

AUSTRALIAN

RATIONALIST

Journal of the Rationalist Society of Australia

FORCED CLOSURE?

The challenges facing the Open Society

- Are we ruled by things?
- A rational approach to the First Nations people
- The illusion of truth
- What is the ice doing?

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**RATIONALIST
SOCIETY OF
AUSTRALIA**

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The Rationalist Society of Australia has published a journal almost continuously since the 1920s, interrupted only by war, internecine strife and lack of funds. The ideas and opinions published in these pages do not necessarily represent the views of the RSA, its Committee or the Editor. Rather, we aim to publish material that furthers the RSA's mission to inform, to educate and generally to promote thoughtful and dispassionate analysis of issues of public contention.

We publish regular articles on Philosophy, Ethics & Religion, Science & Technology, and Law & Politics. We will also consider humour, poetry, short fiction and cartoons; excerpts from forthcoming or just released books; and previously published material if it has appeared recently in non-competing, low circulation periodicals.

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Paul Monk

AN INTRIGUING EXCHANGE

*Rationalism and a theological debate
about 'closed minds'.*

By Paul Monk

On 23 April, the RSA Daily reprised a piece about the 17th century French Huguenot, refugee from Catholic persecution and philosopher of toleration Pierre Bayle that had first appeared in The Conversation on 19 April. I'd like to pivot off that piece to ruminate on the implications of an exchange I had on Facebook recently with a Catholic priest. It became frustrating to me and I'd like to share some thoughts on why that was, and some of the philosophical implications.

I was raised a Catholic myself and spent many years reading and thinking to figure out what I did, and did not, believe. This Catholic priest and I have only met once, quite a few years ago, and he appears largely unaware of my studies and writings. The key to what unfolded is that I long ago concluded that I don't believe in any of the dogmas of the Catholic Church and do not see the Bible as any kind of 'divine revelation'. I slowly acquired a coherent view of the cosmos and the human world in terms of the physical sciences, history and anthropology, which persuaded me I did not require religion or revelation and certainly not the moral authority of priests or cardinals. The exchange took place against that background.

Without going into how the exchange commenced, suffice to say it arose from my unwillingness to spend time debating

with him (I leave him anonymous out of respect for his privacy): (1) whether Jesus had really, physically risen from the dead as a matter of historical fact; and (2) whether the 'God' of the Biblical religions 'exists'. I expressed the opinion that I saw little point in spending time debating these things, as I could not take either claim seriously, after many years of reading and thinking of my own.

His response was that this suggested I have a disappointingly 'closed mind' and that only I could know whether I held my views 'in good faith'. He invited me to overturn his own position 'by simply showing the resurrection of Christ did not occur or is highly, highly improbable'. But, short of that, he asserted, I should stop being condescending 'to those of us who have faith. We are not idiots.' At this point, I had to choose whether or not to argue the toss with him about his religious beliefs, or seek gently to deflect him on the grounds that I have better and more interesting things to do than that. I attempted the second of these strategies.

'It's not condescension,' I responded to him. 'It's simple candour. I see no possibility that Jesus of Nazareth, having been crucified, was physically reanimated. It's not an interesting line of inquiry. What is somewhat interesting is how the myth arose that he had been the 'Messiah'.

What's very interesting is how a vast, imperial institution then arose, over the following four centuries, based on that myth.' Unfortunately, he chose to cling to his line that it was up to me to disprove the reality of the resurrection and disprove the 'existence of God', or by default allow that each is a tenable position to hold.

Here is what he wrote:

It is improper to conclude something didn't happen because you don't understand how it could. Reanimation is not resurrection, so you haven't got to first base in knowing what is being talked about. Read the evidence and that might give you a clue how this Messiah came to claim the allegiance of so many. Patronising remarks about what you think is an interesting question simply means that you are not open to considering a proposition believed by some of the finest minds the world has known. Your lack of interest in a matter, which you clearly haven't a clue about, does you no credit.

Now, as a Fellow of the Rationalist Society, I ask you all, readers, how was I to respond to this kind of challenge? I might have chosen to take up the cudgels, but I saw no point in doing so. I might have chosen to turn the tables on him, by stating that I had no need to *disprove* propositions so evidently dubious as the resurrection and that he could labour at

will to demonstrate their truth, but would find me bemused and sceptical. I attempted to take this second path, but the man of religion would not desist.

I won't reproduce the whole exchange here. My interest in writing it up at all lies in the dilemma it presented: not as to whether I could, or had, any need to engage in a debate about whether the resurrection really happened, but how to *disengage* from a debate I had had countless times before – and now find pointless and tedious – without letting him get away with his assertion that all I was doing was showing how condescending, ill-informed and intellectually irresponsible I was being. I attempted to show by analogy that I was being perfectly reasonable in not taking his claims seriously, by asking whether he, in all seriousness, would spend his valuable time trying to demonstrate to a Mormon that the Angel Moroni had not delivered latter day revelations to Joseph Smith on gold tablets that subsequently vanished.

It was to no avail. He claimed that he has 'always treated Mormons with great respect' and remains 'more than willing to discuss those key aspects of their religion with them if they wish.' He added, 'I know plenty of non-Christians and atheists with whom I can have a useful, informative,

and sensible discussion because they have taken the trouble to inform themselves beyond what they thought they knew as a schoolboy.'

In short, he resented me being condescending to him, but felt inclined to dismiss my mature scepticism and disinterest in theological dogmas as the feckless ignorance of a schoolboy. I was somewhat hampered by my genuine lack of interest in having the debate, but this didn't solve the dilemma for me regarding alleged abandonment of rational inquiry and having a supposedly 'closed mind'. He baited me, doubtless believing sincerely that he was simply tutoring me, by stating: 'Your account is not based on any evidence. It is just a rather jejune way of not dealing with the matter.'

At this point, forgive me, rationalists all, I felt somewhat exasperated and wrote to him (still on Facebook and therefore visible to whoever else was taking an interest):

What's jejune, I suggest, is your insistence that there is an issue here worth taking seriously. People manage to believe all manner of absurd things. It's not my responsibility to go down the rabbit hole after them and conduct Lewis Carroll conversations in Wonderland. You are playing the theological white rabbit here

and I'm simply not interested in joining in the little game. Understood?

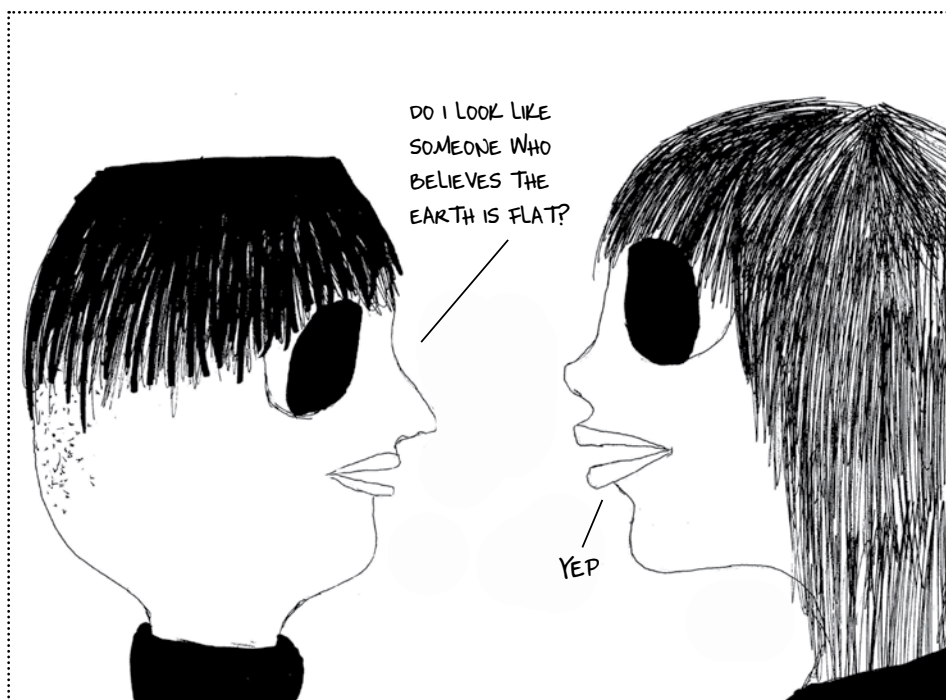
That's certainly the way I felt. The question is, was it the best advised and most responsible intellectual stance to adopt, in all the circumstances?

I attempted to get him to acknowledge a distinction between naturalism and supernaturalism as an admissible barrier to our discourse, by multiplying the analogies:

I suppose Muhammad really took that night flight to Jerusalem, too, and the Red Sea parted for Moses and the people of Israel. You want to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, because there are old stories claiming he did. In going there you are simply abandoning any naturalistic approach to how the world works. I see no point, as I remarked, in taking such an approach seriously. It makes for an absurd view of the world. If, conversely, we treat the idea of the resurrection as a myth, it has a certain symbolic and rhetorical beauty. But it's no more historically true than the myth of Odysseus and his voyages.

Alas, he refused to yield the ground, insisting instead that 'your inability to question your naturalism is your problem ... yours is the classic case of circular reasoning. The resurrection is one of those things that could not occur and therefore it didn't. No need to look at the evidence. I will remain cocooned in my own naturalistic closed system, that way I will never have to be mugged by the rational and factual basis of anything that might challenge my tiny mind. Not smart.'

I confess I've grown unaccustomed to people telling me I have a 'tiny mind' and that my way of thinking is 'not smart'. So, his bald assertion that there is a 'rational and factual basis' for questioning my naturalism just begged to be systematically confronted. But why would I bother? Had it not occurred to this 21st century Catholic that if two thousand years of religious dogmatism, and philosophical rationalizations of it, had not demonstrated beyond reasonable dispute that the resurrection had really happened, it was time to give up the ghost (as it were)



and accept that the basis for his religion, as for every other, is myth and ritual, not truth or fact? I really felt I was in Wonderland here with a preceptor who actually thought he was lecturing to a schoolboy and could pull rhetorical tricks on him at will or browbeat him into submission.

I retorted:

Your remarks here are what I meant when I referred to Lewis Carroll conversations. You can carry on all you like about the so-called 'evidence' that Jesus rose from the dead. It's not an interesting subject. Tertullian famously remarked long ago 'credo quia absurdum est' and many a Christian has taken that line - believing because it is absurd to do so. You rebuke me for declining politely to do that. But your rebukes are empty. There is nothing to inquire into here. So, let me reiterate - this must be the third time now - that I'm going to gently put aside this pointless exchange with you. I have many interesting things to get on with and debating whether or not Jesus rose from the dead (and all the things that allegedly followed from that) is not among them. If that irritates or exasperates you, I'm sorry I can't help you further. The history of how the Christian religion got going and came to dominate the Roman and medieval world is, on the other hand, an important and complex subject, to which I have devoted a good deal of time over many years.

At this point, his Tridentine proclivities and dogmatism rather got the better of him and he burst out with the curious remark:

Take your own advice. Stop commenting on things about which you know so little... The gates of hell will not prevail against the Church which, having been inaugurated by Christ, and its righteous members enjoying eternal life, endures for ever.

I was more amused than irritated at this point and responded drily:

Your stalwart faith that the legendary gates of hell will not prevail against the Church and so on is touching, but the time for the legend has passed. Given what we

now know about cosmology, evolutionary biology and human archaeology, the arcane ideas you propound here melt into air.

But naturally, the sturdy apologist was not about to give an inch. He came back at me with all the bluster he could muster:

What I hold to be true is not to be dismissed as 'touching' or as a legend. In company with a great many philosophers, contemporary and historical, I hold that the arguments for the existence of God provide a far more plausible account of the material world than that of atheism and agnosticism...I might also add that what we now know about cosmology is that nothing comes from nothing. This is crucial. Moreover, Leibnitz's question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing' continues to challenge the fair minded seeker after truth. Sneering references to someone else's faith or opinion being 'touching' and a superstitious belief in 'legend' is redolent of the ignorant, supercilious, sneering that I associate with the 'new atheists' like Dawkins, Hitchens, Kraus, Atkins, and a small group of philosophers.

So, here we were in a philosophical discussion despite my efforts to deflect my ordained friend and have him settle for his arcane beliefs without insisting that I had to either accept them or demonstrate their falsity – and, at the very least, respect them as credible, even if mysterious.

What to do at this point? He had jumped from asserting baldly that the gates of Hell will not prevail against the Church, because it had been inaugurated by Christ and endures forever; to the fall-back position that there is a case for the existence at least of some kind of 'God'. Perhaps I could have exited by saying that I understood the philosophical claims for the necessity of some kind of Prime Mover, or for Spinoza's 'God' as 'Nature'. But he would, surely, then have reverted to claims about the Biblical 'revelation' having some special claim that I should take seriously. After all, it's only in that context that the resurrection enters the picture.



I decided to gracefully exit the conversation. I therefore responded simply that the issues at stake are tangled and perhaps we should adjourn the discussion to another time and place. He had his dander up, however, and bit back, writing:

Take your own advice. Stop commenting on things about which you know so little. Your lack of curiosity on the big questions is very odd. Your magisterial pronouncements are not just odd, but dangerous. Your rejoicing in a closed mind a wonder to behold. If you wish to stop this exchange... then make no further comment.

In short, he required that I exit as a precondition for his doing so – this on my own Facebook page, if you don't mind. Rising to the bait, I retorted (with admirable restraint, I thought):

I do find your complaints about my supposed ignorance bemusing. But here's the thing: when you persist in asserting that there is some 'evidence' for the resurrection of Jesus and do so on my timeline, I find I need to correct you. But I have been trying as succinctly as possible to make the point that the discussion is as pointless as spending time inquiring into any number of other confused or spurious notions. What you call a 'closed mind' is simply a clear head, I'm afraid. You are so self-absorbed in your religious enthusiasm that you fail to grasp this. But you can rest assured that I don't spend time trying to disprove the absurd religious claims of Scientologists or Hindus or Mormons any more than I am willing to spend more time than the considerable amount I did in my youth debating the dogmas of Catholicism. If you wanted to insist on the 'real presence' in the Eucharist or on the 'Virgin Birth' or on

GLARING JUXTAPOSITIONS

The trouble with Christianity.

By Hugh Harris

So far, 2019 represents an “annus horribilis” for Christianity in Australia. Recently, we’ve often seen the tenets of the faith come into conflict with secular society.

Fire-and-brimstone radio jock, Alan Jones, noted how we make oaths on the Bible in court, but fire people from their jobs if they quote it on social media. Conservative Christians – those who believe that atheists, gays, adulterers etc are all going to hell – are well advised to keep such blasphemous thoughts to themselves.

It’s still respectable to identify as a Christian, so long as one is not inclined to get into the details. We’ve seen Scott Morrison invite the media to view his weekend worship at the prosperity gospel Horizon Church, only to be surprised that his fervent non-Nazi saluting was greeted with derision. Online Grubs!

No doubt Morrison would agree with the oft-repeated mantra, used by culture warriors such as Alan Jones and Greg Sheridan, that Christians are persecuted by a media full of “aggressive secularists”.

However, it’s not merely a couple of leftie-atheist journos who are to blame. Actually, a majority of Australians disavow traditional Christian creeds. A Globalisation poll noted that 67 per cent of Australians support same-sex unions. A majority of Christians supported same sex marriage at the ballot box. Most Australians support voluntary assisted dying, a pro-choice attitude to abortion, and a secular society in general.

The 45 per cent of Australians who think favourably of Christianity, according to the Globalisation poll, would no doubt agree with Sheridan’s claim that “God is good for you”. But few of these people are out there spruiking the biblical beliefs in a public domain. They may have noticed how well this is working out for the likes of Izzy Folau.

While just over half Australians identify with Christianity, according to the last Census, few of them are church-going observant members of the faith. Surveys report the level of regular church attendance at between 8-15 per cent. The question arises: if one’s commitment to the faith involves merely sending one’s children to an independent school, minus any personal commitment to the observance necessary to obtain everlasting life, to what extent can they be considered genuine believers? In my view, the majority of self-identified Christians are nominal.

They don’t really believe Jesus was born of a Virgin. They couldn’t tell you what the Nicene Creed says. They know praying doesn’t work – they’ve probably tried it! Perhaps they believe in the resurrection, but strongly reject any other sort of miracles.

This is hardly surprising. In this scientific and technological age, most people understand how evidence and the scientific method relate to knowledge. Most exercise scepticism toward claims of faith healing, and supernatural events. And for good reason. We are yet to see any such claims independently verified. Miracles are the fairy stories of a bygone age. We have no good reason to keep an open mind to the superstitions of the past.

Furthermore, the damage to Christianity by the global child sex-abuse scandal can hardly be overstated. Emblematic of this endemic failure, we recently saw Cardinal Pell, Australia’s highest ranking Catholic, convicted of child sexual abuse. This represents a colossal blow to the church in Australia.

Many will recall Pell’s complaints of the secular press exaggerating clerical child abuse. They will recall him accompanying Gerard Risdale – convicted of assaulting 65 boys – to court in order to help minimize his sentence.

Catholics around the world are

distancing themselves from their own church. A recent US poll showed only one third of US Catholics think priests are honest and ethical, down from nearly half in 2017. A Gallup poll showed only 44 per cent expressing confidence in organised religion.

Ongoing publicity of child sexual abuse is hastening the fragmentation of religious communities and accentuating the nominal nature of belief. The glaring juxtaposition between the church’s behaviour and its stated mission, is there for all to see.

The upshot is a crisis of faith. The sophisticated compartmentalisation that allows Christians to believe in miracles in an age of science and technology, is undermined by the unreasonable demand to also believe that the emissaries of God’s goodness have committed and covered up the most despicable crimes against children.

Believers must reconcile how priests and Cardinals could behave with such calculated evil whilst still believing a judgmental God was assessing their daily deeds. Not only are the factual claims and moral claims of Christianity increasingly at odds with modern society, it seems doubtful that many church leaders retain the faith themselves.

Christianity has become a hollow vessel; a name-badge stripped of its core convictions. Having become a disparate landscape of competing beliefs – increasingly jettisoning unpalatable biblical views of marriage, sexuality, women and homosexuals – Christianity’s problem is that it no longer knows what it believes in and what it stands for. There are plenty of Christians. But not many who are willing to admit they genuinely believe in it. The irony, and the future problem for our society is that these groups still own our hospitals, schools and our aged care facilities.



FROM THE PRESIDENT

Meredith Doig

Vale Len Buller

Len Buller died on 20 April 2019, of complications arising from a Golden Staph infection. A member since 2009, Len was the RSA's Treasurer for the past few years.

