



by **FLORENCE SCHECHTER** • Page 4

8 Is Fake Information
Destroying
Democracy?
Mike Flood

12 Ten Years Since
the Abolition of
the Blasphemy Laws
Alicia Chilcott

14 Charlotte
Payne-Townshend
Olwen Terris

16 Save
Democracy –
Abolish Voting
Paul Evans

19 Contractualism,
Liberalism and
Utilitarianism
Dr Sam Fremantle

23 Is Physicalism
the Correct
World View?
Ian Buxton

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IN THIS ISSUE OF THE *ETHICAL RECORD*:

3 Editorial The Ubele Initiative's Partnership with Conway Hall	Yvonne Field
4 Why the World Needs a Vagina Museum	Florence Schechter
8 Is Fake Informaton Destroying Democracy?	Mike Flood
12 Victorian Blogging: Ten Years Since the Abolition of the Blasphemy Laws	Alicia Chilcott
14 Charlotte Payne-Townshend	Olwen Terris
16 Save Democracy – Abolish Voting	Paul Evans
18 Obituary Stephen Housman (1936 – 2018)	Norman Bacrac
19 Contractualism, Liberalism and Utilitarianism	Dr Sam Fremantle
22 Make More Noise: A Day of Creating and Debating	Karen Livesey
23 Is Physicalism the Correct World View?	Ian Buxton
27 Forthcoming Events	

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

The Ubele Initiative's Partnership with Conway Hall

Guest Editor: Yvonne Field

I have heard on numerous occasions and to a large extent believe, that most things happen for a reason. In September 2015, a young man who describes me as his “mentor”, directed us to Conway Hall for a meeting we had been invited to on spatial issues in London. Unknown to us at the time, it was the wrong meeting and venue. However, we encountered, in the main hall, a full capacity panel discussion on gentrification.

During the Q&A session, I mentioned our then new report *A Place to Call Home 2015*¹ which looks at the national situation of community assets which includes community leaders from the “Windrush Generation”, as well as community centres, shops and sports facilities by the African Diaspora community. It found a considerable loss of these assets and an urgent need for younger community leaders, new models to make spaces more sustainable supported by social and community enterprise development.

The Ubele Initiative² is an intergenerational organisation which focuses on “sharing the baton” to create a new generation of leadership, develop community spaces and support young leaders to set up enterprises which benefit communities.

Our “accidental” encounter acted as the catalyst which allows us to introduce a new generation of people to this historic space. My first visit was as a young activist attending anti-apartheid meetings in the early 1980's. However, I had no idea of the history of Moncur Conway and how aligned our respective missions were.

As part of our partnership we have hosted several events in a great centrally located space, facilitating dialogue with and between communities which often experience social exclusion. It acts as an important

resource especially when space is becoming increasingly contested in London. Marginalised communities are increasingly experiencing dislocation and dispossession of housing and key community facilities and new spaces are being appropriated by young socially and economically mobile groups – I dislike the term “hipsters”!

We have hosted two major events and a number of smaller sessions: the first brought together over 45 community-based organisations concerned about the impact of the London Plan³ on local communities. Although a relatively new and small organisation, we take London regional spatial planning issues seriously through collaborating with Just Space⁴, ensuring that the voices of Black and Minority Ethnic communities are heard. The outcome of this event was the creation of a manifesto that sets out a series of demands for community spaces across London – it has been submitted as part of a response to Sadiq Khan's new draft London Plan⁵.

We also launched a new initiative at Conway Hall, called “Leading Routes”⁶ for over 120 African Diaspora young adults and their parents and carers. Now in its second year, it offers support and advice regarding opportunities as well as explores issues and concerns of Black students seeking to enter higher education.

I am so pleased that I followed a “mentee” that day as I am not a natural “follower”. It has led to a rich and generative relationship with Conway Hall.

1 <http://po.st/a-place-to-call-home>

2 <http://www.ubele.org/>

3 <http://po.st/londonplan>

4 <https://justspace.org.uk/>

5 <http://po.st/draftlondonplan>

6 <http://leadingroutes.org/>



Yvonne Field, founder of the Ubele Initiative, has been involved in social and community work for over 40 years. A consultant for 22 years, Yvonne works locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, spending extended periods in Africa and the Caribbean. She is currently a fractional lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London.

A THINKING ON SUNDAY LECTURE, 20 May 2018

Why the World Needs a Vagina Museum

Florence Schechter

WARNING: THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS SEXUALLY EXPLICIT LANGUAGE



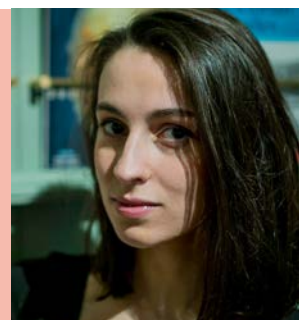
When I say I'm building the world's first bricks and mortar museum about the gynaecological anatomy, I get a lot of different reactions. A lot of people are astounded when I tell them there is a penis museum in Iceland but no vagina equivalent anywhere in the world. Sometimes the reaction is a polite nod, an excuse to leave and a brisk walk away. Sometimes it's a furrowed brow and the question "what would even be in a vagina museum?" And sometimes it's a right-on fist pump, which always puts a smile on my face.

And that's just in person. Online, the story widens. There are people who use it as an opportunity for a

joke – one we get a lot is something along the lines of "there's a building in London dedicated to cunts, but enough about Parliament, there's also a Vagina Museum!" The joke seems funny the first time you hear it, but when you delve in a bit further it becomes painfully clear that the crux of the joke is that vaginas are bad things and a suitable comparison to describe people we dislike. Think about the power the words "dick" and "cock" have as insults, compared to the power of "pussy" and "cunt".

There's always a clitoris joke in there too. People love to tweet about how there's going to be a clitoris

Florence Schechter is a science communicator and founder of the world's first bricks and mortar museum dedicated to the gynaecological anatomy. She came highly commended in the Women of the Future Awards 2017 for her work. As a science communicator, she has performed around the world at the Science Museum, Royal Society, British Science Festival, and Abu Dhabi Science Festival, to name a few.





museum just next door but no man will ever be able to find it. It now barely elicits an eye roll from myself – I’ve got very little patience for any person who cannot spend two minutes googling the location of the clitoris (it’s at the point where the inner lips meet if you really can’t google it).

And yet somehow between all of this, someone still found the time to mansplain the Vagina Museum to me. A man who shall remain unnamed once emailed saying he’d heard of the project and recommended that I look up the Vagina Monologues. How he could envisage a world where a woman who has decided to make a museum about vaginas had never come across Eve Ensler’s seminal work is beyond me. (Side note – I love using the word “seminal” in this context and waiting for people to notice.)

Of all the reactions, it’s the ones that tell me I shouldn’t be doing this that make me want to do it even more. Obviously, it’s a lovely ego boost when someone says it’s a great idea, but that’s not why I’m doing this. It’s when people say “privates should be kept private” or how we should open a “close-your-vagina museum instead” – someone genuinely tweeted this to us – that really showcases why the world so desperately needs one.

People have told me “the world needs a lot of things but a vagina museum is not one of them”. I heartily disagree. Many problems that society is facing can be traced back to the stigmatisation of the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy.

In 2012, the deputy Prime Minister of Turkey openly scolded one of the Turkish Members of Parliament for openly speaking about one of her “organs”, referring to her use of the word “vagina” while making arguments during a debate about abortion.¹ In the USA, a similar thing happened. During a debate on an anti-abortion bill, a state representative was banned from addressing the Michigan House of Representatives after saying the word “vagina”.² Somehow, these women were expected to debate about abortion law without actually referring to the anatomy. Is it any wonder that the push for safe and affordable access to reproductive health has been such a struggle? Even companies that produce products for vaginas can’t bear to say the word. Femfresh, who make wipes and washes and douches and other rather unnecessary items while running tap water is still available, claim to provide “intimate skin care” and have a history of avoiding the words.³ Which is a curious way to market a product. The signals that this subject is taboo that we

1 Hürriyet Daily News (2012) Deputy PM argues with opposition deputy over the word ‘vagina’. Retrieved from <http://po.st/hurriyetaidailynews>.

2 Jones, S. (2012) Vaginagate: US politician banned for saying ‘vagina’ in abortion bill debate. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://po.st/politician-banned>

3 McAuliffe, N. (2012) You can stick your feminine hygiene product ads up your hoo haa, Femfresh. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://po.st/femfresh>.

get from our community leaders and the commercial world mirror themselves in the private world. 65% of young women in Britain report having a problem using the words vagina or vulva according to The Eve Appeal, a gynaecological cancer charity.⁴ They also found that 39% of women believe there is a greater stigma around gynaecological cancers than other types of cancer.⁵

The stigma is there and real. And it's having tangible effects. Millions of people with vaginas have urinary incontinence and it takes on average of seven years to seek help, one of the major causes being embarrassment.⁶ At a pop up exhibition we did just a few days ago, a woman shared with us a story about how a friend of hers was too embarrassed to get her smear test. She put it off for years. Finally she went and it was discovered that she had cervical cancer. It was too late a stage to treat and a few years later, she passed away. People are literally dying of embarrassment.

