Canada then looked at the effects of exposure of Monarch larvae to Bt pollen in both the field and the laboratory, and concluded that any risk to butterfly populations was negligible. A follow up study in 2002 found that, despite large-scale planting of GM crops, the Monarch’s population was increasing.

One MRP (who is a bee-keeper) also expressed anxiety over the survival of the bee population in the UK. However, although bees have recently declined in the UK and Europe to a worrying extent, scientists have ruled out GM as a cause. There is no correlation between where GM crops are grown and where the bees have declined.

Using GM to Add Vitamins. Case study: Golden Rice

Surprisingly golden rice was hardly mentioned in the debate. This is rice that has been genetically modified with the addition of two genes from the daffodil to provide vitamin A. The rice was created by Ingo Potrykus of the Institute of Plant Sciences in Switzerland, in the late 1990s. Vitamin A deficiency affects children’s immune systems and kills around two million every year in developing countries. It is also a major cause of blindness and diarrhea. Boosting levels of vitamin A in rice appears to provide an obvious solution. (Normal rice has no vitamin A to speak of.)

Yet it has taken an incredibly long time for the GM rice to be approved. First developed in 1999, its development and cultivation has been opposed vehemently by campaigners who refused to accept that it could deliver enough vitamin A, and who also argued that the crop’s introduction in the developing world would make farmers increasingly dependent on western industry. The crop became the *cause célèbre* of the anti-GM movement, which sees golden rice as a tool of global capitalism. It was alleged by that people would have to eat several kilograms of it to get any benefit (which was true of the very first generation of golden rice). Their campaign worked. Only now, after 14 years, Bangladesh and Indonesia have indicated that they are ready to accept golden rice, and other nations, including India, have also said that they are considering planting it.

The concerns of the anti-GM lobby are rejected by the scientists involved. “We have developed this in conjunction with organisations such as the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation as a way of alleviating a real health problem in the developing world. No one is going to make money out of it. The companies involved in developing some of the technologies have waived their licenses just to get this off the ground.”

Two studies, both published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, dismissed the claim that the amount of vitamin A in golden rice was too small to be of benefit. The first, in 2009, was based on a group of healthy adult volunteers in the US and showed that golden rice’s beta-carotene was easily taken up into the bloodstream. The second trial was carried out by American and Chinese researchers and published last year. It was carried out on Chinese children, aged between six and eight, and showed that a bowl of cooked golden rice, between 100g and 150g, could provide 60% of the recommended intake of vitamin A for young people. The study also revealed that golden rice is better than spinach at providing vitamin A. The Golden Rice project has triggered a series of similar crop modification programmes that aim to tackle vitamin A deficiency, eg is the ‘golden banana’.

Consumer Safety

Concern was expressed about the possible risks to the health of GM consumers. However, two European Commission reports covering 25 years of research world-wide, have shown no scientific evidence that GM crops have higher risks to consumer health than conventional ones. For 18 years an estimated 2 trillion meals containing GM ingredients have been eaten by hundreds of millions of people, without any health incidents identified. The risk assessments carried out by national authorities over this period have also indicated no risk to human health. The Economic Research Council found in 2008 that a large majority of British farmers regard GM as a simple extension of other techniques, such as selective breeding, and that it did not raise for them any issues of principle, or any risks to safety.

Playing God?

The MRP from Rothamsted reminded us that GM was not only concerned with crops, but has been beneficially applied in other areas such as medicine. Some of the more ideological opponents of GM, such as Prince Charles, consider any genetic engineering to be unacceptable, since this is tantamount to “arrogantly playing God”, “interfering with nature” and so on. I wonder if the Prince is aware that the insulin produced by genetically engineered micro-organisms has saved many millions of lives? And if genetic scientists finally succeed in growing blight-resistant potatoes, or maize or wheat which can thrive in drought or saline conditions, will he still insist that this is damaging food security? I doubt whether those for whom crop reliability is a matter of life and death would share his mystical concerns. They may not care that biotechnology is “experimenting with nature”. In a much publicised speech in 2009, the Prince also opined that GM would “lead to the biggest disaster environmentally of all time”. Bigger than the tsunami of 2004? Or the eradication of some 75% of all land-based animal species, including dinosaurs, by the huge meteorite which struck earth 65 million years ago?

If anyone has suggestions for future topics for the Rational Parliament, please email them to clerk@rationalparliament.org or look up Rational Parliament.

THE LITERATE HUMANIST
John Severs

It is most surprising to find, when searching through literature, just how many direct or indirect references to humanism or doubts there are. Starting with the bard himself, we have him mocking astrology through the words of *King Lear*:

This is the excellent foppery of the world
That when we are sick in fortune
Often the surfeit of our own behaviour
We make guilty of our disasters
The sun, the moon, the stars

And on ultimate mortality, Prospero in *The Tempest* says:

Our revels now are ended.
These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, thin air: And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
.....The gorgeous palaces, the solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind.
We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded
with a sleep!