His practical experience, running a small business for so many years, made him wise counsel for us in matters to do with the prudent use of our members' money – though I think he had some difficulty coming to terms with our new online accounting system.

Len was always dependable. I can't remember a Board meeting he missed, except of course for the couple of months when he was in intensive care. He always had a sensible word to add to the discussion, and could be relied on to do what he said he would do.

In many ways, Len was a great representative of our members: ordinary people from a variety of backgrounds who are concerned about the lack of civility in public debate, worried about the rise of extremism, and bothered by the lack of critical thinking in our leaders.

Len's opposition to religiosity was not shared by all his friends and family, but his was not a militant atheism. Rather, he was in favour of a genuinely secular Australia, one in which there is separation between

church and state, where people of all faiths – or of no faith – are accepted, but no one faith is privileged above others.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to the rationalist movement was his insistence that our members should have a forum where their ideas and thoughts could be aired and exchanged. That's why he set up what he called the Rationalist Think Tank, and over the past four years he led monthly meetings that attracted a core group of regular attendees and a wide range of occasional participants.

Each month, Len would come up with another interesting topic: from the ethics of Driverless Cars to the Morality of Nudity. He researched and initiated discussions on nuclear disarmament, the fairness of our tax system, and drug law reform, as well as the perennially controversial issues of abortion, voluntary assisted dying and same sex marriage.

At these meet ups, Len wanted to do things differently. Unlike meetings of other freethought groups, we would not have an expert speaker come and pontificate from on high. Len wanted us to be more democratic. So he would research the topic, summarise its main points – pro and con – and then prepare three or four questions that participants had to analyse and respond to. We would divide into small groups, discuss each question, and then share our collective thoughts as a whole group again. It was really critical thinking in practice.

Len's Welcome to the World

I'd like to share one of the ideas Len had, which, I think, is a poignant example of his love of family and his sense of being part of 'our common humanity'.

This was his "Welcome to the World": a humanist alternative to baptism, a ceremony to mark the welcoming of new baby to the family of human beings.

According to Len's design, the ceremony would begin with an uncle and an aunt describing the background of the parents of the baby. Then a grandparent from either side would speak, promising to provide their love and support throughout the child's life. A representative of the cousins and second cousins would welcome the child to their ranks, perhaps speaking about the days of play to come.

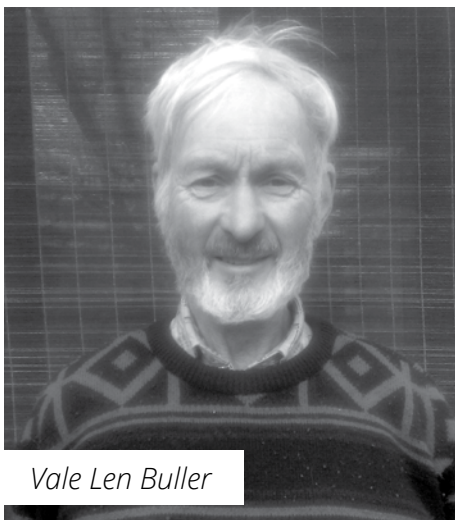
Following the family's welcome, there would be a statement from a humanist representative, speaking on the rights and responsibilities of being a human in today's world. A human should respect the dignity of every other human. Individual rights and freedoms should be balanced with reciprocal social responsibilities.

The child would be welcomed as an Australian citizen, with all the benefits of living in the best country in the world. And, Len said, they should be reminded that they must vote – even if there's no candidate worth voting for!

And they'd be welcomed as a Melburnian, having the great good fortune of being born in the world's most liveable city, with our trams, and the MCG, and of course, they'd need to choose a favourite footy team.

Finally, there'd be a Welcome to the Universe. A reminder that the length of a human life is humble compared with the almost inconceivable timespan of our universe. Perhaps, Len suggested, there's intelligent life elsewhere in our universe. If so, they'd also welcome this child.

Despite his quiet demeanour, Len was a deep thinker, interested in a wide range of ideas, a deeply humanist man with a great love of humanity and his family. From a personal point of view, I will miss Len's humour and his good sense. Len was a good man and a valuable member of the RSA. Rest in peace.



Vale Len Buller

Dear Editor,

While reading the March letters pages I was entertained by Geoff Trescott's verbal bangs and flashes as counterblast to the vile vice of spruiking the nefarious notion of anthropogenic global warming. I thank him for enlightening me. I had a good chuckle when Geoff T. warned us that climate change "ideologues" religiously defend their sacred cow, and instead of "rational scientific debate" resort to "*ad hominem* attacks". Like, I suppose, "bought-off environmentalists", these "dishonest people", "these charlatans", the "deluded Tim Flannery", "the totally discredited, hypocritical and dishonest Al Gore and Richard Branson", and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which manipulates facts and figures "with the oleaginous ease of an organisation that is notorious for distortion of, and fabrication of, data".

Ah! Rational scientific debate in full flight and flower, indeed; and all part of life's rich tapestry!

- Nigel Sinnott, *Sunshine West*.

Dear Editor,

Ohhh, I get it, dear editor, I hadn't realised Geoff Trescott is your resident clown! And how entertaining he is ... I have a belly ache from laughing. His hilarious take on climate change denialism is priceless (as is his letter-writing style); nevertheless, his ignorance has to be addressed, so I'll say two things on the subject of very basic climate science knowledge.

1) Yes, there is abundant CO₂ gas produced by nature – has been for millions of years – and human production amounts to only one, two or three per cent of the total; and yes, CO₂ is good for plants – indeed for all of us – as plants turn CO₂ into the oxygen we breathe. However, all that CO₂ produced by nature also gets absorbed by nature, whereas the anthropogenically produced CO₂ is accumulative, hence we have global warming (as scepticalscience.com notes: "the natural cycle adds &

removes CO₂ to keep a balance; humans add extra CO₂ without removing any").

2) Yes, Climate Change (CC) in principle is natural. But it is important to differentiate between the two types of Climate Change. Natural climate change (CC1) causes an Ice Age approximately every one hundred thousand years, probably due to the eccentricity of Earth's orbit around the Sun. The planet warms and cools in oscillations of about seven degrees Celsius (one degree in every fifteen thousand or so years). Anthropogenic climate change (CC2) occurs in our lifetime; a temperature rise of one degree Celsius in one hundred years is extraordinary, causing polar ice to melt and ocean levels to rise (this of course is no problem for Flat-Earthers ... the extra water will just run off the edge). Incidentally, Earth currently is 'naturally' cooling; that is, heading for another Ice Age.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) collects reports from the three thousand scientists around the world who work in the field of climate science. The reports are then peer-reviewed before they are re-published in a summary-report ... but the facts and figures submitted by ninety-seven per cent of scientists who apparently agree on climate change and global warming have been manipulated and falsified by the IPCC? Oh dear! I guess Mr. Trescott is among those three per cent of climate scientists who swim against the stream. He is a climate scientist, isn't he?

I might add that Mr. Trescott was all dirty on Mr Tim Flannery, who he says is: "a mammalogist, palaeontologist, environmentalist and conservationist (no mention of 'climate science')". Well, that's a bit rich, seeing that he probably got those qualifications from Flannery's Wikipedia page, which reads in full: "Timothy Fridtjof Flannery is an Australian mammalogist, palaeontologist, environmentalist, explorer and public scientist. Having discovered more than 30 mammal species (including new species of tree kangaroos) he served as the Chief Commissioner of the Climate

Commission, a Federal Government body providing information on climate change to the Australian public.

Please, dear editor, keep printing this gentleman's letters. They make for light relief in an otherwise very serious forum.

- Carsten Burmeister.

Dear Editor,

I have a comment on Leslie Allan's article 'The Importance of Being Objective' (Volume 112 March 2019). I understand his argument that morality should not be justified subjectively, but wonder how anyone could justify morality objectively.

In 2005 I gave a talk to the Atheist Society in Melbourne on this subject, and suggested that there were five kinds of "foundations" that people rely on to justify their moral principles. These were Nature, Personal Conviction, Divine Revelation, High Principles and Evolved Morality. There is a lot of overlap between these justifications, and one or other of them might seem to be objective. Some people might think the particular ones they rely on were self-evident.

Nature might seem to provide an objective guide for morality. But which aspects of nature do you select? How about the food chain? Some conservative people used to say that homosexuality was "unnatural" and therefore immoral. Any selection must subjective.

Personal conviction is intrinsically not objective. It has produced religions and cults, often with weird obligations and prohibitions. 'Divine revelation' is not much different, but its doctrines are commands – arbitrary, but neither objective nor subjective.

Typical high principles are freedom, fairness and equality. In what kinds of things should we be able to have freedom to do, and what kinds of things should we be able to be free from? What are the criteria for fairness when each person has unique needs, capabilities and wishes? In what ways are people to be given equal

treatment? These are subjective issues. The trade-offs within, and between, such principles have to be arbitrary. There might be an argument for objectivity in issues like personal and national safety, destruction of property, and robbery. But even these could have counter arguments.

Evolved moralities are those that a community accepts as being reasonable. They are informal and are not precise. Each person will have additional principles and won't accept some of the others. This kind of morality has different principles in different communities. With evolved moralities, some behaviours that were once acceptable can become immoral. Examples are hostility to homosexuality, and suppression of people with different skin colour, ethnicity or religion. In many communities, some behaviours, such as the use of various words, and wearing clothes that exposed a lot of skin, were once immoral but are now commonplace. Such changes occur continually.

In societies where evolved moralities prevail, there will be some people who also obey some of the doctrines of the religion they belong to. They pick the ones they like and ignore the others. We live in such a society. And its morality is not objective.

Objective morality is an elusive concept. As Leslie wrote in the final sentence of his article, "an objective standpoint leaves much room for rational debate amongst ethicists".

In practice, we often rely on the law to sort it out.

- Graeme Lindenmayer

Dear Editor,

I don't understand the usual objections to cloning, whether it's cloning of extinct animals or cloning of humans. There is this idea that cloning would be somehow unnatural, but that's not true, cloning happens in nature. There are species of lizards, amphibians, fish and birds who can self-fertilize and clone themselves by a

form of parthenogenesis. The offspring are genetic clones of the parents. Many plants can clone themselves too.

I don't understand the usual objections to genetically modified plants and animals. Humans have been genetically modifying plants and animals for some 12,000 years, or more, through selective breeding. The many types of dogs that exist today are the result of selective breeding which genetically modified the original wolf stock over time. The same goes for many of our staple crops like rice, wheat and corn. They have been genetically modified by humans through selective breeding. Yet no one has an issue with this.

The usual objections to things like cloning and genetic modification is that it is 'playing God' but why should that be a bad thing? This is a religious argument, not a rational one, and it is specific to the Judeo-Christian concept of God who is a jealous jerk who can't handle competition and is easily threatened. If we were talking about the god Prometheus, he would be all for human's 'playing God'. That would be a good thing in his eyes as he wanted us to rise to the level of gods, he wanted us to use our intelligence.

Much the same could be said about transhumanism: the notion of merging humans and technology, and of enhancing humans through genetic engineering. Many will object to this in a knee jerk reaction without really thinking about why they object. Most of their reasons will be rooted in Judeo-Christian presumptions that 'playing God' is a bad thing, the idea that humans are a special creation of God, and thus our forms should be fixed and immutable.

But we know that human evolution, back to earlier hominids, doesn't support

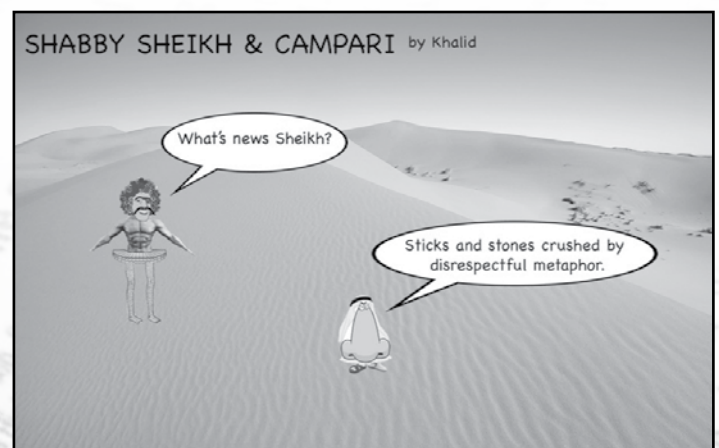
this idea. The human form is not set in stone. We are a species in transition and always have been. Genetic changes have occurred over time for myriad reasons. Ancient viruses, for example, have altered our DNA many times, as have more straightforward evolutionary forces.

There is no sacred and platonic form of Homo Sapiens to preserve from our meddling. Modern humans come from diverse hominid ancestors, not just Homo Sapiens but Neanderthals, Denisovans and other hominids. Our ancestors were fish, if we go back far enough. We have no idea what our descendants may look like in 10 million years. Even if we didn't direct our own evolution, our descendants would be genetically and biologically different from us.

It is curious how many people would object to transhumanism and altering our DNA, yet many of the same people have tattoos, piercings, and are circumcised. In fact we have been 'playing God' – that is, altering nature – since we first stepped out of caves and started using tools.

It is a distinguishing mark of humanity that we are able to direct our own evolution through our own intellect, and alter our own place within the natural world. Animals are completely subject to the forces of nature, at its mercy. We are not. We have the genius and power to alter nature to serve our interests. We should not be afraid of that.

- Daniel Peckham, Tamworth.



AN ECONOMICALLY RATIONAL CHOICE

Why giving First Nations a voice is good for the nation.

By Fiona Stanley

When the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* emerged from the challenging consultations all around the country in 2017 I, along with many non-First Nations people, felt that at last Australia would start on the journey for constitutional recognition and improved circumstances for our First Nations people.

The statement gives the emotional, historical and spiritual reasons why Australians should support this statement. When the Turnbull government ignored, and then rejected, the *Uluru Statement*, I was gutted. I tried to imagine what I would

Polling from various sources suggested that nearly 70 per cent of Australians would vote yes for a voice and I can't see anything in the statement recommending a third chamber of parliament. In fact, the proposal, beautifully crafted, was quite measured in its demands. It put clearly what was needed: i) a voice so that First Nations could have a say on what is done to them; ii) a Marrakata, or treaty process; and iii) a truth telling. It did not detail how that voice would work in a constitutional or political sense. That could be worked out later.

educational outcomes, substance abuse, gambling, child maltreatment, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), criminal behaviours, incarceration and suicides. This may sound depressing, and it is, but it also opens up fantastic opportunities for First Nations improvements. If we can influence these early pathways, then all outcomes will improve.

Research

There is ample research from Canada, New Zealand and Australia, that describes and measures outcomes in communities that have Aboriginal control – in which

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The clearly demonstrated advantages of First Nations running their own services means that this needs to be front and centre of government policy. It means that instead of evaluating them to death, we should enabling them to succeed by partnering to give them capacity and strength.

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feel like as a First Nations person. How would a Noongar or Wiradjuri leader feel? Perhaps they had become cynical with so many proposals, royal commissions, social justice reports and carefully crafted legal documents demanding social justice, over so many years, being ignored.

But this was different surely? This process had been requested by the Federal Government. The national consultations were led by highly skilled and committed First Nations leaders. Would not this process produce a document that, this time, would get there? Following an appalling silence for months, a press release was leaked, rejecting the request to ask Australians to vote for (or against) an 'Aboriginal voice', legitimised in the Constitution, because: i) it would not get up and ii) it was recommending an undemocratic third chamber of parliament because only First Nations could vote for it.

As a health researcher, my career has been committed to getting the best data and evidence to improve the health, development and wellbeing of children and youth in Australia. With an outstanding group of First Nations researchers, we have worked closely together to identify the most important pathways to improve health in First Nations families over their whole lives.

The data are clear and important for our response to the *Uluru Statement* calling for a voice. There is international evidence now that the pathways into poor health in First Nation populations world-wide commence early, and emerge from social disadvantage (no surprises there).

They include forced removals of children from families and land, resulting in ongoing inter-generational trauma. These circumstances and history also influence almost *every other pathway*: poor

Aboriginal culture is strong, as measured by language, attendance at cultural events – and which have attachment to country.

The results are staggering. In such communities, use of services (which is, of course, tailored to the specific and variable contexts of First Nations lives) is very high, and health conditions are better diagnosed and treated.

But the fascinating thing is that the whole population's wellbeing is improved. In the Nunavut community in Northern Ontario, the results of bringing back Aboriginal birthing included better birth outcomes (as predicted) but also increased self-esteem, reduced domestic violence, substance abuse and resulted in more children being ready for, and attending, school. These outcomes were not predicted by Health Canada, which was funding the services. In British Columbia, a study of youth suicide in all the Aboriginal tribal

tracts across the province over 20 years showed that some communities had very high rates of suicides and some had no suicides at all. Those with no suicides had strong Aboriginal councils, language and Aboriginal controlled services (health, education, other).

A major report from a study undertaken by our First Nations' researchers in the Kimberley in 2012 (*Hear our Voices*) confirmed the need to empower First Nations people, focus on youth, provide jobs and futures and listen to Aboriginal solutions. However, it is now clear, with yet another WA Coroner's report on the causes and prevention of very young suicides, that governments have failed to listen and that this has had devastating impacts.

There are real human, economic and social costs of not promoting and resourcing First Nations solutions. The economic costs of lost culture and the potential of enriched life pathways has been calculated using ABS data by the ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project *Solutions that Work; what the evidence and our people tell us* (published

in 2016), summarises the evidence base for Indigenous community-led suicide prevention. It focuses on the upstream risk and protective factors for suicide and demonstrates the effective tools for improving all social outcomes. Giving First Nations people a voice is cost effective. It is economic best practice.

The other huge advantage is that these First Nations programs do not just focus on one issue, such as policing to get children to school. They focus on the whole family and community, they know the local diverse circumstances in each community and in so doing they can effectively address the causal pathways referred to earlier. And they are powerful in enhancing self-esteem and mental health.

The other exciting aspect is that there are so many highly trained and skilled First Nations people who are capable of running their own services. Of course we still need more, more Aboriginal teachers, midwives, nurses and so on. Encouragingly, over three per cent of the intake to Australian medical schools is now Aboriginal, which mirrors their proportion in the population, a great success story. Surely, if it can be done for future doctors, it can be done for all

professional and other training positions. Aboriginal jobs don't all have to be in mining.