As can be seen with the cases of the banned politicians, it becomes very difficult to address something when you can't even say the words. But by finding a way to talk about it, change can be made. In the past few decades, the fight against female genital mutilation has been growing, and many people put this down to the terminology used. It used to be known commonly

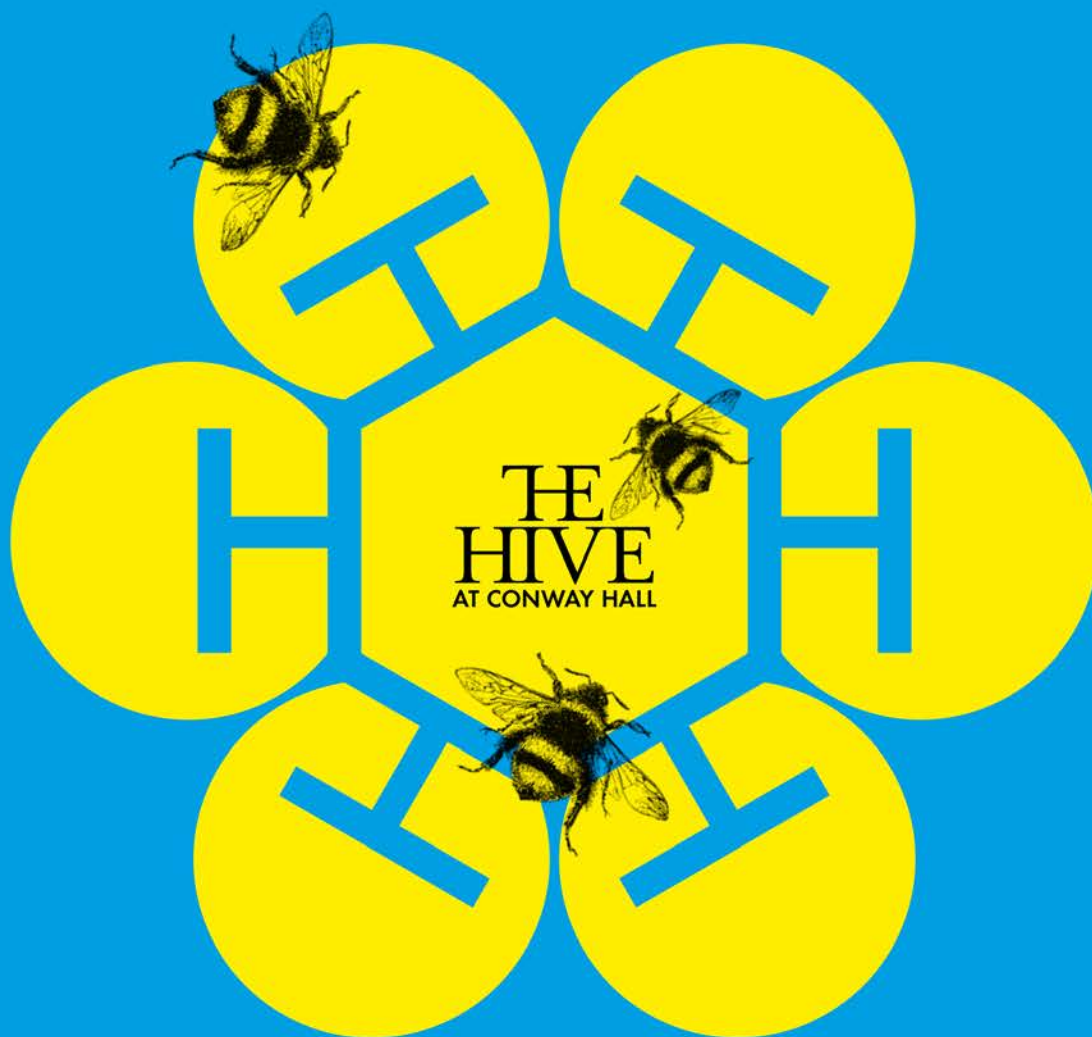
as female circumcision but around the 70s and 80s it started being referred to as female genital mutilation, or FGM for short. Some activists believe that saying "FGM" takes the emotive edge off the term while also signalling that it is not comparative in severity to male circumcision, and so now it can be discussed more openly in public and government. The case for the destigmatisation of the gynaecological anatomy is clear. After all, it is just another part of the body, like an elbow or a leg. I truly believe that a museum is a great way to do this. It is permanent, unlike an awareness campaign, and can be open for generations to come. It can provide a forum for discussion that might not be open to you in your community. A physical space shows that you're not the only person asking questions, as you might otherwise think quietly surfing the web in the darkness of your bedroom. Exhibitions display the rich history of the gynaecological anatomy in art and culture, in society and history, that isn't displayed widely in other museums. You can learn about anatomy, health, sexuality, gender identity, menstruation, menopause and all things related in a space where you can trust the information and ask real people questions.

We are currently touring a pop up exhibition called "Is Your Vagina Normal?" (spoiler: yes, it is) around the country. This is our first travelling exhibition and it is very interactive. You can catch us at the Science Museum, Green Man Festival, Pride in London and loads more places. We also run a series of events in London ranging from comedy nights to talks and panels to pub quizzes. The next step is a major fund-raising drive to open an interim space that will serve as a proof of concept for the permanent museum space that we are working towards.

Come to visit and make up your mind whether the world really does need a vagina museum.



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- 4 The Eve Appeal (2014) Why 'vagina' should be part of every young woman's vocabulary. Retrieved from <https://eveappeal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Eve-Appeal-Vagina-Dialogues.pdf>
- 5 The Eve Appeal (2015) Stigma around gynaecological cancers could be costing lives. Retrieved from <https://eveappeal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/The-Eve-Appeal-Vagina-Stigma.pdf>
- 6 Miller, E. (2017) Why I wrote a comedy show about incontinence. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2017/aug/10/why-wrote-comedy-show-incontinence-edinburgh-fringe>



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Is Fake Information Destroying Democracy?

Mike Flood



Two hundred years ago Thomas Jefferson is said to have observed that: “information is the currency of democracy”. If this is right, the question I posed in my Thinking on Sunday talk in March was: “What happens when that currency is corrupted by fake information?”

For me the development of the internet and advances in IT and artificial intelligence have made fake information – “alternative facts”, conspiracy theories and pseudoscience – an existential threat. Lies and deception, and dogma taught as “fact”, confuse and mislead the public and contribute to mistrust in government and mainstream organisations. They also damage individuals and businesses, and destroy reputations, sometimes lives; and they incite suspicion, fear and anger, which undermines social cohesion, democracy and the rule of law.

CHALLENGING TIMES

Today we face many challenges, not least trying to cope with the sheer volume of unregulated information, much of it negative, that invades our personal space 24-7. We are also struggling to get to grips with the corruption of social media, the spread of populism and identify politics, terrorist outrages on our streets perpetrated by indoctrinated youths or malcontents, and covert foreign interference in domestic politics via disinformation. In our “post-truth” world facts and opinions have become interchangeable, reasoned analysis is routinely dismissed, and there has been a haemorrhaging of trust in traditional sources of information and authority – to quote *Edelman’s* latest *Trust Barometer*¹: “We now have a world without common facts and objective truth, weakening trust even as

¹ <https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer/>

Mike Flood has many years’ experience in public education. He has worked with and for non-governmental organisations for most of his professional life. He is chair of *Milton Keynes Humanists*, and was until recently Director of a small development charity, *Powerful Information*, where he oversaw over one hundred grassroots education and information projects in Eastern Europe and West Africa.



the global economy recovers. [This is] most insidious because it undermines the very essence of rational discourse and decision-making.”² Society seems to have become more intolerant, fractious and polarised, and hate crime is on the rise.

Many of us have responded to events by retreating into our personal echo-chambers, where we rely increasingly on social media and our friends for news and comment (and confirmation of our opinions/prejudices). We are also less inclined to believe factual “evidence” from “experts”, and more inclined to go along with the simplistic arguments made by vulgarian politicians.

And the prognosis for the future is not encouraging, indeed, the dangers to democracy and global sustainability are likely to increase with advances in computing and AI, and the rapid growth of the “Internet of Things”.³ Moreover, logic and reason are of only limited value, at least in respect of trying to influence people’s attitudes and beliefs, and their behaviour on-line.