Moving on to the first poet laureate, John Dryden, who in *Confessio fidei* laments the difficulties he perceives in getting in touch with the Almighty:

What weight of ancient witness can prevail,
If private reason hold the public scale?
But, gracious God, how well dost thou provide
For erring judgments an unerring guide!
Thy throne is darkness in the abyss of light,
A blaze of glory that forbids the sight.
O teach me to believe thee thus concealed
And search no further than thyself revealed;

.....
Can I my reason to my faith compel,
And shall my sight and taste and touch rebel?
.....

Then let the moon usurp the rule of day,
And winking tapers show the sun his way;
For what my senses can themselves perceive
I need no revelation to believe.

Alexander Pope hits the button in his *Essay on man*:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of mankind is man

Moving onto Byron, in Canto VI from *Don Juan* he mockingly laments the Trinity along with other elements of belief:

The first attack at once proved the divinity
(But *that* I never doubted, nor the Devil)
The next the Virgin's mystical virginity;
The third the usual Origin of Evil;
The fourth at once established the whole Trinity
On so uncontrovertible a level
That I devoutly wished the three were four
On purpose to believe so much the more

Then George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) from *The Choir Invisible*:

Oh may I join the choir invisible
Of those immortal dead who live again
In minds made better by their presence: live
In pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end in self,
In thought sublime that pierce the night like stars,
And with their mild persistence urge man's search
To vaster issues.
So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world,
.....
May I reach
That purest heaven, be to other souls
The cup of strength in some great agony,
Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
Beget the smiles that have no cruelty -
Be the sweet presence of a good diffused
And diffusion ever more intense.
So shall I join the choir invisible
Whose music is the gladness of the world

On to Thomas Hardy's self-explanatory *A Plaint to Man*:

When you slowly emerged from the den of Time
And gained percipience as you grew,
And fleshed you fair out of shapeless slime,

Wherefore, O Man did there come to you
The unhappy need of creating me –
A form like your own -- for praying to?

My virtue, power, utility
Within my maker must all abide,
But since I was framed in your first despair
The doing without me has had no play
In the minds Of men when shadows scare;

And now that I dwindle day by day
Beneath the deicide eyes of seers
In a light that will not let me stay,

And tomorrow the whole of me disappears,
The truth should be told, and the fact be faced
That had best been faced in earlier years

And earlier and further afield from the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, written around 1100 CE, the idiocy in believing in heaven:

Would you be happy!
Hearken, then, the way
Heed not tomorrow, heed not yesterday
The Magic words of life are Here and Now
O Fools that after some tomorrow stray!

Men talk of heaven – there is none but here
Men talk of Hell- there is none but here
Men of hereafters talk, and future lives,
O love, there is no other life- but here.

And trenchant wit from Heinrich Heine:

If your eye offends you, pluck it out
If your arm offends you, cut it off
If your reason offend you, become a catholic.

Now back to ancient times with an extract from the play *The Clouds* by Aristophanes covering an imaginary dialogue between Socrates and his friend Strepsiades:

Strepsiades:(regarding thunder heard above)

Oh Earth! What a sound, how august and profound! It fills me with wonder and awe.

Socrates: (referring to the clouds) These, then alone, for true deities own, The rest are all god-ships of straw

Strepsiades: Let Zeus be left out? He's a god beyond doubt: Come that you can scarcely deny

Socrates: Zeus! There's no Zeus: don't be so obtuse

Strepsiades: No Zeus up above in the sky? Then you must first explain, who it is sends the rain;

or I really must think you are wrong

Socrates: Well then be it known, they send it alone: I can prove it by argument strong.

Was there ever a shower seen to fall in an hour when the sky was all cloudless and blue?

Yet on a fine day, when the clouds are away he might send one according to you

Strepsiades: Well, it must be confessed, that chimes with the rest:
Your words I am forced to believe
Yet before, I had dreamed that the rain water streamed from Zeus and
his chamber pot sieve

Socrates: Why, 'tis they I declare, as they roll through the air

Strepsiades: What the clouds? Did I hear you aright?

Socrates: Ay: for when to the brim, filled with water they swim by force
they are carried along

They are hung up on high in a vault in the sky and so by necessity
strong in the midst of their course, they clash with great force, and
thunder away without end

Strepsiades: But is it not He who compels this to be? Does not Zeus
this Necessity send?

Socrates: No Zeus have we there, but a vortex of air

Strepsiades: What! Vortex? That's something I own I knew not before
that Zeus was no more,
but Vortex was placed on his throne.

NB It is dreadful to think that the above piece of fiction was actually used as
evidence in the trial of Socrates for atheism!

And in more modern times from the 1st world war:

They by Siegfried Sassoon

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause; they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race,
They have challenged death and dared him face to face."