The expensive failure of most Federal and State/Territory government programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia is a tragedy. It is not only a huge waste of money but, in some circumstances, is causing more trauma, more illnesses, more suicides and more incarcerations. Whilst most Aboriginal services and activities that are government funded have to provide evaluations of effectiveness, few government-run programs do, in spite of it being obvious that they are often useless.

The clearly demonstrated advantages of First Nations running their own services means that this needs to be front and centre of government policy. It means that instead of evaluating them to death, we should enabling them to succeed by partnering to give them capacity and strength. A First Nations voice to advise and guide decisions made for them is both historically and economically best practice.

- Fiona Stanley AC FASSA FAA FAHMS;
Telethon Kids Institute, University of Western
Australia and University of Melbourne.

A TWO SPEED NATION

The irrational undercurrents of racism still plague the country.

By Mariana James-Techera

The patterns of history continue to repeat. Australia is home to both native and colonised people, and for years this has brought conflict.

This became very clear when the hotel chain Accor was recently discovered to be "segregating Aboriginal guests in lower quality rooms" according to a report by the ABC. The ABC presented photographic evidence that the poorly kept rooms were being given to Aboriginal people, and uncovered an email which stated that the Aboriginal guests should be "referred to

as a community and we will try to limit them to just that, those coming from the communities". The email asked staff to use a "touch of initiative" when allocating rooms.

It would be logical to think that the poorly kept rooms would be significantly cheaper than a normal room. Not so in this case. They were priced equally. During the investigation, ABC's 'Background Briefing' arranged for two identical bookings. One group was indigenous and the other non-indigenous. Both rooms were equally priced at \$129 but the quality of the upkeep

was drastically different. The bathroom had chicken bones on the floor, there was "broken glass and rubbish in the patio area, dried liquids on the windows and walls, a stale smell in the air and exposed wires around the skirting of the room," according to Gloriana, the indigenous women in the group. By contrast, no issues were found in the rooms for the non-indigenous group.

The management of the Alice Springs hotel responded predictably. They ordered 'further investigation' into the situation and asked for staff to undergo 'cultural training'.

Kevin Childs, a writer on indigenous issues and a former editor of *Australian Rationalist*, believes there should be a commercial price paid for such practices. “The hotel chain should be boycotted and punished economically. It is absolutely confounding to think that in the twenty first century there is still segregating in this country.

“There was another situation where (aboriginal) band members weren’t allowed into a taxi in Melbourne, or a restaurant,

The decision has set an example for similar actions to be undertaken across the country, which is no doubt why the state governments of Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia were interveners, or interested parties, in the case. It is the “end of unfinished business” according to indigenous advocates Lorraine Jones and Chris Griffiths who spent several years in court fighting for what their late fathers began. Jones said the most important part of the judgement was

Aboriginals were not a warrior race and that they just “rolled over” for the white man. “I had a fairly solid idea that this was untrue, which began my investigation into the history of the Aboriginal race which is still continuing now.”

Childs believes Aboriginal history should become a prominent component of the Australian education curriculum “There have always been gaps in the education system regarding our knowledge of Aboriginal history. I had difficulty

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You have to be taught to hate to be racist.

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because of the colour of their skin. It was only because it was a famous musician that this situation was highlighted.

“It is happening every day to other indigenous people around Australia. It is an unfortunate thing to say, but the majority of Aboriginals are invisible. If you ask anyone if they’ve met someone who is Aboriginal other than sports people, how many can tell you yes? It is bizarre and grotesque to have segregation in this day and age.”

High Court

There have been some positive legal developments. A recent decision by the High Court of Australia has ruled that: “native title holders from the remote Northern Territory town of Timber Creek will receive \$2.5 million in compensation for loss of their rights, including spiritual connection to the land.” The case is being described as one of the largest test cases since Mabo. It is the first time that the High Court, in examining the *Native Title Act’s* compensation provisions, has put a price on the spiritual disconnection between Aboriginals and the land.

The final amount of \$2.5 million in compensation is divided into three components: economic loss, interest, and non-economic loss related to the “spiritual” harm caused by disconnection. It includes \$1.3 million for non-economic loss.

the acknowledgement of the loss of culture.

Childs believes the High Court’s decision is seminal. “It recognises a spirituality and a bond which we can’t quite understand – we can only be in awe of it,” he explains. “It is a relationship which has baffled and amazed many people, and to see its recognition by a court is a great moment in the history of this country and for black-white relations.”

Resistance

Childs, along with daughter Emily McCulloch Childs, was awarded a State Library of Victoria fellowship to work on a manuscript, *Warriors on the frontier*, which tells little-known stories about Aboriginal resistance leaders. He says his interest in the issue was sparked when his daughter took an interest in Aboriginal art.

“She has done a lot to help Aboriginal women and men sell their art, and has helped them market it, including their jewellery. Coming from New Zealand, which has a very different culture, I had very little knowledge of Aboriginal history. Later down the line, I met the minister of South Australia, which led to progressively meeting more and more aboriginals. This ultimately sparked my interest.”

Childs says many indigenous people from other countries, especially in South Africa and New Zealand, believe that

getting this book published. Big publishers would say that ‘black books don’t sell’. But we have overcome that and now I am advocating for the book to be part of the school curriculum.

“I would love Australian school children and others to read about this history when they are growing up. I talked to a high school teacher who had one of the books I was using for research and when giving me the book he asked me what it was about. When I explained, he said: “Why weren’t we ever taught this?”

“In fact, one of the chapters in the book is entitled ‘Why weren’t we told?’ There is an extraordinary amount of people who know very little about the history of their own land.”

Does Childs think that younger generations will continue the racism? “It may lessen over time. But (racism) is ingrained all around the world. It happens everywhere and will never go away.

“You have to be taught to hate to be racist. With any luck, it will be alleviated as we get more and more black faces in the media. But racism has been around for centuries. Evidence such as blackface cartoons and articles show that. Unfortunately, it will be a while until it is no longer an issue.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley

by Paul Monk

*Shelley died when he was half my age
And left behind a monument of verse.
He perished reckless, as he'd lived:
Heedless of rede or storm warning;
But passionate he was in prosody.*

*Sprung of the Sussex squirearchy,
He learned his Latin and was gifted Greek
From childhood at fabled Field Place.
Fabled, I write, since it was Tudor,
Save for its belated Georgian wing.*

*It harboured many mysteries and attics,
As well as arboured gardens full of life,
Where boisterous Bysshe adventured;
Returning thence with wild imaginings
Confabulated for the ever eager ears*

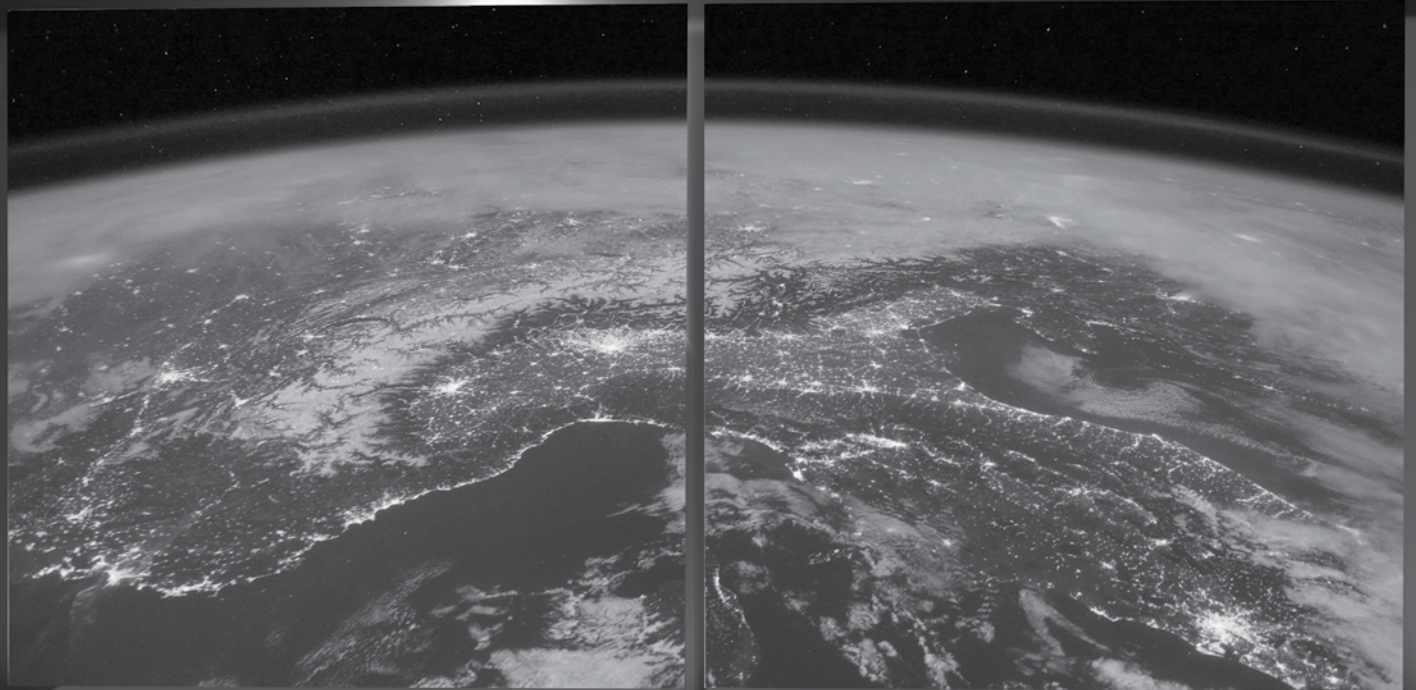
*Of his young, adoring sisters;
As, in like manner, he affected Alchemy,
Plunged his febrile brain among strange books
And annotated them with horned sprites.
He was fey and broke with his staid father -*

*Not least on account of a brutal schooling,
That instilled in him a turbulent character:
At once a leveller and violent in disdain
Of all that might advise, accost or thwart him.
His liberty he loved and roamed abroad*

*Described, in his most memorable verses,
Are the fall of Ozymandias, King of Kings
And Prometheus Unbound, defiant hero.
He revelled in Caracalla's ruined Baths;
Then, tempting fate at thirty, died at sea.*

No closed minds here

The need to maintain an expansive view in order to acquire knowledge remains paramount.



The phrase ‘the Open Society’ has been intimately linked with the Austrian Karl Popper, who saw deep links between the operation of rational thought, science and democracy. In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1934), he said that science’s mix of conjecture and rigour is, next to music and art, “the greatest, most beautiful and most enlightening achievement of the human spirit”.

Then, in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in 1945, Popper went on to claim that the two totalitarian systems, communism and fascism, were philosophically closed. He saw parallels between the open mindedness required for sure-footed intellectual inquiry and the openness of democracies.

It was principally an argument about epistemology, or the philosophy of knowledge, rather than a political statement, but it had far reaching political

implications. Popper defined the open society as one “in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions” as opposed to a “magical or tribal or collectivist society.” The preference for democracy and its emphasis on individual choice was clear.

Popper’s argument made him one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century – although it should be noted that it was the French philosopher Henri Bergson who first coined the phrase -- and the idea of the open society has since come to be seen as a touchstone of social health in the West.

Yet just as the political and social conditions at the end of World War II differ greatly from those in 2019, what it means to have an ‘open society’ now has also profoundly altered. The financial trader George Soros, whose philanthropic organisation is called the Open Society

Foundations, claimed he set out to combat the use, by conservative, right wing operatives such as President George W Bush’s spin doctor Karl Rove, of techniques of deception borrowed from modern advertising and cognitive science. But Soros’ concerns now seem almost quaint compared with what has emerged over the last few years. The practices on social media often seem to be more suggestive of a closing society than an open one, and disclosures such as Edward Snowden’s revelations about the mass surveillance undertaken by the National Security Agency, lead to little confidence that there is widespread encouragement of different viewpoints.

In particular, the insidious blizzard of ‘fake news’, which is issuing from many, often competing, sources, is making the drawing of open-minded, rational conclusions a fraught process.

The much-decorated Australian epidemiologist Fiona Stanley, who is a patron of the RSA, believes that it is for this reason that it is critical to protect the public broadcaster, the ABC (she is a previous board member). “The ABC is the vehicle in Australia for democracy and an open society whereby people get proper information – the best information, and evidence,” she tells *Australian Rationalist*.

“There are other countries that have more media avenues for getting information out about areas such as: rising inequality, the corruption in society, environmental degradation and climate change, all of the things which are changing in society that I was concerned about.”

Stanley believes that “content-rich output” is critical for an open society. “We need an evidence base on which people can be educated on the major issues in our community and planet, so they can make the right decisions. Not just about themselves and their families, but in terms of being able to be a good democratic citizen.

“We no longer seem to have out there a proper informed debate within our parliaments which is driven at least a bit by some evidence; I don’t think it is an honest and open debate.

privatised and their only real aim becomes to serve their shareholders.

“I was hoping that the financial crisis that people would see reason. And what happened? They bailed them out. No-one responsible for that crisis even got to caught, let alone jail.”

Diversity

Stanley supports the push to have more diverse voices. She believes there is a need to hear from people with different world experiences, and that “the days of the white male privileged politician” should be over.

“We need increased diversity in our parliament and government, diversity within the decision making processes. It will actually give us greater resilience”. Just as biodiversity in the physical environment is more sustainable because there is greater redundancy in the system, so diversity in the political and social systems is more likely to be robust. “Then there will be more trust.”

Stanley says younger people should be given the option to vote, pointing out that they have often understood issues better, and are more open to ideas, than older generations. “Take climate change. Young kids have got the science, why haven’t our politicians? Because they are being influenced by the corporates. The most

about jobs? Even the jobs information has been erroneous.”

Stanley is especially critical of corporates overseeing themselves. “Give me an example in any of these corporates where self regulation has worked. There is not one. Who do you trust to regulate? It has to be proper government. But our parliament is totally ineffective in dealing with the major issues facing mankind.”

The push to create more diversity of voices may improve openness, but it can also have some perverse effects, especially on social media. The intensifying politics of identity is often leading to a narrowing of the mind: a stress on *who* is saying something rather than *what* they are saying. At the very least, intolerance of other people’s viewpoints seems to be on the rise, especially on social media, which has become the arena for levels of animosity, even verbal violence, that were previously unthinkable.

Neither is the intolerance of other viewpoints confined to social media. Cynical mainstream media operatives, such as the radio ‘shock jocks’ in Australian capital cities, or newspaper columnists whose career success is predicated on being effective provocateurs, are eroding openness to different arguments or points

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We need increased diversity in our parliament and government, diversity within the decision making processes.

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“Added to which, we have had corruption in many of our political and top corporate and financial companies, especially the banks. I feel quite anguished about Australian society and the way decisions are made at every level. What happened at the banks was pretty shattering – plus the fact that the Coalition did not want to have a Royal Commission into the banks and then of course it was truncated. It is a problem when these kinds of corporate entities are

powerful influences in our decision making processes are coming from those who stand to gain from the creation of short term wealth. People like the Koch Brothers in America are above government. They don’t care a fig.

“I can’t understand, for example, why a Labor government in Queensland is supporting a huge coal mine, the Adani coal mine, when the science shows that this is the most ridiculous thing to do. Is it

of view. Rationality is the inevitable loser.

Compromising of public information is nothing new – it was intense during the Cold War, for instance – but the greater interconnectedness created by the proliferation of media platforms has meant that poor, or inaccurate, information is penetrating people’s lives to an extreme degree. Sit on a train or tram and witness the passengers staring at their mobile phone screens and the conclusion is

clear enough. The internet is becoming a dominant source of information about the world for most people (as opposed to direct personal experience) and if that is being heavily manipulated, it harms the ability to be rational and open minded.

Even the social media giant Facebook has acknowledged this. The company produced an internal paper that argued that the term 'fake news' is unhelpful, because there are so many other types of falsity:

Information (or Influence) Operations – Actions taken by governments, or organised non-state actors, to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment.

False News – News articles that purport to be factual, but which contain intentional misstatements of fact with the intention to arouse passions, attract viewership, or deceive.

False Amplifiers – Co-ordinated activity by inauthentic accounts with the intent of manipulating political discussion (such as by discouraging specific parties from participating in discussion, or

amplifying sensationalistic voices over others).

Disinformation – Inaccurate or manipulated information/content that is spread intentionally. This can include false news, or it can involve more subtle methods, such as false flag operations, feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information.

To this list can be added 'No news': important facts that are suppressed. And there is the most fake news of all: the claim that Facebook provides a product to its customers when in reality its customers are themselves the product, being on-sold to other parties.

If the open society depends on good quality evidence, then it seems evident that it is no easier to create now than it was when Popper was making his case.

Fake measures

Fake news is not the only problem clouding a rational, open understanding of the world. Another insidious influence might be described as 'fake figures',

especially in the financial sphere. Witness gross domestic product, or GDP, which is taken as a measure of national wellbeing.

In reality, it is only a measure of transactions. If money changes hands when something disastrous happens, then GDP will still rise. The 2011 tsunami in Japan, for example, led to an increase in that country's GDP; it was hardly an indicator of national wellbeing. The disastrous Black Saturday fires in Victoria resulted in a \$4 billion increase in GDP.

GDP is not even a proper measure of production. As the economist Michael Hudson has noted, finance, insurance and real estate do not produce anything; they are parasitical. If they are taken out of GDP it shows most developed economies withering. This is not a new insight; Robert F Kennedy pointed out decades ago that GDP measures "everything except that which is worthwhile".

"If you pursue that singular measure of GDP it supports a very damaging neo-liberal conservative agenda," says Stanley. "The things that increase GDP can be

UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOURS

Is what is happening to Julian Assange a death knell for the open society?

The jailing of Julian Assange after he was extracted from the Ecuadorian embassy, where he had sought asylum after sexual assault charges were brought against him in Sweden, suggests that when it comes to publishing information that the American military does not like, any commitment to maintaining an open society remains weak.

The former British diplomat, Craig Murray in 2016 claimed he received, and passed on to Wikileaks, the leaked Clinton campaign emails from a "disgusted" Democratic whistle blower. If true, this proves that the Russians were not involved and it as a leak, not a hack. But this has not stopped America, which, at the time of writing, has sent a provisional extradition

request to Britain charging him over alleged computer hacking.

Assange's fears that he would be extradited to America, the reason for his seeking asylum in the first place, have proven to be correct, but they were ridiculed by the mainstream press, demonstrating a deep bias against him and his publishing activities. Far from protecting the open flow of information that is supposed to be central to the practice of journalism, they are doing the opposite. *The Guardian*, for example, claimed in 2018 that "there is no public criminal case against Assange or WikiLeaks in the US," and that the only barrier to him leaving is "pride."