FAKE NEWS IS NOT NEW, BUT TODAY IT IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN EVER

No one is claiming that “fake news” is a new phenomenon: it has been used for millennia to gain advantage over rivals. The Prologue in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 2* is spoken by a figure dressed as Rumour and “painted full of tongues”. Rumour is there to “open men’s ears” and “stuff them full of lies”. He is pictured in Cartari’s 1582 woodcut blowing a trumpet and followed by Mars, the God of War. However, the ability of more than three billion of us to share our thoughts, fears and prejudices over the internet⁴ has fundamentally changed the nature of the game, as

have the automated bots which flood social media with fake news and disinformation and amplify marginal voices and ideas by boosting “likes” and retweets. This creates an artificial sense of popularity, momentum or relevance.

Our addiction to our smart phones and social media, and poor critical thinking skills, makes us highly vulnerable to deception and fraud. Take the story about the New York Lottery winner who was “arrested for defecating on her boss’s desk”⁵, it’s highly original and funny. Regrettably many stories are anything but amusing – one (in June 2017) claimed that the co-creator of cryptocurrency *Ethereum*, Vitalik Buterin, had been killed in a car crash, forcing him to post a selfie on-line, but not before 20% had been wiped off⁶ Ethereum’s \$4-billion market value; and unfounded reports of child abduction circulated on *Whatsapp*⁷ (in India in May 2017) led to seven Muslim men and Dalits being lynched.

Another aspect of the problem is denialists who glibly dismiss scientific or medical consensus. Indeed, the “my-opinion-is-as-good-as-yours” attitude is now seriously hampering global efforts to eradicate infectious disease, and deal with a host of other existential threats, including climate change.⁸ Take measles: according to the WHO, cases of the disease increased four-fold in Europe in 2017. In Italy alone there were 5,006 cases and 80% involved people who had not been vaccinated.⁹ An alarming fall in vaccination rates has been linked to the surge in support for two far-right parties, the *Northern League Party* and *Five Star Movement*, which have vowed to scrap Italy’s vaccination law. And both parties did well in the March elections and (at the time of writing) have just been sworn into office.

2 Each year *Edelman* analyses public trust in government, business, the media and NGOs in over 30 countries. It’s work shows that, in recent years, trust in the main institutions of state has declined in the West whilst rising in authoritarian regimes like China, Russia and Turkey.

3 The technology for voice synthesis and real-time manipulation of facial expression is already available (<http://criticalinformation.org.uk/videos>), raising the nightmare prospect of malevolent but realistic fake videos of prominent figures being uploaded and going viral; and there are genuine fears that the multitude of goods and devices now coming onto the market to make our homes and cities “smart” are not engineered with adequate security or safeguards.

4 According to the Global Digital Report 2018 (<https://wearesocial.com/uk/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>), there are now 5.13 billion mobile phone users in the world; 4 billion internet users; and 3.2 billion active social media users. This represents 68%, 53% and 42% of the global population of 7.59 billion

5 This was one of the biggest fake crime news hits on Facebook in 2016, generating ~1.7 million comments or shares. After winning \$3 million on the lottery, the 41-year-old was said to have showed up to work to deliver “one last package” for her boss. “It was worth it,” she is reported to have said when arrested. “I’ve been putting up with that guy’s sh** for years, it’s time he put up with some of mine.” When the story (<http://po.st/woman-arrested>) went viral, its author, comedian Dave Weasel, could see he was onto a good thing as clickbait earned him a fortune.

6 <http://po.st/selfiehoax>

7 <http://po.st/abductionhoax>

8 Applying too much logic and reason may well make things worse. This is the so-called “backfire effect” (<https://youarenotsosmart.com/2011/06/10/the-backfire-effect/>) – expect an especially strong reaction with conspiracy theorists, not least, climate change deniers. This attitude/behaviour presents a massive challenge for democracy.

9 <http://po.st/measlesitaly>

Sometimes the perpetrators' goal is not to peddle a particular line but to poison the conversation so badly that no one knows what to believe. Following Sandy Hook, one of the worst school shootings in America,¹⁰ people started posting videos on social media insisting that the massacre never happened. Similar tactics are being used by Russia in its information war with the West – as Joseph Nye points out: “In the information age, it's not just whose army wins but whose story wins”, and Putin is a great story teller. Last year EUvsDisinfo was debunking an average of three fake stories *a day* that it attributes to the Kremlin or one of its proxies.¹¹

So, in summary, the problem with fake news is that it's “sticky” and contagious, and highly effective at influencing opinion; and it achieves this at minimal cost and very little risk because fantasists, criminals and foreign powers can hide their identity on-line. What's more, research suggest that fake news is disseminated much more widely on social media than real news;¹² and the more we are exposed to any particular story, the more likely we are to think it is true.¹³ Indeed, we are complicit in this process as we post and repost items on social media with little or no thought.

FIGHTING FAKE

Over the last couple of years (really since Trump turned up the heat with his mantra: “You are fake news!”) there has been an upswell of concern about misinformation – witness the number of articles and books published¹⁴ and the many NGOs, news organisations and international agencies now seriously engaged in trying to find solutions to the problem. Their efforts basically involve either structural changes aimed at identifying and taking down fake or hateful material and prosecuting the perpetrators (and or the platforms they use); or interventions aimed at improving the quality of information in the public sphere and its accessibility and reach; or measures designed to empower individuals (especially the young) to become

more aware of the traps and dangers on-line and better able to tell facts from opinion, and genuine from fake.

Measures that fall into the first category include more effective controls on social media (perhaps similar to the “NetzDG” law introduced in Germany to control hate speech. There also needs to be more research into how to identify and neutralise social media bots, better authentication software, and the examination and vetting (licensing?) of commercial algorithms. Initiatives to improve information quality include news organisations and NGOs setting up fact-checking teams and websites, and professional bodies taking measures to enforce standards amongst their members. Measures to empower individuals include better public education about the dangers, and more critical thinking and media literacy in schools and colleges. And all of these different approaches need to be better coordinated than they are at present.

Here in the UK we also have GCHQ, working to neutralise malefactors and protect vital infrastructure from cyber-attack and (as of earlier this year) a dedicated *National Security Communications Unit* charged with “combating disinformation by state actors and others”.¹⁵

CRITICAL INFORMATION

With fakery and disinformation proliferating (and having a real impact on domestic politics and the public mood) we must try to remain hopeful that solutions will be found. Clearly many of the threats are beyond what any of us as individuals can address; however, there *are* things that everyone of us can do, and being aware of the danger is a good start.

It was with this in mind that early last year I launched *Critical Information*:¹⁶ the intention was not to try to compete with those already working on the problem, rather to complement their efforts by helping to publicise and explain their work, which is not particularly well appreciated and or understood by the general public. (How many people know about or can be bothered to use fact-checkers?) *Critical Information*

10 In December 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed his mother and then drove to the school (in Newtown, Connecticut) and shot dead 20 young children and six adults before taking his own life.

11 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

12 Researchers at MIT used 126,000 stories tweeted by some 3 million people over a ten year period. They found that prominent responses to false news included surprise, fear and disgust, whereas true news tended to be met with sadness, joy, anticipation and trust (<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>).

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusory_truth_effect

14 I've counted 60 books on Fake News / The Dark Web / Information Warfare, and that's just in English!

15 <http://po.st/reutersfakenews>

16 <http://criticalinformation.org.uk/>

aims to help people keep abreast of developments in this confusing world.¹⁷ We also identify resources that teachers and local activists can use in their work, and things individuals can do, including recognising fake news and not passing it on. And in the future we hope to work with others to lobby for the democratisation of IT and the prosecution of political opportunists who seek to mislead or deceive the public.¹⁸ For now, we are focused on taking our message to schools and the non-profit sector, including local environmental and humanist groups in Britain.

IN CONCLUSION

We began with a quotation by Jefferson. It was taken from the internet and, I'm afraid, like a number of other sayings attributed to the great man, it's fake.

Did you think to question it? I didn't when I first came across it. The quote is benign but that's not the point: our natural tendency is to accept much of what we see or hear, especially if we agree with it and it is repeated often enough. And this in a nutshell is a major part of the problem.

Everyone is at risk of harm from lies, deceit and fake information because these imposters undermine trust, the "glue" that holds society together. Sam Harris calls lies "the social equivalent of toxic waste",¹⁹ and my point is that lies are slowly poisoning social intercourse and damaging international relations.

Is fake information destroying democracy? Well, perhaps that's a bit strong, but it is definitely degrading democracy, and we are all to some extent complicit. It's time to get real.

¹⁷ We have to date identified some 90 organisations or initiatives in the UK (~300 worldwide). This includes channels that offer potential for "fighting fake", such as internet forums and TED Talks.

¹⁸ In Britain the legislation to prosecute liars and fraudsters is available e.g. through the 2003 Communications Act (Section 127).