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply.
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic; you'll not find
A chap who's served that hasn't found some change."
And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"

And amusing extracts from *I Believe* by Noel Coward (1899-1973):

Do I believe in God?
Well, yes, I suppose, in a sort of way;
It's really terribly hard to say.
I'm sure that there must be, of course,
Some kind of vital, motive force,
Some power that holds the winning cards
Behind life's ambiguous facades
But whether you think me odd or not
I can't decide if it's God or not.

I look at the changing sea and sky
And try to picture eternity.
I gaze at immensities of blue
And say to myself "It can't be true
That somewhere up in that abstract sphere
Are all the people who once were here,
Attired in white and shapeless gowns
Sitting on clouds like eiderdowns
Plucking at harps and twanging lutes
With cherubim in their birthday suits,

I gaze at a multitude of stars
Envisaging the men on Mars
Wondering if they too are torn
Between their sunset and their dawn
By dreadful night-engendered fears
Of what may lie beyond their years
And if they too, through thick and thin
Are dogged by consciousness of Sin

Have they, to give them self- reliance,
A form of Martian Christian Science?
Or do they live in constant hope
Of dispensations from some Pope?
Are they pursued from womb to tomb
By hideous prophecies of doom
Have they immortal souls like us
Or are they – less presumptuous?

And finally the marvellous Stevie smith (1902-1971):

The past

People who are always praising the past
And especially the times of faith as best
Ought to go and live in the Middle Ages
And be burnt at the stake as witches and sages.

Major sources

Donald A Langdown **Shakespeare the Humanist**; essay in *Ethical Record*
November 2011

Bet Cherrington **Facing the World; An anthology of poetry for Humanists**

In the **CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES DISCUSSION SERIES (CIDS)**, a member of CHES presents a topic that has caused disagreement in the public, followed by a Q&A leading to a discussion. Meetings will be held occasionally throughout the year on Sundays from 1430 until about 1600. Tea and coffee are provided, admission is free and open to all.

VIEWPOINTS

Conflating Human Rights and Politics

As a fellow human rights activist I must disagree with Naomi McAuliffe, (*Ethical Record* August) who somewhat misunderstands the necessary tensions between human rights and politics. This is best reflected in a rather naive view of ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) and her championing of women as a separate class.

This obsession with gender completely ignores complex social differences -- a once fashionable view which is demonstrably reactionary. There have been hundreds of conventions and international agreements and they vary in their enforcement and effectiveness. The ozone layer protection convention was relatively easy and costless to implement with near unanimity over it. McAuliffe confuses adoption of a law or covenant with its actual implementation. ICCPR and CEDAW were also signed and ratified by failed states which have neither the capacity nor intention of implementing such conventions.

I am strongly opposed to conflating civil and political as a category with the wider and more contested social and economic rights and contrary to McAuliffe, there is no consensus on this. They are both important and arguably necessary but have separate historical roots and separate sources of legitimacy. It is perfectly possible to have basic democratic structures without a welfare state for instance. Equally there are many societies which provide economic and social benefits without any democracy. But since social and economic rights are themselves essentially political questions there has to be the democratic space for such 'progressive realisation' if it is to be anything more than an empty slogan when asserted as a right and honoured in the breach.

McAuliffe claims that there were no human rights before UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This is completely untrue and she is subscribing to a 'creation myth' of human rights ostensibly beginning in 1948. There were several rights conventions before 1948. UDHR was signed initially by a majority of countries which were themselves not truly independent. Most of those were either occupied, had foreign bases or were banana republics enjoying a muted form of pseudo-independence of a post-colonialist type. As McAuliffe herself argues, the language of HR was from the beginning part of the cold war and continued to be used as part of the strategic arms limitation talks and known as 'Helsinki basket 4'. History does not support her assertion that 'Once these rights have been realised they cannot be taken away.'

Indeed inequality has widened in the metropolitan and developed countries regardless of human rights instruments and conventions. Now the narrative of human rights has itself been colonised by NGOs like Amnesty and other international NGOs with a slogan-led version of rights which they themselves do not always respect. McAuliffe's version of human rights ends with a messianic message which will deliver humanity into a utopian paradise.

Human rights are a *praxis* not a catechism in tablets of stone. In fact there are

diverse and inconsistent narratives within human rights with competing groups demanding special attention. McAuliffe particularly focusses on the important issue of abortion. Choice should be a right but it may not transcend other rights in practice. The party in Nicaragua which legislated for it had to undergo this reversal in policy in order to be re-elected. Its defeat would have meant rolling back much progressive legislation, including land reform, previously passed by the Sandinistas.

In politics there are few core principles. Every principle has to be weighed against other principles which may be as important and sometimes more important. But human rights advocates who have never governed may not be aware of such realities. Human rights cannot ultimately trump the primacy of the political process. It has to exist in tension with it. That is the harsh lesson of democracy.