The courts have been worse. Murray

noted that Assange's trial over breaching bail (for charges that no longer apply) has exposed the British legal system as deeply flawed. He was given a sentence of almost a year.

"Julian Assange said nothing during the whole brief proceedings, other than to say 'Not guilty' twice, and to ask a one-sentence question about why the charges were changed midway through this sham 'trial.' Yet Judge Michael Snow condemned Assange as 'narcissistic'.

"There was nothing that happened in Snow's brief court hearing that could conceivably have given rise to that opinion. It was plainly something he brought with him into the courtroom, and had read or

very harmful to the population, such as increased consumption of tobacco and alcohol.

“The ‘GDP agenda’ pushes faster and unfettered growth and increased consumption, because that is what wealth creation is all about. They promise that everyone will benefit; that the rising tide will raise all the boats. But it hasn’t. What has happened is an increase in inequality, which has had a very damaging impact on the planet, increased consumption and an increase in the amount of waste that that has been created.”

Stanley, who is involved in a world-wide effort to find better measures than GDP, says the New Zealand prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, made a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos that confronted the issue.

“She said (to the Davos audience): ‘This is NZ’s GDP, and as you can see it looks good. So why do we have the highest suicide rate amongst young males? Why do we have inequity? Why aren’t we able to provide good health care for all our Maori

and Island people? We are not a good society. GDP does not measure our ability to deliver on these things and I am going to ensure that my government will use other measures.’

Stanley says New Zealand will be first country, in June, to bring out a budget that is based on the well being of the population. “It will not just be focusing on economic growth.” She adds that the Australian Bureau of Statistics was interested in developing measures of well being, but the Coalition government insisted on retaining just GDP as the sole measure. “(The Coalition believed that) if you have a good financial bottom line then well being is served. Show me the data that GDP delivers well being for the community. It is not there.”

There are many other deceptive, financial measures whose proliferation encourages the vice of positivism: the belief that something is only real if it can be measured. A related intellectual trap is nominalism: the belief that naming something makes it real.

Quantitative measures, and the lists created from them, make for attractive media fodder by reducing national comparisons to the level of a sporting contest. But any quantitative measurement of human activity often ends up being a precise calculation of nothing at all, or a distortion.

Stanley believes America’s “foreign policy and financial neo-liberal agenda” has also been damaging for the development of an open society. The intense political partisanship between Republicans and Democrats that has emerged in America in recent years she believes has also had a negative effect on openness and rational debate.

“We follow America. I think it is appalling what America has done to the world. If we want to be like America, and many countries seem too, I feel very anxious about that.”

heard in the mainstream media, or picked up in his club. It was, in short, the very definition of prejudice.”

Melbourne-based journalist Caitlin Johnstone, argues that the proposed prosecution of Assange in America represents a seminal challenge to Western countries’ commitment to openness, and to rational inquiry.

Many logical fallacies, she notes, are evident in the smear campaigns being waged against Assange, including attacking his character rather than his argument (*ad hominem* attacks), misrepresentations (the straw man fallacy), hasty generalisations, false causes, false dichotomies, non-sequiters and a reversal of the burden of truth.

“It’s amazing how frequently I see people blurting out assertions about Assange that I know for a fact they have no way of proving: that he’s a Russian agent, that he’s a rapist, that he’s a CIA asset, etc.” Johnstone writes.

“The burden of proof is always on the party making the claim. Make them present the specific information. Rank-and-file citizens generally help the mass media propagandists smear Assange, not to help protect the world from the influence of a dangerous individual, but to protect themselves from cognitive dissonance.

“People find themselves eager to believe smears about Assange because the raw facts revealed by WikiLeaks publications punch giant holes in the stories about the kind of world, nation and society that most

people have been taught to believe they live in since school age.

“These kinds of beliefs are interwoven with people’s entire egoic structures, with their sense of self and who they are as a person, so narratives which threaten to tear them apart can feel the same as a personal attack.

“One of the most interesting things to me right now is how the unconscious behaviours of our civilization are mirrored in the unconsciousness of the individuals who support those behaviours.”

If Johnstone is right, it suggests that we remain a long way from having an open society and are instead still mired in what Popper called ‘tribalism’.

cont. from page 7

the 'Immaculate Conception' or on 'Papal infallibility' you would find me equally dismissive, I'm afraid. It seems to bother you that I've long since moved on from taking any of these things seriously, but there it is. There's no going back for me.

Inevitably, this was waving the proverbial red rag at a (Papal) bull and his closing (at last) dig at me was indicative of both his annoyance and his unregenerate theological worldview:

No. I think your destination is pretty

I'm sure you will find continuing absorption in obscurantist dogma rewarding in both this life and your imaginary hereafter.

Now, here's my question to readers of this magazine: did I conduct myself as a good rationalist should? If Pierre Bayle was right, that it should be how people behave, rather than what strange things they profess to believe that should underpin a regime of toleration, did I behave in a tolerant manner here?

condescension' and refusal to venture into Wonderland with him warranted in all the circumstances? Remember, I was a Catholic, back when I was actually a schoolboy, so I am not unacquainted with the ways of priests.

My own view is that it's dishonest to pretend, in the name of 'tolerance', to take religious dogmas and supernatural claims seriously (unless in fact you do). Nor should religious believers be encouraged to expect that one will. They should, rather, pause and

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I'm sure you will find continuing absorption in obscurantist dogma rewarding in both this life and your imaginary hereafter.

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clear. No going back, eh. Actually, I am not bothered by your beliefs. That is up to you. But your arrogant condescension- now that's another matter.

This might be described as a fine old fashioned way of saying 'Go to Hell.' Old fashioned in that he really meant it. Perish the thought that a free thinker akin to Milton's rebellious Lucifer – Day Star, Son of Dawn – should strike an attitude of 'arrogant condescension' in an exchange with a humble servant of the Good Lord. But the free thinker is destined, alas, to so offend true believers of most any kind. Polite scepticism – what, in fact, in the British Enlightenment, was christened (if you'll pardon the expression) polite condescension seems the only recourse in attempting dialogue with those who have strong views from which they will not be deflected or dissuaded – fanatics, as Churchill defined the term.

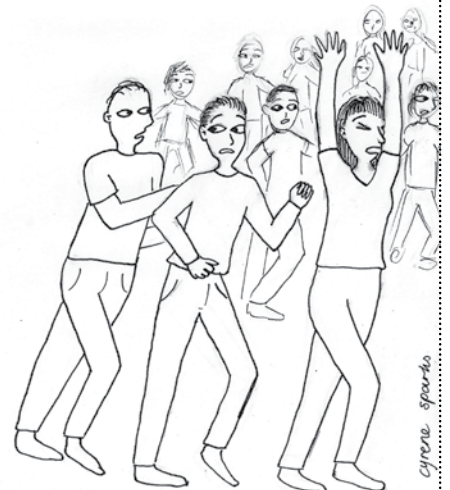
I closed the exchange by responding in this spirit and proposing to 'write it up as a case study for Australian Rationalist.' Doubtless to his further fuming exasperation, I commented that his belief that I am destined for the Catholic Hell struck me as very funny. Just to ensure that his fire was really burning, I added:

Should I have 'respected' the beliefs of this Catholic priest and given him to understand that, naturally, I take the resurrection and the existence of his Biblical deity seriously and humbly avow agnosticism with regard to other religious claims? Or was my 'arrogant

reflect on why it is that there are a growing number of us who are tired of their claims and uninterested in discussing them. We ask only that they behave as ordinary decent human beings and agree to the rules that make a tolerant, as distinct from theologically obsessed, society workable.

RUN!

**IT'S THE CHRISTIANS WANTING
TO LOVE AND FORGIVE US!**



The Merciful Beneficence of Repression

By Charles W. Brice

*Let's just say the incense fell out of his censer
a long time ago. Let's just say his holy water boat sunk.*

*Let's just say his rosary beads bounced wildly along his psyche
and dribbled onto the sanctuary floor. No one wanted to serve*

*mass with Monsignor Hartman. He would grab your arm in an iron grip
and grimace—as close as he got to love. But here I was, alone, serving*

*a requiem mass for a poor young woman who died of a church and state
forced botched abortion. Her relations wailed and keened—*

*one of them crawled on her knees up the center aisle of St. Mary's
where Monsignor Hartman and I stood before the small casket.*

*Because the other two altar boys had bowed out, I had to balance
the sensor and holy water boat, the charcoal and incense while*

*Monsignor, in his black cape and mood, stared at me maliciously
until I offered him the holy water boat. He took the aspergillum*

*and stepped down to anoint the coffin with the church's holy tears.
Instead he dropped the aspergillum and grabbed his throat,*

*his pallor as pale as back-alley putty, blessed terra of terror. "Holy
shit!" I intoned. Was the old blowhard having a heart attack?*

*The grieving multitude gasped. What possessed me to look at my feet
I don't recall. Head bowed, I discovered my right shoe planted atop*

*Monsignor's cape causing the gold clasp at his throat to smite his Adam's
Apple like Cain crushed Abel. "Holy shit!" I chanted again and lifted my foot.*

*The Monsignor winged toward the casket like an ecclesiastical trapeze flyer.
I remember nothing after that except the image of Monsignor Hartman draped*

*over the coffin, clutching it like a vulture in a Caravaggio nightmare—
my first experience of the merciful beneficence of repression.*

ON THE SPECTRUM OF OPINIONS

Autism can be described, but not explained.

By Jack Dikian

The fact that behavioural symptoms of Autism often appear early, with many children showing symptoms by 12 months to 18 months of age or earlier, has unfortunately been reason for some to promulgate an erroneous viewpoint that a link exists between childhood vaccines and Autism. So it was significant that Danish researchers recently confirmed that there is no link between the childhood vaccine Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) and the related risk of developing an Autism Spectrum Disorder (Autism). It should not have come as a surprise to anyone, and it certainly does not surprise practitioners working in all forms of Medicine, and especially in paediatrics, developmental psychiatry and developmental disability.

The Danish results, which tracked some 657,461 children over a decade correlate well with a number of other large longitudinal studies of this kind across

the world. This includes a study funded by the US National Institutes of Health and the Department of Health and Human Services which examined 96,000 U.S. children in 2015. The U.S. study, crucially, went a step further and included children those who have a sibling with Autism, a group considered at higher risk for the disorder.

This is not to say that the unfolding of the MMR controversy has not revealed anxieties about the cultural climate affecting matters of health and illness, which is reflected in a heightened sense of individual vulnerability to environmental dangers. The controversy first began in 1998 after the British gastroenterologist, Andrew Wakefield and colleagues published a paper in *The Lancet*, the world's oldest and most prestigious medical journal, which described eight children whose first symptoms of Autism appeared within one month after receiving an MMR vaccine.

It is important to note that Wakefield's data was faulty. *The Lancet* retracted the paper in 2010, but the damage was done and this work continues to be cited by anti-vaccinationists.

In December 2001, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in response to a question from the Conservative MP Julie Kirkbride, a campaigner for separate vaccinations, refused to disclose whether his son Leo had received the combined MMR. Claiming that this was a private matter, Blair indicated his support for the official policy on MMR. To the public, his

stand seemed disingenuous.

In some ways it might have been beneficial if MMR studies shed light on understanding the aetiology of Autism but the fact is Autism is a complex developmental disorder with little or no support for the claim that environmental factors contribute to the risk of developing it.

Since the early 1900s, when the word Autism was first used to describe a group of schizophrenic patients who were especially withdrawn and self-absorbed, we have become especially good at describing the features of the disorder, and as well, have developed protocols to help those with Autism, and their parents and carers, reduce the impact of the disorder and increase quality of life.

Whilst we can describe the disorder we can't explain it. What we do now know is that Autistic symptoms result from maturation-related changes in various systems of the brain, but how this occurs is not well understood. And, whilst there is a strong genetic basis, the genetics of Autism are complex and it is unclear whether Autism is explained more by rare multigene interactions of common genetic variants.

Another aspect of Autism reporting is the question of whether the disorder is on the rise. This too makes front-page news frequently. Anecdotally, it certainly looks that way. Stories about increasing numbers of children in schools, and of funding for people with Autism blowing the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) budget are many. The ABC's *The 7.30 Report* in 2016 reported that the NDIS budget was under strain with a boom in Autism diagnoses. The report went on to explain that in South Australia almost 50 per cent of those eligible for NDIS funding were individuals with Autism. An equally important, perhaps better nuanced, claim



is whether we are just recognising Autism more easily and applying this term more willingly. The answer is yes.

In the case of Autism, the set of criteria used by practitioners has changed substantially over the years, listing more behaviours that are considered to be indicative of Autism and also including

in the behavioural severity of Autistic disorder diagnoses (Wiley, 2017) found that the increasing prevalence of Autism may in part be due to a shift in the diagnostic threshold that has led to individuals with a less severe behavioural phenotype (observable characteristics) receiving a clinical diagnosis.

increased from 58.5 per cent to 86.6 per cent across the same period.

Statistics notwithstanding, the problem behaviours of children with Autism are among the most challenging and stressful issues faced by Australian schools and parents. The current best practice in treating and preventing behaviours of concern is

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Whilst we can describe the disorder we can't explain it.

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descriptions of subtler symptoms that previously may have been overlooked. In essence, the diagnostic threshold has become wider and finer. Many children who would be diagnosed with Autism today would not have been diagnosed with Autism 15 years ago. Recent research exploring possible reasons for the increase in diagnostic rates also points to the same explanation.

A recent study in Western Australia titled, *Evidence of a reduction over time*

For example, their data showed there was a statistically significant reduction from 2000 to 2006 in the percentage of new diagnoses meeting two of 12 Autism criteria. There was also a reduction across the study period in the proportion of new cases rated as having extreme severity on six criteria. There was a reduction in the proportion of individuals with three or more criteria rated as extreme from 2000 to 2006, however the percentage of new cases with no ‘extreme’ rating on any criteria

early intervention and utilizes principles and practices of positive behaviour support. Since the roll-out of the NDIS in July 2013, the eligibility rules for people with Autism has been revised and revised again. It is important for parents and caregivers to keep abreast of this when seeking support and importantly understand that children under the age six do not need a diagnosis of Autism to benefit from the NDIS.

- Dr Jack Dikian is a practicing clinical psychologist (clinical consultant).

ARE WE RULED OVER BY THINGS?

Is hostility to the idea there is a design in nature stopping understanding of the effects of technology?

One of the most common targets for rationalists is the idea of ‘intelligent design’: the theory that life, or the universe, cannot have arisen by chance and so must have been designed and created by an intelligent entity. Because this implies the existence of a supreme being, it runs counter to the commonly held principles of rationalism.

But has the aversion to the idea of an underlying design in nature resulted in an overlooking of the implications of what, in the human world, has evidently been intelligently designed?

That is the view of Jason Tuckwell, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Western Sydney. He notes that the ancient Greek root of the word ‘technology’ is

techne, which means ‘craftsmanship’ or ‘art’. He believes that technology tends to be thought of in mechanistic terms and it is time to refocus on the human intention behind technology in order to make us less vulnerable to its abuses.

In an interview for the ABC’s Radio National’s ‘The Philosophers Zone’, Tuckwell claimed that the modern view of technology lacks “human agency”; that it is too easily forgotten that technologies – which have “very diverse and disruptive effects on society and culture and social relations and the natural world” – have been created by somebody with an intended purpose, or design.

“To me it seems to generate almost a

perverse effect. It is one thing to claim that nature is based on rules and that there is a materialistic basis for the universe and that makes it knowable. Science has been very successful in using that idea to make very powerful interventions and understandings about what sort of beings we are and how the world works.

“However, if you keep following that mechanistic metaphor you start to try to think of the emergence of the technological object itself as like the way nature produces things.”

Tuckwell stresses that the “mechanistic metaphor” used in science is an “extraordinarily powerful and explanatory tool” for understanding the natural world.

“That has been shown in a really rigorous way and we owe a lot to our understanding of nature in that context.” He does not subscribe to the idea there is a “formal cause” in nature, stating “there is not a design principle that sees us as already coming into existence.”

The problem, as he sees it, is that the mode of thinking used in science has flaws when applied to human agents. This point resembles a common criticism of the philosophy of materialism: that it fails to explain itself. To subscribe to materialism a person has to be, by definition, conscious of what materialism is. So where in matter (presumably in the brain) is the human consciousness necessary to have that awareness? It is generally accepted in science that matter is not conscious given that, if it were, it would not be possible to predict with complete accuracy what

example of what is missed when there is a failure to identify how agents are operating in technology.

“Almost daily, or weekly, we see new accounts of this bad behaviour, or bad faith actions, on the part of Facebook. It was sold to us as a friendly community, a way of getting people to interact over the tyrannies of distance and time. One of the profound things that technologies do is that they change the relations between time and space between agents and that is an incredibly potent thing.

“But under this guise of a social good, we have learned that Facebook’s user profiling has been used for nefarious purposes. At first this seemed to be a fair trade off: advertising in return for a ‘free’ service.

“But we have learned now that the sophisticated profiling has been used for a

chain reaction set off by a random, chance, ordinary event that produces a set of indifferent universal laws.

“This is to radically change the nature of the original cause – so much so, that by declaring it random, or chance, it is really a way of saying just ignore (causes). (Science) is completely superfluous to the indifferent universal laws it produces.”

Aristotle, Tuckwell notes, explicitly argued that art and technology are not determined by a prime mover: what “brings everything else into being”. Instead, the ancient Greek argued that neither art nor technology is “a divine, creative inspiration from a Creator God, anymore than a combination of indifferent forces sparked by chance or random events.”

Tuckwell adds that whereas technology is now often seen as an object only, Aristotle saw it more as the end of a human process.

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What about taking up the violin, learning to tango, or memorising a chunk of Hamlet?

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the physical world will do. So how does consciousness come about?

Tuckwell contends that scientific materialism creates intellectual traps. “It becomes very strange when you try to apply this (materialism) to understanding the technical apparatus itself, like a telephone. It’s almost like the telephone has come into being as a natural object. Yet, quite transparently, there are design principles and concepts.

“What we risk doing is completely missing those design elements and there are very profound consequences for not understanding that. The clearest examples today are the ethical conundrums we are having with things like social media. I see that as being part of this deeper schism between these two ways to understand what a technical object is.”

Social good?

Tuckwell says recent problems that have emerged with Facebook provide an

lot of different gains and exploitations that are other than purely financial, for profit. This is very concerning. We need to think about who the designing agent is when we engage with technology.”