¹⁹ https://philosophynow.org/issues/110/Lying_by_Sam_Harris



THE HUMANIST LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

Conway Hall Humanist Library and Archives is home to a unique collection of published and archival sources on humanism and its related subjects. We are open for members, researchers and the general public on Tuesdays to Thursdays from 10 till 17. Our collections include printed materials such as books, pamphlets and journals as well as archival material of unpublished institutional and personal records and papers, such as manuscripts, letters and photographs. For your time and convenience it is advisable to contact the library before your visit so we can ensure the material you seek is available.

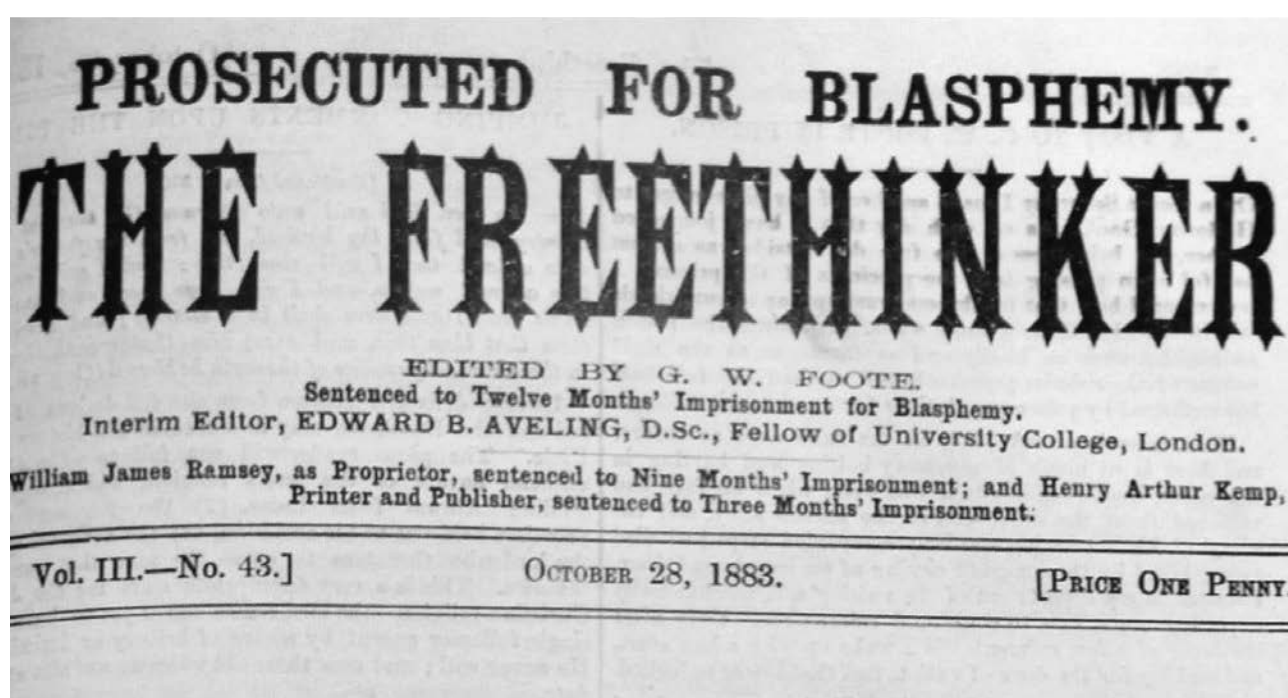
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Ten Years Since the Abolition of the Blasphemy Laws

Alicia Chilcott



The 8th May 2018 marks ten years since the blasphemy laws were abolished in England and Wales through the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act, following hundreds of years of campaigning. The offence of blasphemy has its roots in late medieval canon law, which allowed “heretics” to be imprisoned and burnt to death under ecclesiastical authority. In the seventeenth

century, blasphemy became a common law offence, used to prosecute religious dissenters for speaking out against the Christian Church. Abolition came after years of campaigning by individuals and organisations including the National Secular Society and was based on the view that the laws were antiquated and inappropriate in the modern day and that they afforded

Alicia Chilcott is Digitisation Co-ordinator at Conway Hall Library and Archive, working on an HLF funded project to digitise our collection of around 1,300 Victorian pamphlets. These pamphlets were written by London’s radical thinkers to disseminate ideas about freethought, humanism and social and political movements such as the early women’s rights movement, freedom of the press and anti-blasphemy. Alicia qualified as an archivist in 2017 and has a background in social and economic history.



privileges to Christianity that were not available to other faiths, or indeed those with no faith. The Act received royal ascent on 8th May 2008 and came into effect on 8th July that year.

Conway Hall's Library and Archive's pamphlet collection includes some key examples of opposition to blasphemy law amongst freethinkers and secularists. In the nineteenth century, pamphlets were the ideal medium for radical campaigners to share controversial ideas with minimal fear of legal action – they could be published anonymously and produced in a DIY fashion with the help of small radical publishers. Our Victorian pamphlets show how nineteenth-century freethinkers argued against the blasphemy laws, often recounting specific blasphemy trials to demonstrate problems with the legislation or publishing works previously involved in blasphemy prosecutions.

One pamphlet, "Plain reasons why prosecution for blasphemy should be abolished" (1884) by W. Mawer, makes many of the same arguments that finally led to the abolition of the blasphemy laws in 2008. Mawer asserts that blasphemy is an antiquated concept with no place in modern society and, as an offence originally created by the clergy, should have no place in modern legislation. Another in our collection provides a transcript of Charles Bradlaugh's speech to the Commons proposing a bill to abolish the laws on 12th April 1889. For Bradlaugh, blasphemy legislation was an issue of personal significance. A prolific pamphleteer, Bradlaugh narrowly escaped a blasphemy conviction in 1882 for his assistance in producing the anti-Christian newspaper *The Freethinker*. In his speech to the Commons, Bradlaugh positioned the blasphemy laws as an issue of inequality, as they acted to suppress the views of the non-Christian minority. He further suggested that they only give publicity to the views they attempt to censor and never succeed in changing the religious views of those prosecuted.

Whilst Bradlaugh had escaped conviction in relation to *The Freethinker*, its editor, G.W. Foote, and William Ramsay, the manager of the shop where the newspaper was printed and sold, were found guilty. Foote, an outspoken secularist, wore his conviction as a badge of honour and an October 1883 issue of *The Freethinker* stated "prosecuted for blasphemy" in bold letters on its cover. One pamphlet in our collection includes transcripts of the entire trial and was disseminated to share the arguments Foote made against blasphemy laws during the process.

Another popular form of defiance against blasphemy prosecutions was to reproduce works that had been identified as blasphemous. In 1890, J.M. Wheeler reproduced Swedish freethinker Viktor Lennstrand's "The God idea", for which Lennstrand was imprisoned for blasphemy in 1889. Wheeler's foreword to the pamphlet states that Lennstrand had been "firmly rooted in the earnest Swedish mind" thanks largely to his high profile persecution.

These pamphlets are among those currently being digitised as part of our Heritage Lottery funded project, *Victorian Blogging: The Pamphleteers Who Dared to Dream of a Better World*. This project will ensure that searchable digital copies of these pamphlets, that evidence some important and under-researched areas of history, are made freely available online.

PROSECUTED FOR BLASPHEMY.


THE FREETHINKER.

EDITED BY G. W. FOOTE.
Sentenced to Twelve Months' Imprisonment for Blasphemy.
Interim Editor, EDWARD B. AVELING, D.Sc., Fellow of University College, London.

William James Ramsey, as Proprietor, sentenced to Nine Months' Imprisonment; and Henry Arthur Kemp, as
Printer and Publisher, sentenced to Three Months' Imprisonment.

Vol. III.—No. 38.] SEPTEMBER 23, 1883. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

COMIC SKETCH.—2.



CHRISTIAN EVIDENCES.

As honest man, when he had been
With fresh-imported hell-fire warmed,
Grew serious—from his dress and mien
'Twas plainly to be seen
The fellow was transformed.

His eyes turned up, his mouth turned down;
His accent caught a nasal twang;
He oiled his hair; there might be heard
The grace of god in every word
The villain said or sang.

SHELLEY (slightly altered).

But if you allude to some self-styled Atheist leaders who have done so, and you are proud of them, then part of your pamphlet may have meaning?

I am prepared to discuss with you the question, "What becomes of the infidel leaders?" in the columns of the *Freethinker*. I shall endeavor to show (1) that your pamphlet is misleading (2) that you have really begged the question, as you have not mentioned the true infidel leaders of this age or of past times. You must clearly understand that I shall not only deal with the initials given in your tract, but I shall carry you much further afield. The question you ask is a large one. What becomes of the infidel leaders? I shall take you and our readers, if we have any, over the lives of all the infidel leaders of our time, and shall show them, whether I succeed with you or not, that you have carefully avoided referring to the real leaders in secular thought, and that your pamphlet cannot be taken as in any sense a truthful and complete reply to the momentous inquiry that heads it.