Mazin Zeki – London N15

Prize Essay Praised

In reference to Daisy Jones' excellent winning entry for the James Hemming essay prize (*Sept ER*), it is of interest to note that Shelley was expelled from Oxford University for sending his pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* to all heads of colleges. In it he argued that religion had a negative effect by fettering (with its restraining) the reasoning mind.

John Severs — Durham

Free Will

The September *Ethical Record* is a very interesting issue, as usual. I photocopied pages 15 to 19 and posted them to David Tribe in Sydney, as I do not think he sees the *Record* regularly.

I was particularly interested in Clio Bellinis's lecture-article on philosophy and science as I have long been suspicious about the determinism versus free will argument. I do not think living organisms are seventeenth-century automata or glorified clockwork machines (determined and predictable), nor do I think our choices are a form of magic. I can choose to drive somewhere or catch a train, but I cannot choose to sprout wings and fly there! I can choose to hold my breath, but only for so long.

Daisy Jones's prize-winning essay is a remarkable piece of writing.

Nigel Sinnott – Victoria, Australia

Challenging Corporate Interests

I fully agree with Duncan Mayhew's statement, in his letter in the *ER* September issue, that politics is dominated by corporate interests. However, with reference to the text of my talk *The Driller, the Banker and the Minister*, which appeared in the *ER* August issue, he claims that I call for a new left wing movement "which is a challenge to Labour."

A more precise reading of the text would have shown him that the left wing movement which I indeed do call for would be a challenge precisely to those corporate interests to which both he and myself are opposed—so not, in any automatic way, a challenge to the Labour Party. I clearly say that the Labour

Party could play a major role in this movement, but only if it radicalised its leadership—not otherwise. As for Mayhew’s other contention, that I express nothing more than “a vague hope” about the emergence of such a movement, I should remind him that a full two pages of text is given to detailed suggestions on how the movement could be formed: that is, one third of the entire article.

Tom Rubens - London, N4.

THE 2013 JAMES HEMMING PRIZE ESSAYS



*Photo by: Darren Johnson
idjphotography.com*

On 21 September 2013 in Conway Hall the James Hemming Essay awards were handed out by Stephen Law to (L to R):

- 1st prize (£1000) - Daisy Jones, Downe House School, Berkshire
- 2nd prize (£500) - Sahar Abas, Kingsbury High School, Brent
- 3rd prize (£250) - Agata Siuchninska, St. Leonards-Mayfield School, E. Sussex

The prize essays can be read at
www.hemmingprize.org.uk/2013-winners
 (The winning essay was printed in the September *ER*)

**NEW ADDITIONS to the HUMANIST LIBRARY
 AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2013**

Bakhurst, David	Thinking about reasons	2013
Calhoun, Craig J.	Habermas and religion	2013
Garner, Robert	A theory of justice for animals	2013
Hernandez, Anabel	Narcoland	2013
Walsh, Lynda	Scientists as prophets	2013

Cathy Broad, Librarian

THE ECONOMICS OF KILLING

Vijay Mehta

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 22 September 2013

Will there be an alternative social evolution of our species towards peace that might someday eliminate war (which is politically organised violent crime perpetrated by warmongers and controlled by war making lobbies)? Is there a way we can put people before profit and thus have growth and reduce inequality without exploitation, which is the *modus operandi* of the capitalists who are the cause of most of the problems including violence facing the world today?

The greed of fulfilling corporate interest by capitalist expansion and financial globalisation has created extreme economic disparities for the majority. 925 million go to bed hungry every night. The UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon observed, “The world is over-armed and peace is underfunded.” The cold war has been over for more than two decades, yet the world continues on an insane path to increase its military spending year after year as if we are living in a time of unending conflict.

Each year, armed conflict kills an estimated 200,000 people. The current proxy/civil war in Syria, for example, has resulted in over 120,000 deaths so far. Wars now kill more civilians than soldiers. Privatising the military has become a profitable business for some companies and it has become an industry itself. Halliburton (a US Corporation) made \$26 billion from the Iraqi war.

After living on this earth for so many centuries, why is it man cannot live peacefully on this marvellous earth? How can a society be called civilised if it has an international arms/killing industry which leads to wars, violence and barbarism?

Violence Costs World Economy 11% of Global GDP

The cost of violence to the global economy in 2013 is \$9.46 trillion, which is equivalent to 11% of global GDP. 780 million guns are in circulation world wide and 5 to 6 million are manufactured on a yearly basis. For example, for a population of 300 million, Americans have 300 million guns. Mass shootings in US occur every 4 to 6 weeks. If the gun culture is to be reviewed, surely US drone assassination policy should likewise come under scrutiny as it will not only be the cause of future wars but also a continuing danger to peace.

In 2012, the US, with weapons as its number one industrial export, is still the biggest in military spending with \$711 billion but China and Russia are catching up fast. The USA has only 4% of the world’s population, friendly neighbours Canada and Mexico, yet spends more than the rest of the world on its military.