Tuckwell says while the mechanistic metaphor has worked well in unravelling the physical world, more complex metaphors need to be generated to understand the human world. This, he says, is why Aristotle’s main interest was on how art and technology are made (he saw little distinction between art and technology). “Art was a causal problem for him. How is it possible that a human can make something new? Whether it is a boat or a painting or a sculpture?”

Writing in *devianttechnique.com*, Tuckwell further claims that science does not deal well with human creativity. “Scientific rationalism invites us to think that (causes) are not the work of a creative being, or force, at all. What it rather describes is a

“Art is not an imitation of nature, because it is not like nature in any way; it is rather that which works to bring things into being that are not possible for the gods, nature or indifferent universal laws.”



*Wait a minute, I am ringing.
I had better answer myself.*

AVAILABLE NATURAL LIGHT

The amazing, masterful Jaqueline Mitelman.

By Alison Waters



Jaqueline Mitelman

Jacqueline Mitelman was born in Scotland, and has lived in Melbourne most of her life apart from a period of years living in France. Since studying photography at Prahran college in the mid seventies, under the tutelage of Athol Smith, Paul Cox and John Cato, she has worked as a freelance photographer specialising in portraiture.

Her work has appeared, in Australia and internationally, in magazines and newspapers, on CD and book covers, and on theatre and music posters.

A wide range of private commissions has resulted in a considerable collection of portraits of culturally significant Australians.

In a recent interview with Jaqueline Mitelman I asked her the following questions.

What were the main influences at the beginning of your training as a photographer?

When I was about 19, I met Ben Lewin through a mutual dear friend, Robert Richter. Both of them were studying law, but Ben was also a very enthusiastic photographer, who was a master in using available natural light. I think this had a lasting influence on my photography.

At that time I had a friend who was teaching in the Engineering faculty at Melbourne University and he made the darkroom available to me. I started taking and printing my own photos. Working in the dark room was a revelation to me, I was so involved that I lost all sense of time!

I left Australia to live in Paris for a few years, where I became involved in theatre.

It was not until I had returned to Australia, and married artist Alan Mitelman, that I became involved in photography again. We set up a temporary darkroom in the kitchen; it was the easiest room to blackout. A new baby daughter was a great stimulus for my picture taking. In 1973 I started studying photography at Prahran College. After 3 years there, I started working as a freelance photographer, and have done so ever since.

Does portraiture define your oeuvre?

I have exhibited works which are landscapes and cityscapes. Apart from portraits of people, I have had great delight in photographing dogs and other animals (the exhibition was at the Monash Gallery of Art, black and white dog portraits)

How significant was it for you to win the 2011 prestigious National Photographic Portrait Prize?

The National Portrait Prize was a big thrill. I loved the portrait of Suzi, and that the judges could see what I loved, was really thrilling! And, of course, getting a general, positive response was very pleasing

What do you look for that inspires you to take photographs?

The exploration of the face, the angles etc., are necessary in a portrait for me. It is a specific process. Sometimes, one chooses the subject because the face is interesting, or it is a commission – either way the process is similar. Outside of that, it is very hard to specify what inspires. I am inspired by very varied subject matter, light on the trees, a fruit bowl, my dog.

Is there a particular photography/artist that you admire?

I liked the whimsy of Henri Lartigue's belle epoch images, August Sander, Julia Margaret Cameron. Classical painted portraits are obviously an influence.



Ruby Hunter by Jacqueline Mitelman



Yothu Yindi by Jacqueline Mitelman

NOTHING COMES FROM NOTHING

Why do things exist at all and can we even ask the question?

By Greg Kasarik

The question of existence is a vexing one and lies at the heart of a myriad of other conundrums, such as meaning, destiny and purpose. Despite its seeming simplicity, this conundrum and variations on it, has probably confounded philosophers, theologians and the ordinary person since our species first became able to contemplate its own existence.

While many might otherwise disagree, I am firmly of the opinion that the answers to this question will lie forever beyond our reach and the only 'solutions' are speculation. While others may claim to know the 'Truth', the Divine Principle (that god can never know if god is God) teaches us that we can never have the answers, because we can never be certain of anything beyond our own existence.

The question of existence takes on additional importance, as its answer relates directly to our own existence, meaning and purpose. With the capacity to fear death, and the terror that the thought of our own oblivion produces, we desperately ask ourselves if 'this is it'? Is there more

beyond this often vicious existence, is there a god and ultimately and perhaps most importantly, do I live on after death?

Despite having been granted this amazing and wonderful gift of sentience, too often the world speaks to us of randomness and pain. As we seek meaning, we inevitably wonder if it is all nothing but chance? Will everything that we have ever stood for – our hopes, dreams, fears, goals and desires – amount to naught? Could it be that there is more to existence than meets the eye? Or does nihilism inevitably beckon?

Traditionally, religions have sought to answer this problem through the evocation of a variety of creation myths. The most famous of these, of course is that found in The Book of Genesis, which is held to be sacred by over two-thirds of the world's population. Despite this, few have ever noticed the bait and switch contained within its opening sentence: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

The astute reader will note that this isn't

telling us about the "Beginning," because, if it were, it would be telling us about how God came into being. Instead Genesis seeks to answer the much less interesting question of how our *particular* reality came to be.

In all fairness, this bait and switch isn't the fault of the original writers, but that of those who followed centuries later and who failed to understand the important context of those immortal opening words. It is doubtful that the writer of Genesis was attempting to explain the basic question of existence as I have expressed it; the very question may have been entirely beyond his conception.

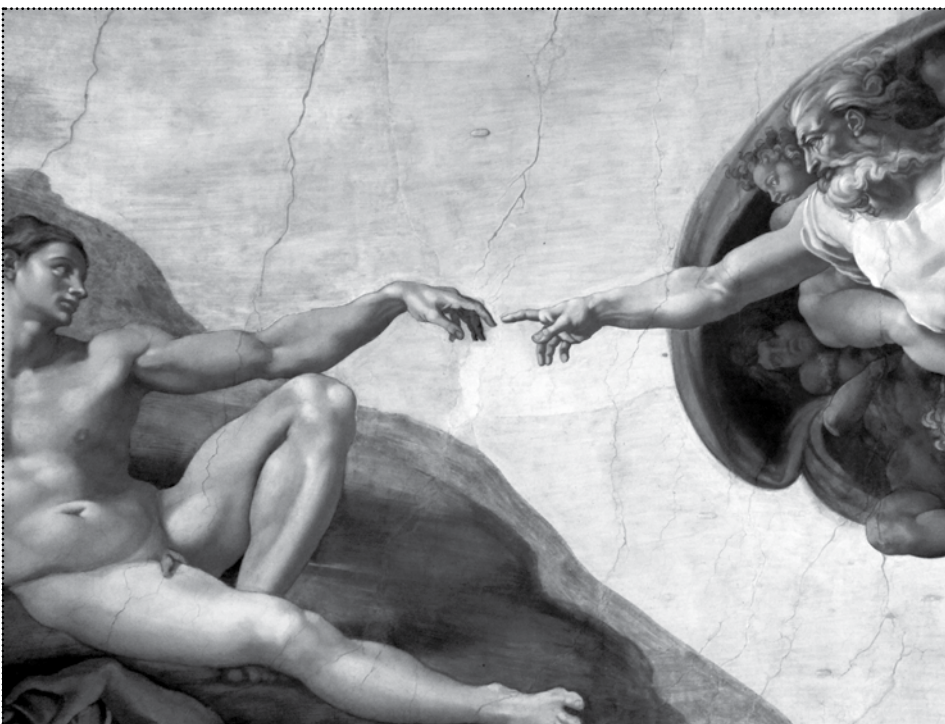
Instead, like many of his contemporaries in the ancient Middle East, he believed that the world had been formed out of a void, chaos or some other pre-existing substance and that his gods had been the ones to bring order and to create the world along with the plants, animals and people within it.

The origin of his god isn't addressed within the myth and it isn't hard to understand why. This story most likely originated out of the verbal mythologies told by nomadic herdsman as they followed their flocks. They were illiterate, and lay at the dawn of the golden ages of thought that have given us greats such as Socrates, Descartes and Kant.

What many would regard as the 'final version' of their myth, captured so beautifully in the King James Bible lay more than 2,500 years away. The writers sought to explain the world around them and their place within it and, given the difficulty of even imagining a time when there was nothing, it made sense to propose a void from which the world as they knew it emerged.

Eternal recurrence

Intriguingly, despite being isolated in their own bubble, through the absence



of any knowledge of history, few early cultures seem to have taken the apparently reasonable position that everything was as it always had been and that there was no need for anything to have been created in the first place. The closest that many traditions came to this idea was the concept of Eternal Recurrence, which (according to Wikipedia) “is a concept that the universe

psychological need for causation.

Existence is the most binary of concepts. Something either exists or it doesn't. But what do I mean when I talk about 'Nothing' or 'non-existence'? A state of non-existence is a state which is completely devoid of any information content. Nothing whatsoever exists, including time, space and abstract objects, such as numbers. It

In order to understand this, we need to picture our universe as a single unit of space-time. Because of the nature of our consciousness, we perceive only the present, but once the present becomes past it doesn't cease to ever have existed. Rather, it exists in a place that we cannot access. Similarly, the future can be said to exist, even if the only way that we can

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The problem is that we are locked within a mind that cannot divorce itself from notions of time and causality.

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has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time or space.”

Perhaps because of our own immersion within our own time stream and our almost instinctive desire to imagine causality even when there is none (for example with superstition), thinking that the universe had a start made more sense than not.

Modern science now apparently supports this view, with the Big Bang Theory seeming to point to a definite moment in time when everything began. But the Big Bang can only provide an explanation for how this particular universe exists. In our search for an explanation for existence we still need to ask, ‘What caused the Big Bang?’ Even if this were explained, we would still be left asking ourselves what caused the thing that caused the Big Bang, followed by what caused the thing that caused the thing that caused the thing, ad nauseam, all the way to eternity. Infinite regress seems unavoidable.

The problem is that we are locked within a mind that cannot divorce itself from notions of time and causality. Even if universe's origins didn't lie within an inaccessible metaphysical realm, our experience and common sense ideas about the world make it difficult to put aside our

is pure and absolute state of Not-Being. In this state, not only does Nothing exist, but non-existence precludes existence; they are mutually exclusive states.

Given a state of non-existence, nothing could ever exist. As Parmenides pointed out so astutely in the fifth century BCE: “nothing comes from nothing”. It is impossible for something to arise out of the state of nothingness. If it were, this would imply that it the state of non-existence actually contained within it the possibility of something existing. But that possibility would be in itself ‘something’, if only an information state that recognises potential. The idea of a ‘possibility’ itself describes potential within time, and time does not exist within the non-existent state.

Just as something cannot be birthed by nothingness, so too can something not give way to nothingness. For this to occur would require that the ‘something’ never existed in the first place. For example, while it is certainly possible that our universe might cease to exist, this cessation of existence is merely how we would perceive an encounter with one of its boundaries in time. Its cessation could never undo the fact of its previous existence and it would remain a fact that our universe had certain properties of existence within a certain space-time.

access it is to wait for it to manifest itself as the present.

An entity residing outside of our timeline, and able to view the universe as a whole, would see its entire history simultaneously from beginning to end – just as I can currently see my whole garden from beginning to end. If we imagine my puppy walking from one side of the garden to the other, we can imagine how a particular sentient being experiences time within a particular universe.

Time can be perceived as beginning, just as Saasha (my dog) starts to walk from one fence. Similarly, time can be perceived as ending, just as she gets to the other side. However, the garden is still there and has not ceased to exist simply because we have arrived at a boundary. Thus, it can be seen that while our perception of a universe might cease to exist, the actual universe itself would still exist in a very real sense.

Because something cannot arise from nothing, the mutual exclusivity between existence and nonexistence and the very obvious fact that something (i.e.: you the reader) exists, it is clear that something has *always* existed and done so *without cause*.

While this is certainly counter intuitive – to the point that many will reject it outright – this is only because we inhabit minds that are unable to divorce themselves

from the concept of time, and the common sense impositions that it places upon us. But the very fact of existence precludes that of non-existence and within this context it no more needs a cause than non-existence would: Existence simply is. Don't ask me why.

More on gardens and puppies

Existence also exists in its entirety. As time is a state of existence, it cannot be thought of as being a relevant determinant of what exists and what doesn't. Just as the garden exists even when the puppy isn't there, so do the past and future also exist, even when we are not there. Time is the mechanism by which sentience uses to navigate its way around the universe.

But just as we don't believe that the universe is created and destroyed by our movement through space, so too would it be incorrect for us to imagine that the universe was somehow being created or destroyed as we move through time.

This is not to say that we live in a completely deterministic universe, where we are fated, or doomed to a particular future. While it is the case that the future exists, there is nothing to suppose that only one future exists. Indeed, I see no reason why an infinite array of possible futures (and pasts) could not exist, with our sentience simply navigating its way through one of a potentially infinite number of possible timelines.

For example, if one imagines Saasha the puppy walking across the garden, she could take any one of a potentially infinite number of routes. Some of these might involve going around the pond, others might involve going through the pond. But whether or not she interacts with the pond, it still exists as a feature of the garden and as a very real alternative path. Similarly, if we observe her sitting in the middle of the pond (after all, she is a Golden Retriever), we can imagine an infinite number of paths (or pasts) that she could have taken to get there.

The possibility that we inhabit an Infiniverse containing a potentially infinite

range of possibilities, raises the question as to whether there might exist a fundamental 'unit' of existence, or if any of the various gods that humanity worships might have had anything to do with it.

Numbers

I would suggest that we would be looking for something that can exist without seeming to require a universe, or metaphysical foundation for its existence. It seems to me that the only thing that can fit that particular bill are numbers and mathematics.



The debate as to whether mathematics is discovered, or invented and even whether numbers actually exist, is far from being decided. However, it seems to me that mathematical (and, by extension, logical) truths are true, irrespective of whether there is a universe to contain them or not.

Numbers represent certain concepts, independently of language, culture, or anything else. Remove the universe, and the number 1 will still be the number 1. It is an intriguing possibility that this numerical independence is the fundamental aspect that both precludes non-existence and forms the foundation from which the rest of our existence emerged.

How one gets from numbers and mathematics to a universe as complex, wonderful and amazing as ours is of course pure speculation and far beyond my imagining. How mathematics can produce sentient creatures with apparent free will is even more out of our reach (although it would be delightful if advanced mathematics and computing eventually

stumbled upon the mathematical equivalent of free will).

It could be argued that the all-pervading mathematical elegance that we have discovered within our own universe adds weight to such a theory, but this should not be considered the case. Even if it were the case that mathematics is somehow the basis upon which our universe is built, it does not follow that mathematics should be so easily accessible to our senses, and that the underlying algorithm should be so simple, that a slightly more intelligent

monkey should be able to grasp it.

Within this framework, all creation arises out of sophisticated algorithms made real. Somehow, we are the product of mathematical manipulations beyond our ken. True, this way of stating the problem begs the question as to who, or what, is doing the manipulation, but I would suggest that rather than being a result of mathematical manipulation in a strict sense, we are instead an emergent property of the very existence of mathematics itself.

Obviously, speculating that mathematics is the fundamental unit of reality is just that: speculation. Speculating that we are an emergent property of mathematics is speculation upon speculation. It hardly answers the question definitively. But given that I've already conceded that the very issue of the 'how' of existence is entirely out of our understanding, I hope readers will understand my mathematical musings for what they are. Speculation!

- Greg Kasarik is a self confessed mystic.

IS IT JUST ALL ABOUT US?

The philosophical conundrums of the Anthropic Principle in modern physics.

By Leslie Allan

It appears our universe is 'fine-tuned' for life. With just a minor variation in some physical laws and constants, life, it seems, would be rendered impossible. But are we limited by our human perspective? Let us consider what the Anthropic Principle – the idea that theories of the universe are constrained by the necessity to allow for human existence – has to say about our role as observers and the kind of universe we should expect to see.

Some scientists and commentators have argued that there are many apparently incidental features about the universe that cannot differ from what we observe without it being impossible for life on earth to germinate and survive.

Such apparent 'fine-tuning' includes the following:

- If the strong nuclear force were two per cent stronger, atoms would not have formed out of quarks. If it was five per cent weaker, all atoms other than hydrogen would not have formed. This would have prevented the emergence of hydrogen-burning stars and deprived living things of hydrogen-based water.
- If electromagnetic forces were marginally different, stars would not have produced the amount of carbon needed to allow life to evolve.
- If space were not three-dimensional, planetary orbits would not be stable, making the evolution of life extraordinarily unlikely.
- Gravity is some 10^{40} times weaker than the electrical forces. If the strength of gravity were only 100 times stronger than it is, the universe would not have existed long enough for stars and planets to form.
- If the cosmological constant (dark energy) were an order of magnitude larger, galaxies would be unlikely to form.

The Anthropic Principle illuminates how we should deal with this apparent sensitivity of the cosmic constants to change. It is to this that I will now turn. The term 'Anthropic Principle' was coined by an Australian physicist, Brandon Carter, in his 1974 article that first appeared in *Confrontation of Cosmological Theories with Observational Data*.

In it, Carter countenanced against overreaction to the Copernican Principle. This principle postulates that we do not occupy a privileged central position in the universe. Copernicus' challenge in the 16th century to the Ptolemaic view that our earth is stationary at the centre of the universe has been repeated in kind throughout the following centuries.

Subsequent scientific advancements have revealed that the earth's geology, astronomy and cosmology occupy but a tiny corner of the universe in space and that our history is fleetingly short as judged against cosmic time. In the middle of the 19th century, Charles Darwin completed the dethronement of the human race by showing how our evolution and the evolution of all life on this planet is the result of blind physical forces.

Carter wanted to redress the balance by suggesting how our evolution and place in the universe limits the kinds of universe we can observe. The point was to show how the conditions we observe may be typical for any kind of observer but not typical for the entire universe.

This he expressed as his *weak* Anthropic Principle: "Our location in the universe is necessarily privileged to the extent of being compatible with our existence as observers." Using this principle, he predicted, in retrospect, the observed value of the cosmological constant to fall within a narrow band suitable for stars to form. Anthropic reasoning suggests that we should epistemically favour explanations

in which our location as observers in space and time are unremarkable. The apparent 'fine-tuning' effects listed in the introduction above are, then, just anthropic effects of the kinds of observers we are.

Some advocates have put the case for a stronger version of the Anthropic Principle. On these renditions, proponents have argued that the weak version entails that the conditions in the entire universe are compatible with the evolution of observers, or even that such conditions are necessary. These stronger conclusions are unwarranted extrapolations from, and misinterpretations of, the weak Anthropic Principle.