In a letter, that with your permission has been sent on to me, you speak of the *National Reformer*, "scandalous blackguardism," and call that paper a "filthy print." I will admit that you are, probably, better versed in scandalous blackguardism than I, and that your professional acquaintance with the Bible gives you the right to recognise filth. None the less I challenge you to quote from the *National Reformer* a single passage that is filthy, and I refer you to the following chapters in the Bible as examples of the disgusting nature of the book that you place in the hands of little children. (Genesis xix., 30-36 (The story of Lot and his daughters). Genesis xix., 4-11 (The story of the men of Sodom). Genesis xxxviii., 9 (The story of Onan). Leviticus v., 3; xv., 16-18, and indeed the whole of that fifteenth chapter. 2 Samuel xiii., 10-14, and the Song of Solomon, passim. As long, sir, as you and wicked men like you are idolising a book containing such passages as these that I have picked at random out of the large number of filthy passages in the Bible, so long had you not better cease, for very shame, to speak of indecency in men's writings? No man has written anything to approach the horrible filthiness your god, as you say, has vomited forth in his book, the Bible.

In this same letter you write, "For many years I have been the subject of persistent attack, simply because I exposed their wickedness; and I have repaid the attacks by feeding and helping all the broken-down Secularists who have come to me whom their own body left to starve." Again I challenge you to substantiate this statement.

Candidly, I had no desire to meet one of such conspicuous ill-breeding and so unscrupulous a nature as you appear to be. There is an old proverb as to the impossibility of touching pitch—you know the rest. But when I find you posing as an authority upon the fates of Secular leaders, attacking myself and slandering a newspaper and a party with which I am connected, I put on one side personal feelings and challenge you (1) to a written discussion upon "What becomes of the infidel leaders?" (2) to quote from the *National Reformer* passages as those to which I have referred in the Bible (3) to substantiate your statement as to encouraging Secularists left to starve by their own body.—Yours faithfully,
EDWARD B. AVELING.

The rev. gentleman replied as follows:—

88 Caversham Road, N.W., August 27, 1883.

Sir,—As you are clearly afraid to make good your bragging threat of "attacking my statements" on a public platform, I beg to decline any further correspondence. And so

REPLY OF DR. EDWARD AVELING TO THE
REV. C. J. WHITMORE'S LETTERS APPEAR-
ING IN OUR ISSUE OF SEPTEMBER 16TH.

13 Newman Street, W., August 24, 1883.

Sir,—At greater leisure than I had when I acknowledged the receipt of your last letter, I now write. I regret to find your second letter as wanting in good manners as your first. I sent to you notice of my lecture as I was going to attack your words; and I thought that even if you were unable to be present some representative of yours might come. I introduced the name of Mr. Bradlaugh, to whom you refer with the coarseness of manner that seems, unhappily, habitual with you, because that gentleman, in an article published in the *National Reformer* of July 3, 1883, exposed in part your fraud. You read my letters very carefully. The whole of the sixteen persons to whom you refer by initials may have existed, and yet you and kindred Christians may "invent" others. The last part of my last sentence in my last letter but one is of general application—the first part is of special

Charlotte Payne-Townshend

Olwen Terris

"She knows the value of her unencumbered independence."

– George Bernard Shaw



Charlotte
Payne-Townshend

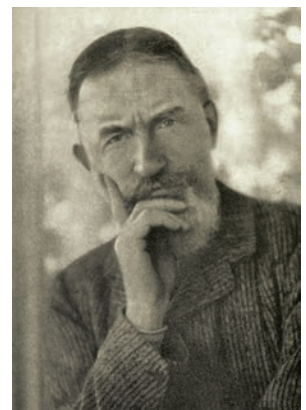
Charlotte Payne-Townshend (1857-1943) was an Irish heiress and a political activist. She married the playwright George Bernard Shaw in 1898 at the registry office in Henrietta Street, Covent Garden.

The economists and social reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb, early members of the Fabian Society, and co-founders of the London School of Economics and Political Science, persuaded Charlotte to join the Fabian Society and to donate £1000 to the London School of Economics library and endow a woman's scholarship – the Shaw Library was founded by and named after her. Beatrice Webb later wrote of Charlotte in her diary, "By temperament she is an anarchist, feeling any regulation or rule intolerable, a tendency which has been exaggerated by her irresponsible wealth".

The Webbs introduced George to Charlotte; Shaw wrote to the actor and actor-manager Janet Achurch, "We get on together all the better, repairing bicycles, talking philosophy and religion". It was a marriage of minds but a marriage which is thought to have been celibate; Charlotte showing a deep apprehension of sexual intercourse and firm of the belief that rearing children and motherhood were no strong part of a woman's natural destiny.

Unwilling to be a passive onlooker of her husband's fame, but vitally important to his career, Charlotte shaped Shaw's output by acting as his advisor, secretary and agent throughout his life. She taught herself to type and read Shaw's shorthand – a diversion Shaw believed – "she amused herself by writing my critical articles at my dictation". She also masterminded her husband's vegetarian diet to the world's chefs on his foreign travels, "Mr. Bernard Shaw does not eat meat, game, fowl or fish or take tea or coffee". She proposed topics for his plays, and her research into the life of Joan of Arc became his late masterpiece Saint Joan. Her Irish nationalist sympathies made her an active supporter of Home Rule asking Shaw to do "everything in his power" to defend Roger Casement after he was arrested for treason in 1916, having tried to secure German support for an armed rebellion in Ireland against British rule. She was a prominent backer of the feminist review *The Freewoman* (banned from the shelves of W.H. Smith in 1912 because of the open discussions on sexuality) and marched in the Boston Suffrage Parade of 1914.

Conway Hall Library and Archives holds many books and pamphlets by George Bernard Shaw – social and political tracts, critical studies, essays and biographies. All titles can be found on the Library website: <http://po.st/librarysite>. Regrettably far less attention has been given to his wife's independent life; certainly without her constant practical and emotional support Shaw's achievements would not have been so great. The legacy of Charlotte Payne-Townshend can be found in the library she founded, the enduring influence of the Fabian Society, and in the inspiration she gave to many women in their campaigns for women's rights.



George Bernard Shaw

Opening Times
See website for details

Private View
6pm-9pm, Fri 13 July
All welcome

Online
[conwayhall.org.uk/
davidwolverson](http://conwayhall.org.uk/davidwolverson)

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RED LION SQUARE,
LONDON, WC1R-4RL

CONCRETE & CHINTZ

DAVID WOLVERSON

18 JUNE - 09 AUGUST 2018



A THINKING ON SUNDAY LECTURE, 13 May 2018

Save Democracy – Abolish Voting

Paul Evans



We may have reached a point in history where the trajectory that democracy has taken needs to change dramatically, if it is to survive as a respected concept.

Most readers will have an idea of what is meant by the word “democracy”. In many cases, it will be a concept that is so indistinguishable from “electoral politics” that it seems almost contrarian to de-link the two. They’re plainly not the same thing. North Korea and Iran hold elections. On the other hand, very democratic bodies often, correctly, treat the point at which things need to

go to a vote as an indictment of their failure to reach a deep consensus.

So much commentary that purports to be about quality of our democracy is, in reality, political advocacy cloaked in a flimsy ethical costume. A call for “*a more democratic decision*” is often a code for “*I want the decision to be made in a way that is more likely to result in my preferred outcome*”.

For example, it’s not hard to see people with a very pure democratic motivation, and no particular political

Paul Evans is a trade union official working in the TV and Motion Pictures industry. *Save Democracy – Abolish Voting*, (2017) was his first book. It draws on a range of life experiences, including the creation of large-scale e-Democracy platforms and programmes, establishing a successful worker co-op software company, union organising and various consultancy roles addressing problems around democracy in the digital age.



outcome in mind are attracted to the idea of referendums. They have an obvious appeal in an age when representative democracy looks increasingly stale, where technology is changing our expectations, and where new, more responsive structures are possible.

But if there is an innocent reason to champion referendums, there is also a deeply cynical one that comes from some quarters. A strategic use of referendums can force the government to do things that no sensible parliament would do.

Plebiscites that were once described as a tool of demagogues and dictators by sages on all sides of the political spectrum are now almost entirely normalised due to a cynical political investment in them as a way of making decisions. Their emergence is less an ethical shift than a political one.

It is very telling that opponents of Brexit haven't thought it worth challenging the claim that leaving the EU is "the will of the people", no matter how flawed the democratic credentials of a ballot in which a narrow majority voted in favour of a very poorly-defined change to the entirety of UK foreign and trade policy.

Even if the ideal of leaving the EU is genuinely popular (it probably is) and is a priority for a clear majority of the populace (it probably isn't), good democratic processes depend upon much more than just gauging of the reflexes of voters.

The alternative – Representative Democracy – also evolved out of political, rather than logical, processes, though over a much longer period. It emerged in a struggle between people with existing power, and emerging groups who had become too strong to ignore. Old autocracies declined as the franchise gradually expanded. It was a political product – not a concept that was developed in the abstract and then applied methodically.