The Military Industrial Complex (MIC)

The US obsession with wars and military spending has created a monster – the military-industrial complex – which acts against the interests of people everywhere, including US citizens themselves. My book, *The Economics of Killing*, shows how this monster is not only the cause of extreme poverty in the developing world, but contributed to 911 and the market crash of 2008.

We need to explore nonviolent ways for building peace and restoring human dignity, ethics and civilisation, reflected in a new initiative *4D for World Peace* inspired by my book – 4D standing for Disarmament, Demilitarisation, Development and Democracy. The 4D for World Peace Campaign offers a choice: continue on the same destructive path of war economy, greed and competition based on market forces and suffer even more – or build a safer and fairer way of life.

The MIC comprises manufacturers of military technologies, dual use systems (from computers and software to fuel cells, lasers, robotic arms and optical equipment) and industries deemed to be strategically important. It also includes the arms trade, illegal and legal. No arms company sells weapons only to democracies to use for self-defence. The arms trade is not about defence, but about profiting from violence, poverty and human rights abuse.

The MIC includes 25 million soldiers worldwide. America's defence department is the world's biggest employer with 3.2 million people on its payroll. China, a big military spender, employs 2.3 million in its armed forces. The MIC includes spying, surveillance and intelligence-gathering centres and 1000 military bases spread around the world in 183 countries having missile and nuclear systems.

Technological developments in the armaments field are becoming more and more sophisticated and murderous. The military is moving towards letting battlefield 'killer robots' take their own decisions without human input. Shall we allow computers to decide who lives and who dies? Who is legally responsible for their actions? The development of robotic warfare is the most dangerous military technology since the atom bomb. If drone attacks were able to put an end to terrorism, we would have already got rid of terrorists in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq. The use of drones means that you assassinate people without bringing any charges, without finding them guilty and in the process cause collateral damage – that is the killing of completely innocent people who might be in the neighbourhood.

Reverence for the military has been prevalent in all societies throughout history. Obsession with wars and military spending since WW2 has created a war economy in which big industries, heavily subsidised by the US tax payer, have become arms manufacturers alongside civilian output, e.g. Boeing, General Electric, Honeywell, Lockheed Martin and UK's BAE (British Aerospace).

Resource Transfer from Poor to Rich

Between 1980 and 2008 the income of the top 0.01% of Americans grew by 403% while the income of the bottom 90% of the Americans grew by just 1%. Militarism is the key driver of the economics of underdevelopment. Puppet governments in the poorest countries are given arms by the rich countries in return for unfettered access to natural resources such as oil, gas and minerals, widening the gap between the rich and the poor to an all time high.

This extreme poverty is the cause of two billion people subsisting on less than \$2 a day. Every 3.6 seconds, a person dies of starvation. Every 30 seconds, a

child dies of malaria. Every minute a women dies in childbirth. One is reminded of the quotation of former US President Dwight Eisenhower who said, *“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in a final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed”*

Special Weapons And Tactics - SWAT

Rulers legitimise violence by creating fear in the masses like the war on terror, which gives the military a reason for increasing its military spending. Arms industry lobbyists have been pushing hard to get police departments all across America to switch from a peacekeeping attitude to an aggressive, militarised SWAT for law enforcement units. These use military-style light weapons and specialised tactics in high-risk operations that fall outside the capabilities of regular, uniformed police, with officers being armed, trained and psyched to treat common citizens as enemies.

The 2008 Financial Collapse

Unregulated capitalism is trapped in a competitive world that seeks growth, efficiency and profit maximisation only. Capitalism’s finance along with resource theft is becoming the 21st century’s *modus operandi*. According to a recent Harvard University Report, the cost to the US taxpayer of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is estimated at \$4 - \$6 trillion, which the US cannot afford and which plunged it and the west into massive debt and financial crisis. Britain is experiencing the human and economic cost of the Afghanistan war today.

It was China that provided US with its seemingly endless quantities of cheap credit which left huge amount of liquidity in western markets resulting in low interest rates and unwise lending of loans by bankers leading to a market crash. Banks were responsible in a major way for the global financial crisis from which they profited. When they got in to trouble, the governments of US, UK etc stepped in to bail them while knowing that this happened because of the unethical and greedy behaviour of the banks themselves. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are controlled by powerful vested interests – a situation that compromises our security and undermines democracy.

Secrecy and the Surveillance Society

The global surveillance system to control information in an organised way is so much bigger than ‘big brother’ – spying on its citizens – secretly, comprehensively and virtually without accountability. It includes recent revelations about drones, special operations and kill lists. Tools of freedom are being turned into tools of operation and agencies like NSA (National Security Agency) and GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) are eroding not only our privacy but also our hard earned freedom, civil liberties and violating human rights. These programmes are highly unconstitutional, illegal, intrusive and undemocratic.