Carter's weak version is not saying that the universe was intentionally set up for life to exist, or that life is some kind of goal of the universe's existence. *Contra* to the strong version, the evolution of life is not a *necessary* product of the universe. Such teleological hypotheses result from confused readings of the weak Anthropic Principle.

Neither is the weak version saying that the reality of our existence in some way restricts the range of universes that could possibly exist, thereby ruling out as impossible those that could not support life. What it is saying is that, given that observers exist, this restricts the range of observed universes to those that support the evolution of life.

The Anthropic Principle suggests that the universe we observe may be but a tiny part of a very much bigger universe in which the physical conditions and laws are different in other locations compared with those in our own locality.

Inflation theory

Inflation theory in modern cosmology lends a theoretical underpinning and experimental support to the Anthropic Principle. One way to express this notion of many different local domains, each with

their own physical laws and constants is with the idea of the multiverse.

The idea of the multiverse is not a wild philosophical fancy on the part of some cosmologists, arrived at after a heavy night of drinking. It arises from the cosmologists' models of the constituents of the universe. One of those constituents is dark energy.

Dark energy is the energy of the vacuum; of empty space. It works in opposition to the pulling effects of gravity. The observed expansion of our universe is occurring at an accelerating rate as a result of the action of dark energy. This accelerating expansion is a natural consequence of the fact that the

to solve another problem in cosmology; the horizon problem. The temperature of the cosmic microwave background (CMB) is highly uniform (varying by only 1 part in 100,000), yet regions of the CMB were so far apart during the time of the early universe that even light was not fast enough to travel from one such region to the other.

This apparent lack of causal connectedness between regions is solved by positing an early period of rapid inflation in which the regions were in causal contact prior to the period of inflation. After the initial inflationary period, it is thought, the vacuum energy dissipated and dropped to

relic gravitational waves left over from the early inflationary period.

These gravitational waves are not easy to detect. How can they be detected? Starobinsky predicted that these gravitational waves will leave their imprint in the form of B-mode polarisation of light on the last scattering surface (the CMB) some 380,000 years after the end of the period of inflation.

For years, cosmologists have been searching for gravitational waves. On March 17th 2014, the BICEP2 research team, using the telescope mounted at the South Pole, announced that they had detected

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The idea of the multiverse is not a wild philosophical fancy on the part of some cosmologists, arrived at after a heavy night of drinking.

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density of dark energy stays constant with time while the density of matter declines as the universe expands. It is this constancy that leads modern cosmologists to identify dark energy with Einstein's cosmological constant.

The history of the universe has passed the point at which the density of matter is greater than the density of dark energy. The effects of dark energy compared with that of matter have now tipped in dark energy's favour.

The density of dark energy is observed to be $6 \times 10^{-27} \text{ kg m}^{-3}$. However, this value is much smaller than the density expected from quantum mechanical calculations by many orders of magnitude. Using quantum mechanics and Einstein's mass-energy equivalence ($E = mc^2$), physicists calculate an expected Planck scale vacuum density of $10^{100} \text{ kg m}^{-3}$. By this reckoning, the masses of elementary particles turn out also to be much lower than expected. It is the solution to these two problems that led physicists to the possibility of the multiverse.

Physicists proposed an early period of inflation just after the birth of the universe

the much lower level observed today.

As it turned out, inflation theory also accounted very accurately for the quantitative irregularities in the CMB and for the seeds of structure in the early universe that led to the large scale structure we see today. Taking account of inflation, the universe turns out to be much older than cosmologists thought. The universe did not arise from a singularity 13.7 billion years in the past, as was supposed. The universe was accelerating exponentially prior to this time; prior to what was thought to be the Big Bang. The puzzle now is to work out how the vacuum energy density can change with time.

Cosmologists cannot test inflation theory by directly conducting experiments in other universes as these are forever beyond our reach. However, they are able to test the consequences of the theory. In 1979, the Soviet physicist, Alexei Starobinsky, realized that the early inflationary period did not only modulate the density of matter in the young universe. He saw that it also modulated the gravitational field. From this realisation, he predicted the existence of

relic gravitational waves. The results are currently being debated as measurements from the Planck satellite indicate that polarisation from dust in our own Milky Way galaxy may be muddying the results. We will need to wait for confirmation. These are indeed very exciting times.

Tantalizingly, the theory underpinning inflation entails that we live in a multiverse in which the conditions for the evolution of life vary from region to region. In this way, we have come back full circle to the Anthropic Principle and a testable empirical theory that answers the question of why we find the universe the way it is.

- Leslie Allan is the founder of *RationalRealm.com*

POLAR OPPOSITES: VARIATIONS IN ICE CAPS

Different icy tales from various parts of the Earth.

By Melissa Bailey

Despite ongoing contention about whether global warming is a true phenomenon and whether it is impacting the Earth, one thing for sure is scientists can show that the world's ice is changing. There is growing evidence to indicate the ice is melting, with differing knock-on effects depending on where it is in the world, what researchers have found under previously melted ice, coloured icebergs, bent glaciers and even icequakes. There is also new research that shows some glaciers are actually growing.



Mount Everest is known to be a dangerous place to visit and climb because of its difficult-to-navigate terrain, freezing temperature and heights that cause altitude sickness. Yet over 4000 people have climbed the 'ragged' mountain since Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay first scaled it in 1953. Sadly, about 300 of those are thought to have perished in the attempt.

In 2018, a group of researchers investigated the temperature of Everest's ice, finding that it was warmer than average. The BBC reports that ponds about the mountain have been expanding because of ice melting. The ice melting has also moved

glaciers, so many of the bodies have been recovered.

At the southern-most tip of the world, Antarctica is known for its unique green icebergs, which are unlike anything in the Arctic. Most icebergs are a stark white or bright turquoise in colour, but the green icebergs of Antarctica are probably the result of iron oxide dust that was ground down by glaciers on the mainland. The colour of the iceberg indicates the age to researchers and scientists. The younger icebergs are a brilliant white and the older icebergs have a turquoise or blue colour. The compression of accumulating layers of ice pushes air bubbles out of the ice, which reduces the scattering of white light.

Glaciologists at the University of Washington have claimed that icebergs in Antarctica play an integral role in providing the ocean and its creatures with nutrients. Icebergs deliver the iron into the ocean when they melt, leaving phytoplankton in the water that can be taken as a nutrient.

Icequakes are tremors that occur due to cracking ice. Researchers in Antarctica placed seismometers in two locations to monitor melting ice, recording tremors from November 2016 to January 2017. One seismometer was placed at a dry location where the surface was covered in the previous years' snow that would harden and compact into glacial ice. Another was placed at a wet location where the surface was often coated with a thin layer of ice over pools of water from melted ice.

The locations showed two distinct differences in tremor patterns. The dry location had no naturally occurring tremors. In fact, the only tremors recorded at the dry station occurred due to vehicle or ship traffic. The wet location, however, showed hundreds of thousands of tiny earthquakes. The icequakes measured below 2.5 magnitude, which is the limit for human detection of a tremor, although

some locals in Antarctica have heard the cracking of the ice. The icequakes followed a general pattern of increasing frequency for a couple of hours each evening. Scientists have revealed the likely cause to be the freezing of the wet location, which expands and puts pressure on the surface, creating small tremors along the surface of the ice.

In Greenland NASA scientists have discovered a surprising fact. It is commonly understood that most of the world's icy areas are melting. However, Greenland is home to a glacier called Jakobshavn in the west coast, which is growing thicker. It is still contributing to a rising sea level because it is losing ice – just less than expected. American and Dutch researchers have found that the glacier is probably increasing in size due to colder ocean currents. Cooler currents from the North Atlantic Ocean, which are more than 600 miles south of the glacier, are thought to be influencing the growth of Jakobshavn Glacier. Researchers predict that when the climactic pattern changes from cool to warmer, the glacier will melt and become thinner.

At the northern end of the Earth, the Arctic is known to be melting. Researchers have found evidence that every autumn, a warm layer of clouds forms over the Arctic that speeds up the process. Clouds have two main functions in the Arctic: to reflect light and trap heat. The main reason that the clouds have a predictable warming effect is that they radiate heat from the Earth's surface back toward the ground. Interestingly, it is only during the Arctic's summer, in July, when clouds have a cooling effect because they reflect away more light than is trapped.

The icy areas of the world are affected by currents, clouds, and the atmosphere. They produce some extraordinary effects.

- Melissa Bailey is a science journalist.

IT'S A WEAPONISING THING

Are we being hypnotized by repeated lies?

By Mariana James-Techera

Are we suffering from what 'Zero Hedge', a news website, describes as an "illusory truth effect"? On the face of it there is some evidence this is occurring, at least when it comes to the depiction of Russia. For the last two-and-a-half years, the Democratic Party in America has been pursuing a conspiracy theory that President Donald Trump was involved in collusion with Russia in his victory in the 2016 election.

The subsequent inquiry headed by Robert Mueller, which failed to uncover actionable evidence of collusion, seemed to stop that idea in its tracks. But there are some other lessons that can be learned,

change what people believe to be true, even when they have knowledge contradicting their own view.

"Repetition makes statements easier to process (i.e. fluent) relative to new statements, leading people to the (sometimes) false conclusion that they are more truthful," they write.

The Russians dunnit

The illusion of truth is thought to work through a mechanism called 'cognitive ease'. Cognitive ease is similar to 'confirmation bias' in logic: people tend to be more impressed by facts and ideas that confirm what they already think.

Cognitive ease is also affected by the

to the American Council on Science and Health.

And so on. Sometimes it is pure comedy. One headline is that that Russia is 'weaponising' 'Jedi Mind Tricks' (VICE); another is that Russia plans to 'weaponise' a 14-legged squid to paralyze humans (*Daily Express*). *The Guardian* ran a story saying that Norwegian experts believe a whale found with a harness 'could be a Russian weapon'.

Although many of these claims are self evidently absurd – and raise questions about whether there is any the logic checking being done in modern news rooms – it creates the necessary repetition

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“Although many of these claims are self evidently absurd, it creates the necessary repetition that produces the illusion of truth and cognitive ease.”

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about the nature of human cognition, from what has happened.

Consider the cognitive effect called the 'illusion of truth'. The idea is that, if a lie is repeated time and time again, it comes to be seen as true.

The phenomenon was identified by social scientists in a study by researchers at Villanova and Temple University in 1977, when it was found that the subjects under examination were more likely to evaluate a statement as true if it was repeatedly presented to them over the course of a couple of weeks. This applied even if they did not consciously remember having encountered them before.

Similar results have since confirmed the effect. A 2015 paper titled 'Knowledge does not protect against illusory truth' by Lisa Fazio, Nadia Brashier, Keith Payne and Elizabeth Marsh, found that the illusory truth effect can be so strong, repetition can

repeating of a stimulus, which has certainly been occurring with mainstream media stories about Russia. The country (or the metonym for Russia, Vladimir Putin) have been accused of being on a 'weaponising' spree:

- December (2018) the BBC stated that Russia was weaponising humour.
- *Raw Conservative Opinions* stated in August (2018) that space is to be weaponised by Russia due to 'abnormal behaviour' of 'mystery satellites'.
- Russians were accused by Alternet in June of 2018 of weaponising international students in a 'new Cold War'.
- Russia has been accused by Global Voices of weaponising Photoshop in a media armed conflict
- Russia is 'weaponising' social media, according to National Public Radio.
- Russia is 'weaponising' post-modernism to destroy Western science, according

that produces the illusion of truth and cognitive ease.

There are powerful actors involved in doing this. A study by Swiss Propaganda Research *The Propaganda Multiplier* said military and Defence ministries are "among the most active actors in 'injecting' questionable geopolitical news" into the three news agencies (Thomson Reuters, Associated Press and Agence France-Presse) that dominate international story creation.

"The head of the American news agency AP, revealed that the Pentagon employs more than 27,000 PR specialists who, with a budget of nearly \$US5 billion a year, are working the media and circulating targeted manipulations," the study says. "In addition, high-ranking US generals had threatened that they would 'ruin' him and the AP if the journalists reported too critically on the US military."

HUMANITY OR SOVEREIGNTY?

Why Potentialism is a road map for the twenty first century.

By Callum Golding

“Political systems, as much as practically possible, should allow human beings to develop their potential” – Lyndon Storey.

The foregoing statement is hardly controversial. You would struggle to find anyone who wanted to live in a world that was not, in principle, consistent with such an idea. Nonetheless, what follows from the acceptance of this proposition is a far cry from the political world we currently inhabit.

There are a few points of departure when addressing an argument over political philosophy. The most common approaches throughout Western thought have been as follows:

- Our original nature, uncorrupted by civilization, is basically good – sometimes referred to as the *noble savage*. This view is often associated with the views of Jean Jacques Rousseau.
- We are basically bad. This is theologically referred to as original sin. This view was put forward by Thomas Hobbes in his landmark book *Leviathan*. Hobbes believed that people could only escape this hellish existence by surrendering their autonomy to a sovereign person or state.
- We are a blank slate or *tabula rasa*. This position is generally associated with John Locke. The claim is that a ‘mixing bowl’ of nature arrives empty and society can freely add whichever ingredients it likes. If parents only adopted the right attitude and provided the right education, then a child, and thus society, could be moulded indefinitely.

The logical consequences of acknowledging human potential, Potentialism – which are carefully laid out in Lyndon Storey’s *Humanity or*

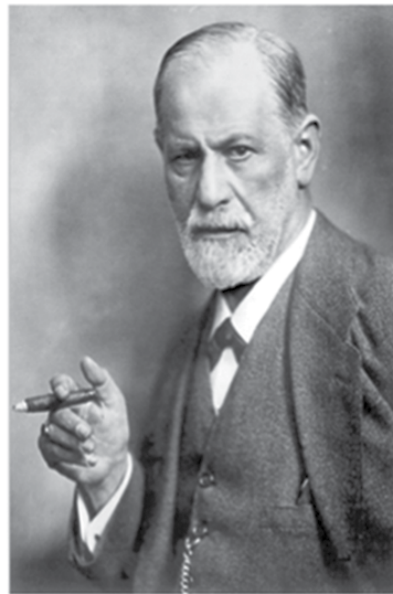
Sovereignty: A political roadmap for the 21st Century – rejects all three of these approaches. Instead, it puts forward the case that, instead of having no nature, or a fixed nature, we are, in fact, a mass of potentials. Each of us has the potential to be lazy or indifferent; the potential to eat too much, or too little. The potential to let fear guide us or take a fearless approach; the potential to do good or the potential to do ill. As we go through life we seek to actualize many of these potentials whilst others remain unrealized. We now know that people vary in respect to their genes and vary in respect to their cultures. So,

where a sense of empathy is damaged and the human being is rendered abnormal.

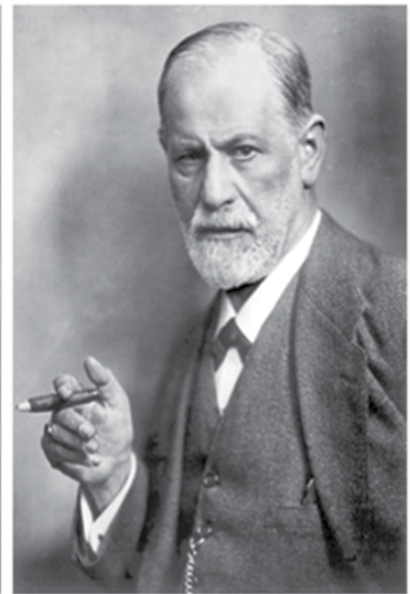
This moral potential has often been referred to by other thinkers as a moral sense. It relates to a potential concern we naturally have for the wellbeing of other conscious creatures, and the subsequent moral acts that emerge from those concerns. It has nothing to do with morality as a series of fixed rules of conduct-like obligations to wear certain clothes, to eat certain foods, or to marry certain partners, as many religions commonly present it.

This sense of sympathy and justice results in seeking to maximize the wellbeing

Freud vs Freud



Sometimes a cigar
is just a cigar, Freud



I don't smoke, Freud

too, people vary in terms of their potentials. We are not intrinsically anything, but potentially many things.

It is claimed that there is one key potential that is universally shared by all of us – the potential to feel empathy towards others. This can be referred to as the moral potential. It excludes forms of psychopathy

of others, or to minimize their pain. Appeals to this moral potential can extend beyond our own species. Many now consider it simply unacceptable that 56 billion sentient farm animals are sacrificed each year. Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher of ethics, refers to this as “extending the moral circle”. The moral potential contrasts with

the moral sense insofar as it acknowledges the fact that this potential is very often neglected.

Modest and evidence based

The strength of the moral potential idea, as distinct from the moral sense idea, is in its being both a more modest claim, and a more evidence-based one. It is more modest in that the claim is not that we have a functioning moral sense, but that, through empathy or sympathy, we have the potential to develop ethical behaviors, such as care for those who are suffering.

It is more evidence-based in that all that is needed to support the claim is evidence of this potential, evidence of some degree of empathy and sympathy. Evidence of human cruelty and sadism may be evidence that we are not naturally good, and that we don't

once they develop the moral potential rather than when they do not, this development can never become a political demand. The best we can ask for is a political system in which as many people as possible are given enough opportunity to develop their moral potential.

Social frameworks based on democracy and human rights offer people a better chance to develop their potential than political frameworks based on dictatorship and domination. All individual human beings need to be treated with basic respect and dignity as part of respecting their potential. State demands that people realize their potential is another, and less desirable thing, altogether. Perfection can be the enemy of the good.

We also need to consider epistemology

My reason for saying no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, not because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers and friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human.

Mencius' "heart of compassion" is similar to the concept of moral potential. Potentialism makes a welcome call for us to also focus on the humanistic sources of ethics, our own potential for love and compassion. If these are not part of our own humanity why should we pursue them?

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All individual human beings need to be treated with basic respect and dignity as part of respecting their potential.

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have a moral sense. But it is not evidence that we don't have this moral potential; just that it was not realized in a particular case. Our ethical framework does not need to be dependent on Jesus, or the dollar, in order for us to make moral sense of the world.

These differences make the position both intellectually stronger, and more inspiring. It gives rise to the possibility of an ethical theory that does not need the supernatural to support it. There is no need to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Instances of bad behavior are not grounds for abandoning the theory because there is still hope based on our potential. The non-religious paths to ethics need to offer not just an assertion of the possibility of ethics, but a path to hope in the face of difficulties.