It emerged in this form because even the most convinced reformers understood that people-power could be unsustainable if it were poorly designed (as must now, surely, be obvious with respect to referendums, as the British government struggles to decode what the Brexit vote told them to do).

Of course people with existing power have never liked giving it away, but there were also always genuine philosophical concerns about what democracy would mean for individual liberty, or about the quality of decision-making. Concerns were voiced about the wisdom of creating a big powerful system that could be "captured" by small groups, or controlled by people with money, charisma, or both. Fears of a *tyranny of the majority* and *mob rule* were not (always) reactionary scaremongering. They were prominent in the writing of

Aristotle, Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill, among many others, and reinforced by the experiences of the French Revolution.

There's no better advert for liberal discourse than the creative way that history has reconciled all of these tensions to arrive at Representative Democracy.

It has blunted a lot of those fears. It's been a fantastically successful outcome in terms of prosperity, liberty and peace. They are designed to work towards a consensus, because it is a rare political gift to be able to get away with annoying too many people too much of the time. They are designed to deliberate well and to make good decisions, to be inclusive, and to (as Burke put it) represent the nation as a whole because they have to get re-elected on their records as much as on their promises.

Even if politicians have not always been sticklers for upholding these ideals, Alexis de Tocqueville was able to calm our fears in his early survey of *Democracy In America*, by showing how a parliament is less an assembly of virtuous people than one of grasping idiots who collectively keep each other in order while also generating an historic vitality almost in spite of themselves.

In many ways, by contrast to referendums, elected representatives give us a fantastic example of evolutionary games design. It is based around an almost magical mechanism that takes people who learned the craft of partisan campaigning, forcing them to stand for election—to beg votes from people who are neither very politically active nor partisan. Winning elections has always been about getting votes from "swing voters" – people who don't have particularly fixed or consistent views on policy and government.

Fanatics have to appeal to agnostics. It kills a number of birds with one stone. It's a great system. It is quite possible that Representative Democracy – government by electoral politics – may still be the least-worst way of giving us a government that is democratic as is practicable, yet these two things are not the same thing. There's something almost miraculous about how Representative Democracy designed itself. The moment that its wheels come off will be a very dangerous one.

Worryingly, or perhaps, fortunately, it may now have arrived.

* * *

Government by electoral politics emerged in certain conditions. There was, for example, an emerging local, and national "commons" and a commercially sustainable media offered the kind of reportage and commentary

that could fuel a meaningful liberal discourse between elections. This was dished up to an increasingly literate, educated population in a relatively high-stakes contest between the interests of labour and capital.

There were many more features upon which government by electoral politics was based. Not all of them are present today in the form that they were. It is possible that society is atomising to the point that the commons needed for a functioning democracy is no longer there. It's possible that clickbait and the degraded version of journalism that Nick Davies described as *churnalism* is suffocating the fourth estate. It's possible that political discourse has left the more reflective forums in which it was discussed as a serious high-stakes business (in the political salons, the newspaper op-eds, etc.) and relocated to the more tribal and reflexive realm of social media.

This may read like an unduly pessimistic snapshot of the digital age, and I only present it to illustrate the point that it is not a foregone conclusion that the mode of government that worked for the civil society of, say, the 1990s, will continue to work in the future. The more exciting possibility is that there are new skills and platforms that we have developed that could transform democracy for the better, and that now would be a good time to explore them.

For this reason, it's worth asking readers to clear their minds. To imagine that they were designing democracy, from scratch, knowing all of the things that we now know now about how people make decisions together. In my book *"Save Democracy – Abolish Voting"*, I have tried to turn our understanding of democracy into one of games design because this may offer a way out of the stalemate offered by debates around "constitutional reform" – a discourse that is often monopolised by those people with political, rather than democratic aims.

It's an attempt to think about what popular sovereignty can look like without any preconceptions about whose interests would be served more, or less, than in the current settlement. It challenges us to say if we would *really* like to live in a state that is very democratic? It's not a foregone conclusion (indeed, the book argues that people who are very engaged in political activity would detest the idea of a well-designed democracy, as it removes many of the vetoes enjoyed by political busybodies).

"Save Democracy – Abolish Voting" asks readers to think about what a world would look like if our priority was to find a very democratic way of doing things and accept the policy outcomes from good democratic processes – whether we like them or not. Imagine a government that is directed according to the interests of all of the people, where we get the governance that the best available consensus of what the whole population really want – not the policies that they *ought* to have if they only knew what is good for them, or the policies that they *say* they want, if asked in a particular way on a particular day (using electoral processes).

Imagine a government that is as accountable as possible to all of the people, not just those who can invest time, or play the political game more effectively than the rest of us. The first observation I'd offer, as part of a guided meditation on this subject, is a question about why we've chosen to stick with "the vote" – a very blunt instrument – when we live in a society that has very well developed techniques (in marketing departments, for example) for finding out what people really want? Ballots are often seen as an almost sacramental part of democracy, but, as Tom Paine said...

"A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom."

OBITUARY

STEPHEN HOUSMAN

(1936 – 2018)

Long-time Conway Hall Ethical Society member, landscape water-colourist and writer, Stephen Housman, died on 22 March 2018. His good friend Harvey Pitcher (author of *Responding to Chekhov*) noted Stephen's four thoughtful contributions to the Ethical Record: "Why must man be rational?" [6/84]; "Man the story-teller" [4/85]; "How not to interpret Darwin" [6/86]; "Humanism, the way ahead" [5/92], titles indicating Stephen's concern for humanism and its problems.

Norman Bacrac

A THINKING ON SUNDAY LECTURE, 18 February 2018

Contractualism, Liberalism and Utilitarianism

Dr Sam Fremantle



The talk I gave for Conway Hall's "Thinking on Sunday" was called "Contractualism, Liberalism and Utilitarianism" and was based on part of the argument of my Phd thesis, "Reconstructing Rawls: a utilitarian critique of Rawls's theory of justice". This article summarizes the main argument of that talk.

John Rawls worked on his theory of justice for over four decades. Its genesis was in a short article

called "Justice as Fairness" published in 1957 and its final statement was the fittingly named *Justice as Fairness: A restatement* published in 2001. Rawls constantly adjusted and revised his theory, and some versions of it were markedly different to others. Given Rawls's stature as the preeminent political philosopher of his generation and the volume of his output, it is perhaps not surprising that he has been interpreted



Sam Fremantle has a Phd from UCL, on "Reconstructing Rawls: A utilitarian critique of Rawls's theory of Justice". He has taught philosophy at Birkbeck since 2000 and still teaches there. He was one of the founder members of the *London School of Philosophy*, set up in 2010. In 2017 he set up the *International School of Philosophy*, providing courses online.

in various ways, with some commentators regarding him as essentially an egalitarian liberal and others regarding him as essentially a contractualist, in the tradition of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke. I subscribe to the latter interpretation.

So, on my interpretation of Rawls' theory of justice, he should be understood as reviving the social contract tradition for two specific purposes. One was to argue for a much more economically equal society than that realized in Western capitalist countries – or any other countries for that matter. The second was to provide a solid foundation for the constitutional rights that right thinking liberals such as John Rawls held to be an essential feature of a just society; rights such as the freedom to practise religion and “freedom of the person”, freedom from slavery. In what follows, I shall set aside Rawls' argument for economic equality and focus on his argument for constitutional rights with particular reference to freedom of the person. One of Rawls' strongest moral convictions, repeated throughout his writings, is that slavery is unjust and that any theory of justice that might allow slavery in some circumstances is inadequate as a theory of justice.

This brings us to a third purpose of Rawls' theory, that is inextricably tied up with his desire to find a solid foundation for our constitutional liberties, and that is the aim of discrediting utilitarianism as a purported theory of justice. Rawls is quite clear about this in his Preface to the second edition of *A Theory of Justice* published in 1999, which I quote here:

“I wanted to work out a conception of justice that provides a reasonably systematic alternative to utilitarianism, which in one form or another has long dominated the Anglo-Saxon tradition of political thought. The primary reason for wanting to find such an alternative is the weakness, so I think, of utilitarian doctrine as a basis for the institutions of constitutional democracy. In particular, I do not believe that utilitarianism can provide a satisfactory account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons, a requirement of absolutely first importance for an account of democratic institutions.” (Rawls 1999, pp. xi – xii)

The passage helpfully continues to articulate Rawls' hope that the social contract theory *could* provide a satisfactory account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons:

“I used a more general and abstract rendering of the idea of the social contract by means of the

idea of the original position as a way to do that. A convincing account of basic rights and liberties, and of their priority, was the first objective...” (Rawls 1999, p. xii)

In my doctoral thesis I argued that Rawls was unsuccessful in his attempt to find an alternative to utilitarianism and it followed from that failure that he was also unsuccessful in establishing a convincing account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens. But before I summarize the main gist of my argument it is worth briefly confirming that utilitarianism would, as Rawls claims, indeed fail to provide a solid foundation for constitutional rights such as “freedom of the person”. This can be done with reference to a little remarked passage from John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*.