Security assessments given by US and European intelligence gathering agencies always highlight new threats with the purpose of starting new conflicts and wars. Peace, dialogue and diplomatic solutions are routinely ignored with a result that it becomes easier to go to war than to explore peaceful solutions.

Misuse of Brain Power

The tendency of science/engineering/technology to be put at the service of the military system rather than human needs is not only deplorable but encourages militarism. MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) is a good example of how science and technology is used in universities for military development. For many years till the 1970s MIT was fully funded by the Pentagon. The Pentagon was and remains a funnel to which taxpayers pour funds deluded into thinking they are being defended and saved.

BAE Systems is the UK's largest employer of engineers – but it is also the world's third largest arms company, building warships, fighter aircraft, missile systems and many other military technologies. Among the most controversial of BAE's activities is its involvement with Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system and the proposed replacement. It has also been widely criticised for selling military technology to regimes with poor human rights records.

In the name of global security and science, new technology is being used to develop and produce insane weapons and fight the asymmetric wars of the future. In universities, scarce resources are being manipulated to develop and produce new high tech deadly weapons for warfare. Worldwide, between 1.2 and 1.5 million people work as scientists and engineers in military research and development. Industry and public research budgets add up to 100-120 billion dollars per year. Of this, some 25 billion dollars are spent on research in universities.

Regarding UK universities, the most recent assessment was published in August 2012, using freedom of information requests; this study found that 17 of the UK's most prestigious universities including Imperial College, Cambridge and Oxford received a total of £83 million over the 3 years up to until 2011 for military research.

The role of universities should be to promote wisdom and not just acquire knowledge – wisdom being the capacity to realise what is of value in life, to oneself and others, by intellectual and educational means. What we lack is a worldwide system of universities rationally devoted to helping us learn how to solve our problems of living, above all our global problems. As Einstein famously said “The pioneers of a warless world are the young men (and women) who refuse military service.”

The US and western countries need urgently to restructure their economies away from its dependence on military sector. How can it be done? Shift workers from war industry into ‘green collar’ jobs – renewable, waste management, pollution control, carbon capture. Share green technology innovation by exporting it to developing countries so they escape smoke-stack stage of development. Close down corruption loopholes and fraud which has cost the UK economy \$73 billion in 2011 – most notably the \$43 billion BAE Al-Yamama arms deal to Saudi Arabia.

Reform the Financial and Banking Sector

Tax Justice Network have published a study “The price of offshore revisited”

that reveals that the global super rich has between \$20- 32 trillion hidden in secret tax havens, some equivalent to the size of United States and Japanese economy combined. According to the study, if this sum were taxed at 30% it would have generated income tax revenues of between \$190-280bn, roughly twice the amount the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries spend on all overseas development assistance around the world. Bankers and corporations should be made to pay their due share of taxes.

The period 1940-1980 was the most democratic and egalitarian era in modern western history. Thanks to progressive taxes, the share of national income in the UK held by the top 1% dropped from 17% on the eve of World War II to 6% pre Thatcher. This was an era of more fairness and almost unprecedented prosperity – for the many. So there is a correlation between high tax levels and better social outcomes. We need to make progress in three areas:

- a) Serve the interest of developing countries by scaling down the Common Agricultural Policy, subsidies to US cotton farmers and weapon manufacturers.
- b) greater corporate transparency.
- c) action against tax havens.

Activists and independent journalists need to challenge the narrative spun by the crony media. Multinationals have blamed Africans, Arabs and Asians for corruption, when it is these state-backed corporations that hire the local agents, pay the bribes, set up the offshore accounts, hide the fugitive capital, rig the internal investigations and sell the weapons that protect corrupt regimes from their own people. The real source of corruption lies not in the poor world but in the European and American military-industrial complexes, which willfully subvert the industrial development of poor nations in order to extract cheap commodities and to prevent their industrialisation.

A reformed UN could play a leadership role in the global economy, international peace and security, protection of human rights and tackling the climate change crisis. We need a more democratic, accountable and transparent United Nations, with fair representation of members.

Nonviolent Ways to End Conflicts

There are examples of people and countries working in creative ways to end violence. In 1948, Costa Rica abolished its army and since has been able to invest resources in the public interest – education, healthcare, etc. No one has attacked Costa Rica although they have no army. The campaign against landmines which resulted in the Landmine Ban Treaty – signed by 159 countries – began with the collection of data by hospital staff treating the victims of landmines.

Nonviolent revolutions have taken place. Examples are the Indian Independence Movement, the Civil Rights Movement in the US, the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland Peace Process, the recent Orange revolution in Ukraine, the Velvet revolution in Czech Republic, the Rose revolution in Georgia, and the reunification of Germany.