Cultivation of the moral potential is needed but there are no guarantees that such an undertaking will be instantly achievable. Even though there is strong evidence to suggest that societies improve

(the study of knowledge). When it comes to knowledge the possibility of attaining absolute truth is a mirage. This does not mean we should abandon objective reality, as some might claim. Far from it. Instead, it means we formulate our beliefs, hypotheses, theories and conjectures in the sober light of day amidst public scrutiny. When we find empirical evidence and reasons for supporting one view over another all we can really say is that we have the best approximation of the truth so far attained. If the evidence in favour of a moral potential is overwhelmingly strong we can therefore give reasonable support to the idea without saying anything absolutely.

Potentialism, befitting a thesis claiming applicability to humans, and not just people of one civilisation, also goes outside Western culture to find supporting evidence. For instance, the Chinese philosopher Mencius, more than two thousand years ago said:

As we start to think about potential in terms of nation states other ideas begin to emerge. With the political landscape today divided into around 206 sovereign states, citizens of these states usually identify with the nationality into which they were born. These identities need not be problematic - however, in practice they routinely are; they have been the cause of much needless harm and suffering.

A country cannot claim to respect human potential if it denies the rights of a certain class of people, but what we often find is greater respect for the potential of a certain group. According to Potentialism, respect for our human potential means, first and foremost, respect for our common humanity. If the potential of all human beings is not considered paramount then the political system is rendered illegitimate.

The logic of human Potentialism makes clear that a key remaining political challenge for the world is to develop a

political system that respects the dignity of all human beings, not just those of fellow citizens, or fellow believers. There is a need to develop a political framework that respects our most important, and shared identity, our human identity, rather than deferring to our national or religious identity, as so often happens in times of war and economic conflict (and, more recently, in terms of the failure to establish global co-operative action to address climate change).

Since nation states developed in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the politics of nationalism has been adopted by almost all countries in the world. It is easy to forget that the idea of nation is a story and that the ability to create better, or worse, stories depends on our collective imagination or lack thereof. As Noah Harrari writes in his blockbuster book *Sapiens*:

“Ever since the Cognitive Revolution (approximately 70,000 years ago), Sapiens have thus been living in a dual reality. On

the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations. As time went by, the imagined reality became ever more powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as the United States and Google.”

This is an important point. The ‘imagined realities’ that continue to disrupt humanity and shape our thinking include: religiously inspired intolerance, nationally inspired conflict and corporate inspired consumption/automation putting material wealth acquisition above all other values. These competing value systems have been gradually tearing apart the social and environmental fabric of society.

Human Union

No one country can be expected to address these effects on its own. Now is the time to consider political systems that deal with the larger problems we face.

What follows from accepting the idea of human potential is the possibility of developing a Human Union (HU). To find a concrete example of how this might work we can look to the European Union (EU), a political system that has moved beyond the power of sovereign states through gradual and steady progress. There are many faults to be found within the EU but there is also much we can learn.

The EU currently requires a basic level of democracy and respect for human rights among its members. But it only allows membership status to countries within Europe. If the EU were to change its name to the Human Union it could allow any country that shared its respect for democracy and human rights to join.

Another universal that I think could further Potentialism is what I would call the ‘objective potential’. There are two worlds in which we exist. The way the world *is* and the way the world *ought* to be. The moral potential explains what exactly it is we appeal to when we reason about what matters, what is better, and what ought to be. By contrast, the objective potential relates to our potential to see the world as it *is*, to gain insight into the universe through curiosity and introspection; to see objects in novel ways with an open mind; to seek out criticism and see trial and error as a humbling gift.

This objective potential, to know thyself and the cosmos, is another aspect of human potential. If we see the world with an open mind the rational next steps are clear – provided we want to base our decisions on evidence and reason, and we support the best of human potential.

Potentialism, a rational and empirical moral framework, is a strong contender in the twenty first century contest of values. It offers a program based on hope and to develop a path to political justice. Far from being at the End of History it appears we are still somewhat closer to the beginning.

- Callum Golding is online editor at the Council of Australian Humanist Societies and an IT Consultant.



A FREETHINKING MAVERICK'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By Nigel Sinnott

Before discussing the autobiography of Britain's 'Queen Mum of Secularism', as cartoonist Martin Rowson dubbed her, I make a disclosure. I have known Barbara Smoker since about 1964 and share many, though not all, of her opinions and interests. Since moving to Australia in 1976, my dealings with her have mainly been by letter or reading her in print.

She was born in June 1923 into a devoutly Catholic family in the south-east London area and at one stage aspired to become a nun in a contemplative order. Her sister Paula joined the Good Shepherd order.

In 1942, during the Second World War, Barbara volunteered for the Wrens, the Womens Royal Naval Service. She was trained as a wireless telegraphist (radio operator), and was posted overseas. After an altercation with the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean, she sailed to Mombasa. Then her destination was changed from South Africa to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka), where she had some interesting adventures. On 15 August 1945 she signalled to all ships that: "The war against Japan is over."

Back in England, with her horizons broadened by "multi-creedal Ceylon", Barbara took a course in Pitman's shorthand, which was to be of use to her for personal notes and in other ways. "I was to become known as the world's foremost transcriber of Bernard Shaw's shorthand drafts, for which I received remuneration from manuscript dealers and collectors, museums, scholars, writers and so on" (p. 97).

Then, in her local public library, at exactly noon on 5 November 1949, she says she: "reached my life-stance verdict". Barbara Smoker said to herself: "I am no longer a Catholic."

She was 26. Her apostasy had come rather late, but it needed (for her) to be "sudden and total". Furthermore, "that meant not only the whole of Christianity but, indeed, the whole of religion" (p. 83).

She did, however, remain on good terms with her Catholic relatives.

Barbara soon found her way to the Ethical Union and established a friendship with the Humanist philosopher and writer Harold Blackham. She had a relationship with Conway Hall in Holborn and its owner, South Place Ethical Society (today's Conway Hall Ethical Society). She was editor of its journal for six years, changing its title from the *Monthly Record* to the *Ethical Record*.

Barbara was an inaugural member (1960) of the South-East London Humanist Group. She also became active in the National Secular Society and was its second longest-serving president (25 years). She became a regular contributor to the atheist magazine *The Freethinker* and conducted baby-namings, gay committal ceremonies, non-religious marriages and secular funerals.

In 1994 she succeeded in persuading the British Humanist Association, the International Humanist and Ethical Union, the NSS, the Rationalist Press Association and South Place Ethical Society to bring their offices under one roof. Nine years later, however, the BHA (now Humanists UK), moved away.

Barbara was involved in a number of other movements and causes: the Shaw Society, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Committee of 100 (founded by Bertrand Russell), Radical Alternatives to Prison and voluntary euthanasia. She opposed Enoch Powell's "absurdly titled" Unborn Children (Protection) Bill, debated with anti-democratic Muslim students, and wrote about "Islamic Terrorism" more than twelve years before the September 2001 terror attacks on the United States.

On two occasions Barbara met Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the founder of American Atheists Inc. (she was often dubbed "the

most hated woman in America"). This is one matter where Barbara and I have always disagreed. From reading her publications, I regarded O'Hair as an authoritarian, disturbed egomaniac, but this in no way excuses the murder of O'Hair, one of her sons and her teenage granddaughter by two of O'Hair's seedy employees. Barbara rightly points out that the case dragged on for five years probably because a Texan senator, George W. Bush, opined that: "it would be a waste of resources for the FBI to investigate the fate of an atheist family".

Chapter 5 includes Barbara Smoker's quite complicated legal case over a gambling debt, which even generated "a footnote in a textbook on the law of contract". Barbara elsewhere suggests that there is a genetic component in problem gambling, a plausible hypothesis that may merit investigation. (It would fit in with research on obsessive-compulsive disorders.)

An interesting aspect of Barbara's private life includes her happy, twelve-year partnership with Leslie Johnson, who was thirty years older than her. They had much in common (except his love of cricket) and the difference in ages did not worry her at all.

I find two faults with the book's publishers: the title page looks unimaginative and slapdash, and an account of this length needed an index. Reviewing would have been very much harder if I had not had a pre-publication electronic copy of the text to interrogate. I greatly enjoyed reading this clear and forthright story of a principled, varied and very worthwhile life. I warmly recommend the book.

My Godforsaken Life: Memoir of a Maverick by Barbara Smoker London: Thornwick, 2018. Hardback; 298 pp., 180 mm x 110 mm; photographs. ISBN 978-1-912664-02-3. Available from the publishers for about \$A32 including postage to Australia. Also available as an e-book on Amazon Australia.

A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE DEAD, THE LIVING AND THOSE TO COME

By Reg Naulty

It is hard to imagine a better book than this about the current state of Islam, and what could be done to better its prospects. Ed Husain was born in London to Muslim immigrants from India. As a teenager, he became a part of international Muslim radicalism, which he subsequently abandoned and wrote about in his book, *The Islamist*. Later, he studied Arabic under Muslim scholars in Damascus, and then went to Saudi Arabia as a teacher, but was distressed to find that his students

interests best, although the Christian Democratic government in Germany should have appeal.

Right now, the house of Islam is ablaze, and Husain has no doubt about who the arsonists are: the terrorist groups spawned by the Salafi-Wahabi version of Islam. Salafi means 'the predecessors' and refers to the first three generations of Muslims. According to an eighteenth century preacher in Arabia, Al Wahab, they had a literalist interpretation of the

marabout, or learned religious scholar, who taught the boy Arabic, the Koran, poetry and Muslim jurisprudence, which he took to without difficulty. He became a Gandhian before Gandhi, and was religiously committed to non-violence against the persecuting, imperialist French. A charismatic personality, he attracted an enormous following, and the French, alarmed, sent him into exile in 1895 to neighboring Gabon for seven years. On his return in 1902, the crowds he attracted

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*Right now, the house of Islam is ablaze, and Husain
has no doubt about who the arsonists are.*

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welcomed the terrorist bombings on the London underground, so he returned to the UK. He now works in think tanks in London and Washington.

It is one of the merits of the book that it identifies a potential bridge between the West and Islam: the conservative political tradition, particularly the British one. Unlike the negligent West, Islam is intent on preserving the collected inherited wisdom and goodness of the past. The political philosopher Edmund Burke's (1730-1797) assertion "society is a partnership between the dead, the living, and generations yet to come," would be congenial to Muslims. What they want to conserve are worship of one God, the Koran, an honoured prophet, a celebrated family life, and emphasis on the soul's journey to the next life.

Islam also favours free trade (Muslims were always great traders), the rule of law (Islam is a religion of law and obedience), and pluralism (Muslims are used to different cultures). The conservative government in Britain seems to suit their

Koran, and maintained that anyone who disagreed with them deserved death. Today, Salafism is the majority form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, which has spent billions of dollars exporting it throughout the world. Even so, Salafi-Wahabis represent fewer than five per cent of the world's Muslims. Terrorist groups like the Salafi jihadi, have appeared before, and were outlawed by mainstream Islam, which, Husain argues, should be repeated.

In sharp contrast is Ahmadu Bamba, born to pious Muslim parents in Senegal, West Africa in 1853. His father was a

grew even more, and the French sent him to jail in bordering Mauritania for four years.

On his return, his crowd appeal continued, and the French, by then convinced of his pacifism, permitted him to stay. He died in 1927. The village he founded as a haven for peace in 1887, Touba, is now Senegal's second largest city. About a quarter of the population is in the Mouride, a Sufi order he founded. Senegal is a rare model of democracy in Africa.

The House Of Islam. A Global History.
Ed Husain Bloomsbury. London. 2018. p.
320. \$29.99. ISBN TPB 978-1- 4088- 7227- 7



WAR AND WAR MEMORIALS

A sad memorial and a plea for peace.

By Chapman Cohen

ON Sunday last, July 24 2017, the memorial at Ypres to the British soldiers who fell in that salient, 58,000 of them, was unveiled by Field Marshal Plumer. The proceedings opened with a hymn, followed by a prayer, then after an interval of speech making, another prayer, with another hymn, one more prayer, a benediction from a Roman Catholic, with a Psalm and another prayer, concluding with the British and Belgian National Anthems.

I can well understand the sadness of those who had relatives and friends among that 58,000 names; one would need a heart of stone to stand unmoved amongst them, or to look at that list of names with a dry eye.

The satire of singing a hymn, 'Now thank we all our God,' will probably be lost on nearly everyone present, although one might gently ask, what kind of help did God give to the world to prevent this terrible

Will the Menin Gate Memorial do this? Seriously, I doubt it. The clergy will talk of the horror of war, and of the Lord's anger against those who bring it about. But one knows with absolute certainty that, whenever another war occurs, the clergy in each country will be talking of its righteousness and will repeat their war-talk over again. If the clergy had taken the unveiling of this memorial as the occasion to make a public statement – and stick to it – that if another war occurred they would stand completely aloof from it, neither blessing nor cursing it, but just, as clergymen, having nothing to do with it, they might turn the occasion to lasting profit.

But this they will not do. They will, as usual, provide a justification for getting ready for war in times of peace, and forge moral and religious justifications for war when it is in being. The *Church Times*

in the last war was – if we are to take its own affirmation – fighting a war of self-defence. And what is easier than for one Christian nation to brand another as really non-Christian? The whole press of this country, particularly the religious press, agreed that, at least for the period of the war, Germany had become a non-Christian nation. If people can be fooled by this kind of verbiage, the next war may be as near as Marshal Foch thinks.

At the risk of cutting across the sentimental feelings of many of my readers, I would seriously ask whether it is quite certain that the Menin Gate Memorial, that any of the war memorials we have erected, are likely for long to drive home the lesson of the unnecessary and horrible character of war?

The mothers, fathers, and other relatives of the dead may well feel the deepest sorrow, and even be inspired to do what

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If war is a dirty, horrible, brutal and essentially ineffective kind of business, our war memorial should take the form of preventing that dirty, horrible, ineffective kind of business happening again.

”

war taking place? The war could not have been worse without his help than it was with it, and a God who did not prevent it has but a questionable right to thanks for a hypothetical help in getting us through it.

It is fitting that the nation should remember the men who died in the war; it is fitting also that they should remember them in the right sort of way. If war is a dirty, horrible, brutal and essentially ineffective kind of business, our war memorial should take the form of preventing that dirty, horrible, ineffective kind of business happening again.

does go so far as to say that “war between Christian peoples except in the case of self-defence, is a sin.” One observes the double qualification. War is not a sin if it is between a Christian and a non-Christian — as professed believers in the brotherhood of man, there must be one rule for Christians and another for non-Christians. And there is the second reservation that war is not wrong if it is a war of self-defence.

Self defence?

Well, was there ever a war which, from the point of view of one of the parties, was not a war of self-defence? Every nation

they can to prevent war in the future. But what of the rest of the nation? What, above all, of the new generation that is springing up? All over the country they see thousands of war memorials, from the Cenotaph in Whitehall to the simple slab in the small village. What do these teach them? They do not see memorials on such a scale, or in such numbers, for any civilian class of the population. Side by side with that they see the constant parading of the military, the glitter of the uniform, the praise lavished on the soldier, and experience the thrill of military music. Or they may read the

Government posters pointing out the superiority of the soldier's life to that of a mere artisan.

What lesson will the rising generation derive from it all? Surely not the meanness, the filth, the brutality, the essential barbarity of war, but its nobility, its necessity, its grandeur. And remember, that it is with the new generation, here, in Germany, in France, and elsewhere, that the question of peace and war rests. The soldier is even more prominent in our social life to-day than he was before the war; and we are educating the youth of the nation into the belief that war must come sooner or later, and that it is the first duty of the nation to get ready for it.

Now I am not averse to war memorials. But I would have them take a form that would do something to educate the people out of the war-like, barbaric stage. I am not averse to having national services at which the nation pays its measure of respect and affection to those who have been killed in war. But, again, I would have them take the form of educating the people in the right direction.

The feature of the Menin Gate ceremonial is the presence of the clergy,

and the dominance of the soldier. As a Freethinker I would eliminate the parson. But I do not want to discuss the question on the basis of sectarian difference, and so I content myself with saying I would eliminate the military. We pride ourselves that we are not a militaristic people. We are a civilian people who are forced into war. Very well, let us live up to it. The soldiers were drawn from the civilian population; let the civilian population, in civilian dress, pay their respects to the dead. I would not eliminate those who served as soldiers; they should be there, from Field Marshal to private. They should even be given places of honour, but they should be there minus their military uniform.

The 58,000 did not die as representing the army; they died as representing the nation, the civilian nation, and it is as a nation of civilians that we should pay our measure of respect. As it is, above the feeling of sorrow, will rise the pride in the soldier, the glory and glitter of the military display. In substance it becomes an exploitation of sorrow in the interests of the very militarism these men died to destroy.

We should have war memorials – plenty of them. I would take all those

who are maimed, or blinded, or otherwise incapacitated during the last war, and I would establish a number of model villages all over the country, where these men might live with their families, working at such occupations as they are fitted for, but guaranteed a reasonable livelihood. And I would mark each of them as war memorials. I would not have these men dependent upon street collections, or upon grants from Boards, whose main desire appears to be to cut down the allowance to the smallest possible amount.

We should thus have our war memorials all over the country, and we should be taxed, and properly taxed for them. And during peace I would keep the soldier strictly in the background. The marches, with their showy uniforms (the showiness of which is at present reserved for peace times), the band playing, the parades, should all be kept back. The people should be educated in the thought of the possibility of life without armies or, at least, life without the soldier occupying the premier position on the stage.

We *talk* peace, but by our actions we do what we can to train the rising generation to believe that war must come, that it is



not at all a bad thing that we should have a war now and again, and that at any rate, while there is danger, it is all very enjoyable, and noble and dignified. The mud, the filth, the degradation, the brutality of war are all left till the war is with us, and then we get through it as best we can. And by the time the next generation grows up, we have educated them along the same lines.

Mr. H. L. Mencken, writing in the *Sunday Chronicle*, says he would like to see a combination of powerful nations formed, which would thrash any “chronic trouble-maker” who threatened war. Excellent, if only the nations could trust each other.

But among these Christian nations there is not one that could trust the other. During the war I made much the same kind of suggestion, as a means of stopping war. I suggested that there might be an international force existing for the enforcement of carefully arrived at decisions concerning disputes between nations, and that there ought to be formed an international Committee of non-politicians, who on any serious dispute, should publish in each nation their considered opinion on the merits of the matter. That would at least do something to prevent war. It is useless depending upon the Press. The last war showed that the government can secure the Press at any time – or what amounts to the same thing; and if Lord Beaverbrook may be believed,

the Press may secure the government.