John Stuart Mill is renowned as a devout champion of liberalism; perhaps his most famous essay, *On Liberty*, is devoted to a defence of individual freedom that is arguably more “liberal”, at least in some regards, than Rawls's. But the principle underpinning Mill's championship of liberty was the principle of utility; the idea that all the institutions of society should ultimately be designed to promote “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”. Mill thought that the best way to achieve the goal of promoting the greatest happiness, at least in civilized societies, was for the state to stand back and leave people free to lead the lives of their choosing. But he explicitly claimed that liberal rights would not be suitable for “barbarians” where more authoritarian rule would be appropriate. And even in “civilized” societies rights such as “freedom of the person” should sometimes be waived for considerations of expediency. So he wrote:

“... justice is a name for certain moral requirements, which, regarded collectively, stand higher in the scale of social utility, and are therefore of more paramount obligation, than any others; though particular cases may occur in which some other social duty is so important, as to overrule any one of the general maxims of justice. Thus, to save a life, it may not only kidnap, and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner...” (Mill 2003, 234)

This passage perfectly illustrates Rawls's concern that utilitarianism could not provide a solid foundation for constitutional rights. Although it does not mention slavery, the same utilitarian logic that would allow a doctor to be kidnapped and compelled “to officiate” would permit slavery in more extreme circumstances, if the institution of slavery would maximize utility.

I hope the example of slavery has served not only to illustrate why utilitarianism cannot provide a robust foundation for constitutional liberties such as “freedom of the person” but also to demonstrate the genuine appeal of Rawls’s project. Many of us would feel, along with Rawls, that slavery *must* be unjust and any theory that can fail to account for its injustice is inadequate.

The trouble is that Rawls failed to work out an adequate alternative with his theory of the social contract and, as I attempt to demonstrate in a laborious and nitpicking manner in my thesis, the reason Rawls kept continually readjusting his argument over four decades is that he was unable to get around the fact that it would be rational for people in an appropriately defined situation of freedom and equality to agree to contract into a society that would permit slavery in certain circumstances. Rawls’s social contract method could support a society run by a utilitarian dictator.

Those who are interested in seeing all the nits being picked can download a copy of my thesis at the website of the International School of Philosophy; here I’ll give a rough summary of its argument.

Rawls was not naïve enough to suppose that society was really founded on a contract. His argument relied on the idea of a hypothetical contract. The basic idea was that the correct principles of justice were those that *would* be chosen by rational people whose primary concern was to lead the lives they wanted to lead but who accepted an obligation to constrain the pursuit of their self-interest in order to allow others to lead the lives *they* wanted to lead, subject to similar constraints. People need to constrain their behaviour according to rules to avoid anarchy which Rawls supposed (but which could be contested) would be worse than living in a society subject to constraint by the appropriate rules of justice. The correct principles of justice, whatever they turn out to be, must at least be ones that provide better prospects than anarchy – or whatever the relevant position of equal liberty by which to measure the advantages of cooperation is.

Now, when Rawls set out his first version of his theory in 1957 he appeared (I argue in my thesis) to assume that utilitarianism would *almost certainly* make many people worse off than in the relevant situation of equal liberty by which the advantages of social cooperation should be measured. He also assumed that slavery would certainly make the slaves worse off than they would be in that relevant situation of equal liberty. But by the time Rawls wrote *A Theory of Justice* his underlying assumptions had changed so that the relevant situation of equal liberty by which the

advantages of social cooperation should be measured was effectively a Hobbesian state of nature. Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, defined the liberty of the state of nature in very uncompromising terms:

“... every one is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemyes; It followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body...” (Hobbes 1996, p.92)

Basically, everyone would have the right to do whatever they wanted to whoever they wanted in pursuit of whatever they wanted. For Hobbes it followed that life in a state of natural liberty would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short”. Rawls appears to agree with Hobbes about this. Rawls also, in *Theory*, assumed that utilitarianism would *almost certainly* make everyone better off than they would be in this relevant situation of equal liberty. *And this would be the case even though utilitarianism could not offer a cast iron guarantee of the right of freedom of the person, and would permit slavery in certain circumstances.* Given these assumptions it would be rational for people concerned to pursue their own self-interest subject to the constraints of rules imposed by society to contract into a society run by a utilitarian dictator.

I conclude that Rawls failed in his endeavour to provide a more solid foundation for constitutional rights through the idea of a hypothetical social contract than that which utilitarianism could provide. But this is not to say that utilitarianism does not provide a reasonably solid foundation for constitutional rights anyway. John Stuart Mill may have been right in his assumption that the best way to the promised land of the greatest happiness of the greatest number would be to allow people to live the lives they choose to lead.

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MAKE MORE NOISE: A DAY OF CREATING AND DEBATING

Karen Livesey

TO PUT WATERLOO BRIDGE AS THE LADIES' BRIDGE FIRMLY ON THE MAP.
MAKING VISIBLE THE INVISIBLE HISTORIES OF WOMEN.

Conway Hall and Concrete History teamed up on Saturday 2nd June to host a playful celebration and commemorate the centenary of the women's vote.

On the proscenium arch in Conway Hall is written large, "To Thine Own Self Be True". Over seventy women and one or two men did just that. We gathered to **MAKE MORE NOISE** as urged by the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.

Through a combination of creating, debating and performance, women aged from thirteen to seventy designed handprinted headscarves and made badges and friends in anticipation of participating in Artichoke's Artwork Processions the following Sunday, on June 10th. The Ladies Bridge team had already made a unique banner, involving metal work and fine stitching.

On stage we had the talented Brit School, students from the University of Creative Arts, Farnham, and Zoe Phillpott, the inspiring force behind Ada Ada,

celebrating Ada Lovelace. As well as impromptu contributions from attendees and screenings of the Ladies Bridge film and BFI's *Meet the Suffragettes*.

This intergenerational group brought together old supporters of the Ladies bridge while embracing many new participants and culminated in a big turnout of over thirty marching together with the Ladies Bridge banner at Processions.

For more information on future events we will be running please do get in touch with Karen Livesey and Jo Wiser, info@theladiesbridge.co.uk.



A THINKING ON SUNDAY DEBATE, 14 January 2018

Is Physicalism the Correct World View?

Ian Buxton



On Sunday 14th January at 11am at Conway Hall I opposed Ray Tallis by advocating the motion: Physical explanation is all that there is. I presented my case for 30 minutes, reading out a list of numbered sequential points in order to try to make the claim seem maximally plausible, but editorial constraints make it impossible to reproduce virgo intacta, and in any case none of the audience picked

up on any of the points that I had made. However, should any kind reader feel impelled to read the full thesis I will happily email it to them, in the interests of disseminating what I consider to be a novel and potentially fruitful set of concepts. I should perhaps apologise for any appearance of immodesty but it is, as far as I know – after nearly 40 years of being acquainted with the professional philosophical



Ian Buxton is highly unconventional, with an early interest in all the physical sciences, but jack-of-all-trades rather than a specialist. He studied two years of a Zoology undergraduate course but failed to complete. He developed an early teenage interest in epistemology and logical positivism. He admits to manufacturing amphetamine during his early '20s and in the attempt to "go commercial" until he came across the Home Office spy network, an organisation that has intrigued him to the present day!

literature written in the genre of “philosophy of mind” – unique, in that these philosophers tend to discuss the logical properties of meta-desiderata which might in principle be able to fulfil the remit of establishing physicalism as true beyond reasonable scientific doubt. (Rather than discussing, in “object-language” scientific vein, the pros and cons of any specific concrete proposals such as my own.) Here’s my address: glyptodon123@gmail.com (Please title any emails “Physicalism Debate”).

Ray – courteous, genial and conciliatory as always – set forth his opposition to the motion in a considerably briefer 20 minutes, presenting a Powerpoint propaganda offensive of predominantly bullet-pointed... not exactly counter-claims, but rather his own standardly promulgated efforts to rebut physicalism. Thus, we largely “talked past each other”, but it would be both unfair and inaccurate of me to reproduce his own argumentation, and I understand that he has declined the offer to submit a summary of his own offering.

Both before and after we’d both presented our sides of the case a vote was taken: “before” yielded 10 votes in favour, and “after” yielded 11, but the extra one was in any case an agent provocateur well-known to me, and therefore meaningless. Furthermore, the meeting’s Chair – who shall remain nameless – didn’t attempt to determine how many actively opposed the motion, as opposed to being comfortably agnostic!