Any demilitarisation plan should begin with US by slashing its cold war level of military spending, its being the biggest player in arms race. The US could easily cut 15% from the defence budget, saving US\$1 trillion, by laying off the 92,000 new defence personnel hired over the past 10 years and reducing the US presence in Asia and Europe, scaling back or terminating wasteful projects such as the F-35 fighter (\$1.51 trillion over its lifecycle, \$680 million each) and the Virginia class submarine (\$2.4 billion per unit), and shrinking the bureaucracy at the Pentagon that consumes 40% of its budget. In the UK we can save huge amounts of money by scaling down on Trident nuclear submarine replacement, which will cost UK economy over \$130 billion over its 30 year lifecycle. Nuclear disarmament is urgent and critical to global peace and security.

Speak Truth to Power

There is nothing more dangerous than living in a society whose citizens are afraid to speak the truth. We need more courageous people risking their lives like Julian Assange, Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden who exposed the torture, illegal detentions and crimes perpetrated by US in Iraq, Afghanistan etc. The leaked information shows how corrupt is the military system and how the secret state wages perpetual war behind our back.

Our hope for abolition of war and demilitarisation lies with us – Citizen Power. We can mobilise strong grassroots movements, to change public opinion with the help of the internet. Change comes from bottom up, grassroots social movements. When enough people are convinced that war is not necessary then elected leaders will be forced to change their war-mongering policies.

My book demonstrates that in 4D for World Peace, there is an alternative model to the deadly cycle of military and economic disaster. It shows the vital necessity for disarmament on a world scale and a strict regulation of arms trading. I believe all global citizens have the passion, talent, determination and power to be agents of change. Let me end with a poignant quote from a Hiroshima survivor, Hisako Kimura, aged 8 in 1945 when the bombing of Hiroshima took place:

“I must convey to the youth the sanctity of peace, the terror of war, the tremendous power of the atom bomb. As long as I have breath and strength, I must tell the terrible story to help bring about the abolition of nuclear weapons.”

The full talk can be downloaded from www.unitingforpeace.com

4D for World Peace film:

“Change the World” - www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9GEK4FFrXk

Vijay Mehta is the chair of Uniting for Peace (www.unitingforpeace.org) and Founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity (www.fortuneforum.org).

Vijay Mehta’s new book *The Economics of Killing: How the West Fuels Wars and Poverty in the Developing World* is published by Pluto Press (UK) / Palgrave Macmillan (USA) / Amazon (Worldwide). For reviews and endorsements of the book, please visit: www.theeconomicsofkilling.org.

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

CELEBRATING LIFE WITH THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY: A GODLESS CONGREGATION

Christopher Tofallis

The Sunday Assembly now holds its meetings in Conway Hall. It has attracted a good deal of media attention since it began in January 2013, and has been described as an ‘atheist church’, or a ‘godless congregation’. However, it needs to be emphasised that the meetings have nothing to do with bashing religion; everyone is welcome, regardless of religious belief or lack thereof. The focus is on promoting happiness. The motto of the Sunday Assembly is ‘live better, help often and wonder more’.

Meetings typically begin with everyone getting up to sing a popular song accompanied by musicians on stage; lyrics are projected onto a large screen and people often clap along to the beat. This is then followed by a light-hearted welcome by the founding organisers: Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans. Sanderson is a stand-up comedian who looks like Jesus: long hair and beard, but laughs a lot and jumps up and down excitedly to the music. He has charisma but could never be part of any established religion as he finds humour in every direction; sacred teachings are supposed to be revered, not laughed at. Pippa is a writer and comedian who has often appeared on BBC Radio 4; she also plays guitar during the mass karaoke singing.

The theme of the mid-September gathering was the harvest festival. The guest speaker explained the origins of the festival -- which are non-Christian. He spoke about the production of wine and pointed out that in some places the grapes are still pressed by feet. Regular participants had been sent an advance email requesting food to be donated and the result was 150kg of tins and packets that were later passed on to two food banks for distribution. Each meeting includes something on doing good for others such as a speaker from a local charity asking for volunteers. There is also a minute of quiet reflection; as Sanderson began to lead the assembly into this, a baby started crying, causing him to ask people to focus on babies. Inevitably this led to fits of giggling around the hall.

More singing followed: Harvest for the World and The Candy Man (from Willy Wonka). Sanderson then discussed ideas he had found in popular books by Eckhart Tolle (*The Power of Now*) and Martin Seligman on positive psychology. It was refreshing to hear a balanced view, with good points highlighted, and other points irreverently made fun of.

You can get a flavour of Sunday Assemblies by looking at Youtube videos (type ‘Sunday Assembly atheist church’). Each meeting has a different theme. These have included stargazing, teams, gratitude and play -- in which everyone was taught to play the surprisingly entertaining Danish clapping game with their neighbour. The June meeting was on the theme of happiness, and was attended by 600 people in York Hall. One of the speakers was Richard Layard, author of *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, and founder of the Action for Happiness initiative.

The founders are actively helping other groups to get started both here and abroad. Sanderson Jones insists that “You don’t have to have a religion to get together as a community, to try to live better, help often and wonder more... To sing songs, hear great talks and generally recharge the batteries”.