Reduction of armaments, which is the most the League of Nations appears to be capable of suggesting, can have little effect. It aims at making war much less costly, and a trifle less dangerous. But it does nothing to stop war. The notion that you can do away with war by making it cheap or less dangerous is one of the most curious ideas that ever took possession of men’s minds. There is no danger too great for men to face. Danger is quite as much an attraction as a deterrent.

The only way to make war impossible is to make it contemptible — to show that two nations pummelling each other to decide which is right is on a level with a bully punching a smaller man to compel his obedience. Ethically, war — modern war — does not rise to the level of the prize ring. Many of the soldiers who passed through the last war know it. I would take care that the rising generation know it also.

Necessary force

A final word. When I have written on this subject before, I have often received letters from friends arguing that some kind of force is necessary behind all law to enforce its decrees. I am willing to grant that. But I am not arguing against the use of force in given circumstances; neither am I arguing that in certain circumstances the act of war — the most unreasoning and least beneficial application of force among

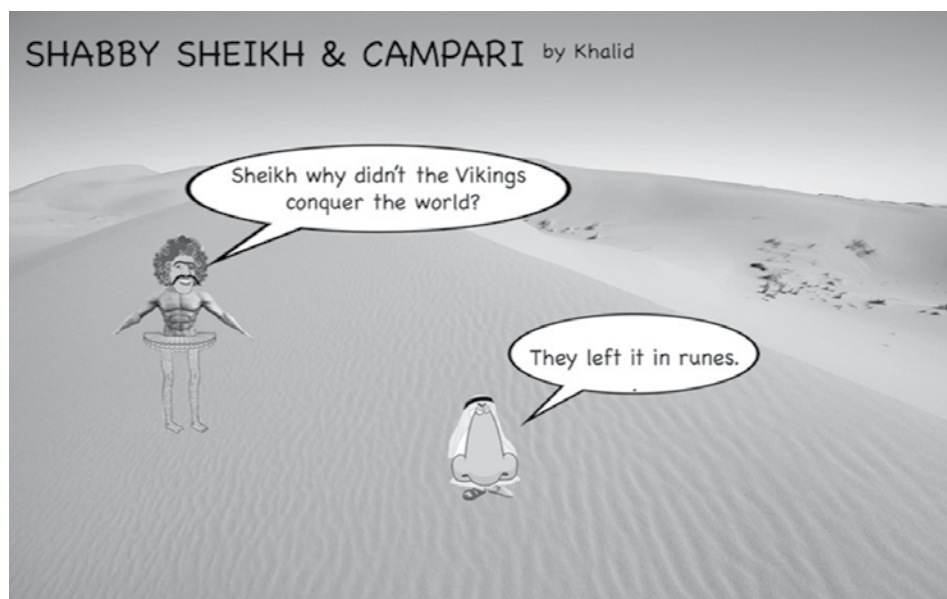
civilized peoples, may be inevitable, or even necessary. I am only arguing that, if we are all intelligently sincere in our expressed desire to end war, if we are sincere in our desire to pay real honour to those who fell in the Ypres salient and elsewhere, we should get to work to set forth war in its true light.

And it is sheer folly, almost criminal folly, to protest against war, and at the same time to surround the profession of the soldier with the glamour and the air of first-rate social importance that is being done today. If “war is hell,” we must do our best, during times of peace, to educate the rising generation that it is so. If war is sometimes inevitable, that does not rob it of its degradation and brutality.

Over and over again in the many cases of brutal assault that have occurred during the past ten years the plea has been entered on behalf of the prisoner, that he was a good soldier during the war. Professional apologists have argued that the man was disgracing his career. I suggest that in many cases the man became what he was as a normal consequence of his career. Four years of war meant demoralization. And if it was demoralizing for the man in the trenches, it was demoralizing all round.

I have the most profound sympathy with all those who were mourning for the subjects of the Menin Gate Memorial. But I want to see that Society gets some benefit from the sacrifice of their lives. I want to make war impossible; and I believe that will be done when we make it contemptible, and not by merely harping upon its dangers, the risks non-combatants run, or the cost to us in cash. If we must have war I have no great desire to protect either skins or banking accounts.

This was first published in The Freethinker (London), 31 July 1927 and Essays in Freethinking (London: Pioneer Press), Series 2, 1927: [153] – 159. Chapman Cohen (1868 – 1954), was for many years President of the National Secular Society and Editor of The Freethinker (London).



THE UNIVERSAL ARCHIVE OF REALITY

(Australian Branch Office)

All characters and events depicted in this article are entirely true.

Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely delightful.

Oh Readers, how I've longed so many times to rewrite the banal disclaimer at the beginning of books and films. For I - or at least one my selves - have always sensed a great untruth lying behind the usual "any similarity or resemblance is purely coincidental" and "this is a work of fiction". Epistemologically, that's bullshit. The truth is like art, or indeed truth is art itself. Did not Professor John Carey wrote in *What Good Are The Arts?* "a work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art"? Accordingly anything is true as long as someone feels it to be true. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. So I am liberated. I can write anything, even fluent Latin. I can be original.

You two, dear Readers, can taste such freedom. An infinite number of true facts validate the thesis. Here they all are. Firstly, from the well-known American artist Richard Prince in a *New York Times* article: "With my own work, it's art when it looks as if I know what I'm doing and when doing it makes me feel good. I've always said art is a revolution that makes people feel good." Secondly, from Professor Pierre Chalmers, Board Member of The Universal Archive of Reality: "Anything is true as long as someone feels it to be true. Emotions and desires have primacy over so-called 'facts'".

Professor Chalmers, as I explained in an earlier article, is a tall pillar of erudition I first encountered in a book-shop and then extensively interviewed at length over half a cup of chai in the *Covet Coffee Café*. What I didn't report, because life may be short but editorial word limits are even shorter, is that towards the end of the interview he paused - with one of those erudite pauses I SO admire - and then - at the end of the pause, obviously - he asked me "to turn the fucking tape recorder off." Stunned, I stared at him. With my eyes.

He'd been talking about The Universal

Archive of Reality. It's an organisation dedicated to the collection of documents and artefacts deposited for safe-keeping and the inspiration of like-minded people in a surrounding best described as "a safe place" by people who create new ideas and new identities or who otherwise embody the Archival maxims of "To thine own self be true, possibly." and "Create the historical past, now." Listening to Professor Chalmers and putting two and two together I'd began suspecting there were twenty-two international branches of the Universal Archive. But now he was leaning forwards and asking to know my exact age. I told him. He frowned and leaned even further forwards - thus bumping over my cup of unfinished chai - and he demanded: "Who, assuming you know, was your mother?"

"Why do you ask?" I enquired.

"Surely you know! After all, you must have met your mother at some stage of your life."

"I did." I said this firmly, as the transcript of the recording shows.

"Do you know where she was when you were born?"

"Yes."

"Where was she?"

"With me."

"*Sacre bleu!* Where were you?"

"I'd rather not say."

"*My Dieu!* Where?"

"Brisbane."

"Brisbane! *Mais j'étais en tournée de lecture à Brisbane à cette époque!*"

"I don't speak French." I said.

He said nothing. He appeared stunned by some memory, nonplussed.

"I mean I'd like to speak French but I don't."

He said nothing. More than nonplussed. Explussed?

"Actually, I would love to be French."

"Perhaps you are." He said grimly, finally.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Have you not noticed how alike we are, in appearance?"

I stared at him, again with my eyes. Professor Pierre Chalmers is about twenty years older than myself but, as I wrote in my first article, he is a tall, imposing person who looks exactly like Doctor Samuel Johnson except for the fact that his face is different, he's blonde, taller and about forty kilograms lighter. Dad - as I have to his irritation lately began to call him - is also charismatic, sexually intense (French) and strikingly attractive.

"My goodness", I said. "You're right. We are very similar".

**

Dear Reader (as I feel they must say in North Korea), The Universal Archive of Reality exists in actual physical places! London, Berlin, Seoul, New York, Beijing, Florence, et al, and - well, I am not yet at liberty to hint at its whereabouts, even though Professor Pierre Chalmers hesitantly took me to the Australian Office. Suffice to say, perhaps, that is located in one of the major State capitals of Australia, a city renowned for its open and tolerant culture, its dynamism and inherent interest. (In other words, it is not Brisbane). I can also reveal - without I think giving any facts away - that the building is at the southern end of a tree-lined boulevard which is flanked by hotels and eateries and is therefore known locally as "The Paris End of Collins Street". What mysteries must lie within, I thought, as we stood outside Number 616. Maybe Professor Chalmers feared, in swearing me to secrecy, that the multi-story (in every sense of the word) building would otherwise be subjected to tour groups similar to those who flock to Europe and England in order to gawk at the precious sites named in Dan Brown's work of scholarship, *The Da Vinci Code*.

"Promise me you won't tell your mother we have met." He said, staring morosely at the footpath. "I remember that encounter in Brisbane with no pleasure whatsoever. It was during one of my book tours. I was tired, exhausted, not at my best. And your mother is a very sharp-tongued woman."

"We call her 'Fang,' in the family." I agreed. Actually my father - my former father, apparently - more often referred to her, lovingly, as "The Poisonous Viper."

"She told me, the morning after we met, that asking 'are you still awake?' does not constitute foreplay and my love-making could be described as 'swift' except it happened so fast she could not be sure."

"Is that a fact?" I said.

"Well ... actually, I don't like to think so."

"I don't blame you."

"Yes, and ... and well, actually ... what she claimed was far from the real truth."

"The real truth?"

"The truly real truth ... in fact, I was a stallion, a stud." He said. And he seemed to gather strength from every declaration. "I was insatiable, her pleasure was prolonged, I was inexhaustible, her orgasms multiple! As with every woman to whom I make love!!"

"I'm not sure I wish to talk about this matter." I said. Mind you, I was moved by how readily he'd become far happier than when contemplating his alleged failure as a lover. Right in front of my eyes, proof of the efficacy of Archival thinking.

"Whatever the case, promise me you won't tell your mother we've met."

"You have my word." I said. "Trust me, I'm a writer, a literary journalist."

"Yes, and therefore well along the way in adjustments to reality."

"How cynical. Don't you believe in anything?"

"On the contrary, I believe in everything!" He'd been about to lead the way past the heavy copper doors before us. Now he swung back to me, his lustrous dark eyes alight. "Perhaps I was am wrong about you. Perhaps you don't have more brains than a lobotomised flea. Everything

is possible. But at least promise me you will try to comprehend what you discover inside."

"I promise, I do."

"The Universal Archive of Reality is the greatest force for liberation, for self-fulfilment, for the end of repression and oppression, in the world! For many centuries, transcendental Archivists, often flourishing in new lives, have left with us the records of their great transformations. We ... it ... it is the depository of wisdom!"

"I beg your pardon? Did you mention a suppository of wisdom?" interrupted a man who had just come out. From the building, I mean. He and two equally fascinating younger guys seemed to have keys to the grilled bronze doors. The older man was a little weird, quite muscular but dressed in one of those flimsy but bulging swimming costumes known in Australia as "budgie smugglers".

"Non, no." said Professor Chalmers (Dad). "I referred to a depository, not a suppository of wisdom."

"Oh, dash it," said the man. "What a disappointment we feel, don't we?" This was addressed to his two beautiful young male companions. They were wearing the uniforms of, incredibly, police cadets. I wondered if all these costumes were part of the man's Archive. And where had I seen him before? Surely I'd observed him on television or somewhere?

"We're just off for a jog. I'd sell my arse for a good jog. A long run. Must keep the evil thoughts under control, ha-ha. Ah yes, it takes a takes a lot of time and effort, exercise, exercise, must keep the evil thoughts down deep, away! Away, my sweeties, away, come, ha-ha." Laughing, he led the beautiful young police cadets off as they with light and delicate steps pranced away. How extraordinary. It's not every day you see a former Prime Minister of Australia in the Paris End of Collins Street.

"Think not, however, that the Archive is merely about personal development." Said Professor Chalmers. "Our philosophical foundations are many. Fiona?"

"My name's not Fiona, Dad." I said. Then I realised he had nodded a familiar welcome to an astonishingly beautiful grey-haired lady who'd approached the Archival doors with a firm measured tread. By gosh, I'd seen her too, on TV and in many newspaper articles.

"What you say is true, Pierre." she said. "It's true because you say it. Our philosophies are like stem cells drawn from Hellenism to neo-Hellenism, from Plato to Smith, from Foucault to Baudrillard, from Eco - ah yes, Eco, Eco - to the Australian philosopher John Armstrong. He's so well known, Armstrong, for his work on a trans-factualist ontology, a contra-functional theory of the mind, an internalist epistemology and a non-necessitarian conception of meta-rationality."

"Meta-rationality?" I inquired, shyly. For who was I to question an extraordinarily famous scientist, a woman who'd been voted, often, a National Living Treasure?

"The transcendence of rationality, post-rationalism" she said. "I shall explain further inside, if Pierre kindly admits you to our sanctum."

"As I shall." said Professor Chalmers. However a little reluctance still apparently dogged his impetus. "Only, please don't ask about my own books."

"Your own books?" I asked.

"Well, I like to believe they are mine." he said. "And therefore ..."

"Therefore they are yours."

"Exactly. By George, you're getting it."

"What are their titles?"

"Oh, well, one's Called *My Life As a Fake*, another is *A True History of the Kelly Gang* and a third is *My Illegal Self*."

My God! Dear Reader, was I really the son of such a writer? Oh, the mysteries of everything. My heart thumped like a broken-winged raven in my breast as I entered, finally, The Australian Branch Office of the Universal Archive of Reality and then ..

To Be Continued.

Membership Application



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- Make submissions to public inquiries
- Lobby MPs, governments and other relevant bodies

As rationalists we:

- Propose ethical principles based on shared values rather than religious doctrine
- Defend freedom of thought and conscience
- Advocate for the separation of church and state
- Work for the secularisation of the education system
- Endorse and support science and the scientific method
- Adopt a sceptical stance towards supernatural and paranormal claims
- Campaign to eliminate superstition
- Promote an open and just society
- Oppose the intrusion of religious dogma into public decision making

Official Aims of the Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.

To propound and advance Rationalism, that is adherence to the principle that all significant beliefs and actions should be based on reason and evidence, that the natural world is the only world there is and that answers to the key questions of human existence are to be found only in the natural world.

To stimulate freedom of thought.

To promote inquiry into religious and other superstitious beliefs and practices.

To encourage interest in science, criticism, history and philosophy as connected factors in a progressive human culture, independent of theological creeds and dogmas.

To promote the fullest possible use of science for human welfare.

To promote a secular and ethical system of education.

CHRISTIANITY, PROPHECY AND THE MILLENNIUM

By J. H. Chandler

THE hostility with which churches regard their ancestors is a puzzling but widespread fact of religious psychology. For the average modern Christian, his religion is a comfortable, stable aspect of everyday life, an influence for conservatism.

He would find it hard to understand the apocalyptic fervour of those who, from before the time of Christ, lived in constant expectation of the downfall of the degenerate world, and the advent of a glorious Millennium, with or without the second coming of Christ.

Yet this chiliastic illusion, which for more than a thousand years has usually existed as a sort of under-world, frowned

fearful persecution, virtue would be almost extinguished. The rule of an anti-Christ would be the last and worst ordeal—he is at once a mighty and wicked human king, and an instrument of Satan, who is seen as constantly intervening in history. Finally, deliverance would come at the darkest hour: a great king would arise and overthrow anti-Christ and a paradisiacal Millennium would follow.

This, the culmination of the whole course of history—seen as a linear, teleological development—would be the reign of perfect peace, happiness and virtue on earth. Even the trees will bear fruit more bountifully, all men will love one

suffering such upheavals produce. The fanatic prophets served popular spiritual needs which the Church, with its advice to patiently bear suffering, and which was thought of as itself corrupt and on the side of the people's oppressors, was incapable of fulfilling. The mind retreats from painful reality, which holds no hope of deliverance, into delusory hopes.

The rampant Millenarianism of the later Middle Ages was fiercely repressed by the Inquisition where possible. Joachim of Flora, its most famous medieval exponent, used the allegorical interpretation of scripture to prophesy the future. Joachim maintained there were three successive

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These people are in the grip of an abnormal psychological state.

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upon by the established churches for its revolutionary and heretical implications, was in fact the creed of Jesus himself, and of the early church, for at least the first two centuries.

The orthodox of later times have preferred to seek the alliance of the great ones of this world, and have usurped for themselves the claim of being Christ's followers. Jesus and his disciples certainly believed that theirs were the last days before the setting up of the Kingdom of God as a literal earthly empire, in fulfilment of prophecy.

With amazing consistency, from the time of the Old Testament, the Millenialist mentality has had the same main ideas. This world is dominated by forces of evil, not merely human but demonic; Satan is its king, and is the cause of all the unjust suffering of the righteous. The rule of Satan was easily identified with that of particular despotic governments by their exploited subjects. Its oppression would grow ever worse, the church would meet

another, and justice will rule without the need for institutional churches or states. The prototype of this fantastic scheme can be found already fairly developed in the Book of Daniel, where the story is that the oppressors of the Israelites will be overthrown thanks to God's providential assistance, and Israel will rule all peoples justly and gloriously.

Quite central to the Millenialist's dream is the belief in prophecy, usually Bible prophecy interpreted by some seer, always to show that the last days and the persecutions of anti-Christ are imminent in his own time.

Despite their universal failure new prophets of doom and coming utopia have always been forthcoming—even today.

The compulsive power of these fantasies is generated as a consolation and fortification against persecution, as among the Jews, or the Christians under the pagan Roman Empire. It has also been especially prevalent in situations of rapid and painful social change, with the disorientation and

stages of history; the third and final stage was about to begin in his time, preceded by the reign of anti-Christ and the persecution of the Church, then, after his defeat, the conventional paradise on earth was promised to his followers.

The Emperor Frederick II was cast as anti-Christ, unfortunately failing to live up to expectations. Not only Thomas Munzer, but most of the leaders of the Reformation, shared in the utopian hope in varying degrees. Calvin's rigidly disciplined theocracy at Geneva can be seen as an attempt to bring about the Millennium—the Pope this time standing duty as anti-Christ.

How is it that such notions can so often survive disappointment after the inevitable failure of prophecy? The “prophets” are rarely tricksters but are themselves sincere idealists. The only possibility is that these people are in the grip of an abnormal psychological state, which makes them quite incapable of perceiving reality and acting rationally.

- October 1964



***Suzi Alesandra by Jacqueline Mitelman,
Winner of the National Photographic Portrait Prize in 2011***