Meetings end with light refreshments and a chance for people to chat with each other. Admission is free, though donations are appreciated to cover hall-hiring costs. Dates of future meetings and other information can be found at www.sundayassembly.com.

Obituary - Bill (W. J.) McIlroy

The death occurred on 22 August 2013 of Bill (W. J.) McIlroy, aged 85. Bill devoted his entire adult life to secularist causes. His non-religious funeral took place in Brighton on 30 August. Bill himself was an officiant at secular funerals for many years at a wide variety of venues around the country.

He was editor of the *Freethinker* for around 14 years in three separate runs spanning nearly a quarter of a century from 1970. He was General Secretary of the National Secular Society from 1963 to 1977, with a one-year break. In the 1960s Bill and the then President David Tribe were responsible for a resurgence of activity resulting in the NSS becoming nationally prominent, attracting eminent supporters such as writer Brigid Brophy and philosopher Margaret Knight, who made ground-breaking broadcasts. David and Bill campaigned successfully for reform of the law on stage censorship, Sunday observance, male homosexuality and abortion.

In 1989, Bill, along with Nicolas Walter (at the time Hon. Rep. of SPES), reformed the Committee Against Blasphemy Law to protest at the threat to Salman Rushdie over his book *The Satanic Verses*. The Committee issued a ‘Statement Against Blasphemy Law’ signed by over 200 public figures. Bill had been secretary of the original Committee Against Blasphemy Law, which was founded in the late 1970s to protest the trial of the editor and publishers of *Gay News*.

Bill wrote three booklets, including one on the history of Brighton Freethinkers, for which Denis Cobell wrote the Foreword. SPES members who visited Brighton some years ago on its annual coach trip will remember how Bill conducted them around the town, seeing the houses of Herbert Spencer and former SPES lecturer Prince Kropotkin.

Denis has pointed out that Bill McIlroy was instrumental in the large stone being placed in Tavistock Square in 1994, which commemorates all who have rejected military service and refused to kill. Every year on 15 May, an event is held at this stone marking International Conscientious Objectors’ Day. Bill believed that there should be “a commemoration in every town for those who refused to fight, as there is for those who fought. Courage has many faces.”

N.B.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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 CHES and £5 (£2 conc) for non-members. For other events, no charge unless stated.

OCTOBER 2013

- Tuesday 8 **GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE**
1900 **Stefan Dickers** *{£3 for CHES, FHRG, SHS MEMBERS. £5 FOR OTHERS}*
- Wednesday 9 **TWO BOOK LAUNCHES – ALL WELCOME -- REFRESHMENTS**
1800 **Barbara Smoker's 'HUMANISM for inquiring minds'** (6th edition)
1900 **Tom Rubens' 'GLOBAL MODERNITY and other essays'**
- Saturday 12 **ALBERT CAMUS: A PHILOSOPHER FOR EVERYONE?**
1430 **Dr Jean-Baptiste Dussert**
(A PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF ENGLAND EVENT)
- Sunday 13 **GATHERING STRENGTH:**
1100 **CONVERSATIONS WITH AFGHAN WOMEN**
Peggy Kelsey
- Tuesday 15 **CHARLES BRADLAUGH**
1900 **Bryan Niblett & Deborah Lavin**
{£3 for CHES, FHRG, SHS MEMBERS. £5 FOR OTHERS}
- Sunday 20 **THE RISE OF THE MACHINES**
1100 **Bryan Appleyard**
1430 **COMING TO TERMS WITH ATHEISM. A CIDS meeting**
Graham Bell
- Tuesday 22 **JOHN STUART MILL**
1900 **Prof. Greg Claeys** *{£3 for CHES, FHRG, SHS MEMBERS. £5 FOR OTHERS}*
- Sunday 27 **50 HUMAN BRAIN IDEAS YOU REALLY NEED TO KNOW**
1100 **Mo Costandi**
- Tuesday 29 **HARRIET LAW**
1900 **Dr Laura Schwartz** *{£3 for CHES, FHRG, SHS MEMBERS. £5 FOR OTHERS}*

NOVEMBER

- Sunday 3 **MATHS ON TRIAL:**
1100 **HOW NUMBERS GET USED AND ABUSED IN THE COURTROOM**
Coralie Colmez
- Tuesday 5 **ANNIE BESANT**
1900 **Louise Raw & Marie Terrier**
{£3 for CHES, FHRG, SHS MEMBERS. £5 FOR OTHERS}
- Sunday 10 **SCIENCE AND THE RISE OF ATHEISM**
1100 **Russell Blackford**

CHES's SUNDAY CONCERTS AUTUMN 2013

Artistic Director: **Simon Callaghan**

Doors open at 1730 Concerts start at 1830 Tickets £9; students £4; under 16 free

Full details on: www.conwayhallsundayconcerts.org.uk