THE CYBERNETIC APPROACH

Before we proceed further, I must furnish the context of the claim set forth in the motion:

Viewing matters from “a naturalised positivist standpoint” I envisage solving/dissolving traditionally conceived “grand philosophical problems” in the light of the epistemology which unavoidably ensues, and which I will sketch below. I contend that it essentially “closes the circle of enquiry”, by positing what might loosely be called “the scientific worldview”, and thence purely neurological, cybernetic mechanisms which function in such a way as to subserve that naturalised epistemology, thus creating cognitively capable animals such as ourselves: autonomous, biological robots. I believe that although crucial to our personal experience, “consciousness” is, ultimately “a wetware illusion”, and I’m currently interested in analysing in greater depth what it might mean for some “purely physical system” to “be in states of Illusion”. I believe this possibility drops out of the cybernetic approach

automatically, and propose an evolutionary rationale couched in terms of overall neurological economy as justification (Appendix). I will show that examination of the problem only allows a very small range of coherent positions, and that the attempt to remain agnostic and aloof founders because there is “nowhere else to go”. We’ll see that the only remaining permissible positions box us in either to accepting physicalism or some variety of metaphysical pluralism; ideally, traditional Cartesian mind/body dualism, because of its relative ontological parsimony.

The problem of (phenomenal) consciousness I take to be the problem of the physical generation of phenomenal, or sensory, qualities. What then should we actually mean by “consciousness”? Here’s the standard argument against colour, sound, and olfactory externalism – that is, the thesis, which many ostensibly hold, that such appearances arise/reside/exist outside our bodies, within the external world (and are, thus, on a par with, say, position, size, shape, and the quantities of kinematics and dynamics). Now follows the argument from physics, because it is physics itself which has generated (the sensory aspect of) the “mind-body problem”.

At school, we learn that the sciences gain their databases exclusively by observations and, more precisely, measurements of the properties of physical systems. Within and up to undergraduate physics and engineering we learn that such measurements are concerned with various algebraic compoundings of the fundamental dimensions of mass, length, time, and electric charge.

Clearly, scientists working within any discipline – let alone “people working in ordinary life” – initially gain access to such measurements by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling. However, “oddly enough”, the colours which mediate the seeing; the sounds which mediate the hearing; the proprioception which mediates the cutaneous pressure, and the smells and tastes which mediate the personal sampling of vapours, aerosols and water-soluble compounds are not accounted for by these algebraically defined quantities. Philosophically speaking they belong to the epistemology of the process. In fact, these latter are nowhere either analysed nor indeed even mentioned within any of the physical sciences; not even within biology, where one might expect them. They are, simply, a pre-scientific adjunct to / condition of the observational and experimental activities which corroborate all scientific theories. Clearly, colours, sounds, smells, tastes and

touches are not part of the fundamental, dimensional parameterisation of the world, as are the primary qualities of geometry, physics and engineering.

Most readers will have read Frank Jackson's famous 1982 paper *What Mary Didn't Know*, concerning visual monochromat neuroscientist Mary who understands every general physical fact about the brain, yet has neither experienced, nor can imagine, colour. When she is eventually introduced to full-colour experience she has learnt an entirely new set of facts. Ergo, physicalism cannot be true! However, it is not necessary even to go to such lengths to discover the sheer absurdity of supposing that colours, sounds, smells, tastes and touches actually belong to the physical stimuli which elicit them (within us); one merely need consider the absolute futility of trying to describe to some radically V4-striate occipitally decorticated person what, say, red is like. How, even in principle, would it be possible to undertake such a description? Exactly the same caveats apply not only to all the sensory modalities, but also even felt bodily states, moods, and emotional arousal. (It would be no exaggeration to observe that were my sensory qualities to be "switched off" entirely, there would be nothing left that could fairly be regarded as "my being conscious", would there? I argue that we are not conscious "of" our sensations, but, rather, our sensations are constitutive of consciousness itself! In a real sense, I simply am my sensory qualities.)

"EASY PROBLEM" MENTAL FARE

I propose to attack the problem by examining what both Dave Chalmers and myself regard as "Easy Problem" mental fare, and examine the notion of the genesis of the concept of "the self", moving into, thereby, explaining the philosophically speaking traditionally-conceived-as problems of intentionality, understanding/meaning, semantics, the possibility even of thinking, and of action, all in one fell swoop.

I would even say that were one to accept the recommendations stemming from what I have to say below then the entirety of traditional philosophical problem-hood vanishes down the oubliette, and, I would argue, good riddance!

Assuming physicalism, provisionally, to be true, then I argue that the notion of the self could only get off the ground by postulating itself. How? It seems that it could only do so by mapping the inputs of

separate sensory modalities onto each other, and looking for invariant conjuncts of invariant disjuncts. Which means: Whenever newborn babies start to make random limb-movements then they more-or-less simultaneously feel proprioceptive feedback from the muscles and tendons of the limb that is moving, and see it moving, and the visual image of some small area of its own skin colliding either with some part of the environment or another part of its own body coincides in time with the feeling of cutaneous/muscular pressure over that same area of body surface. However, whenever the infant sees objects outside its body surface come into mutual contact, then there is no corresponding (either) proprioceptive precursory feeling or subsequent feeling of cutaneous/muscular contact. Furthermore, sensations such as itching, pains, hunger, warmth/coldness are only experienced by such an infant either on or within its visually perceived body surface. Which is to say that one only, for the first time, realises oneself by realising that one is a self, and, even then, only inferentially. In other words, the genesis of self-realisation consists in the discovery of the confines of one's own body. For what meaning could conceivably be invested in the concept of a "self" which entirely lacks physical limits? How would it be possible to distinguish – from its specific visual perspective – such an entity from its environment? It doesn't have an environment! It would be co-extensive with the entire universe! Were I to feel itches within passing clouds, pangs of thirst associated with the sides of the buildings across the street – as opposed to the acute, tongue-sticking dryness of the interior of my mouth and back-of-throat – pains within the boughs of trees, anger associated with the movements of cars, the urge to urinate from the visually apprehended lamp-post, and what-have-you, and had this kind of bizarre phenomenology persisted throughout my entire post-partum life, the concept of self would be as meaningless and irrelevant as would be the possibility of other-perspective to a severe autistic.

We now have the hypothesis of self/world logical necessity. We discover/invent the notion – operationally speaking, as unreflective animals – of physicality by abstracting the persistence of regularities and persisting structure from the patterning of our sensations! It seems to me that any usefully adaptive, flexibly behaving, and ultimately "common-sense"-utilising robot would be obliged to follow as nearly as possible this natural, biological example.

SOLIPSISM IS IMPOSSIBLE

Alert followers will have noticed that throughout the foregoing account I have relied consistently on the reality of “felt” sensory feedback, mandating the prior existence not only of some sort of cumulative weighted-inference mechanism but also of consciousness itself.

Punchline: solipsism is impossible, because it mistakenly accords ontological priority to “self” over “external world”. We’ve seen that this doesn’t work: they are both “on the epistemological starting line”! Concomitantly, neither is any variety of ontological idealism – such as Berkeleianism or Buddhism – viable from a logical point of view, simply because it is impossible to prevent such idealisms from collapsing into solipsism! (I have found that many seem unable to grasp this point: the fact is that our beliefs in the existence of the external world reside purely on sensory grounds, but so do our beliefs in the existences of other people: there exist neither empirical nor a priori grounds to preference either species of existential posit over the other, ontologically speaking!)

Notice that since all forms of ontological idealism such as Buddhism/Berkeleianism founder, as does solipsism itself, we are left with the major alternative contender of “emergence”, a slippery notion, in its “weak” form simply a restatement of physicalist reductionism, but in its strong form espousing the

appearance of rabbits from hats. Its advocates assert that at some appropriate degree of “complexity” the system in question simply pops some entirely novel phenomenon into being, without observing the customarily sensible assumption that the overall behaviour of macroscopic systems can, in principle, be analysed into the causal interactions both of their components and their environments. Thus, the contest resides between physicalism and Cartesian dualism. The latter should be ruled out because it posits a spooky ontology, fitting neither with physics nor the other sciences. But soft (as Dennett would say) there are 2 distinct varieties of physicalism: one “eliminative” and the other asserting identity between relevant underpinning cerebral neurology and consciousness itself. Eliminativism in its a priori form as sometime-espoused by Dennett and many gung-ho AI-oriented theorists simply denies that there is any problem to be addressed, which I find both extremely silly and utterly incomprehensible.

However, I have developed a hybrid form which melds harmoniously with a species of identity theory, and which I call, in contrast with the a priori form, a posteriori eliminativism, asserting that the ultimate explanation of sensory qualities is a physical process, but that there’s “nothing there” to explain as any species of physical entity. We are, however still subject to the illusion, and – exactly as in the case of any conjurer’s repertoire – it is the illusion which needs explaining, and not dismissing.



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Start at **15.00** unless specified otherwise.

Jul 01	Vaccination Myths <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Dr Andrea Kitta</i>
Jul 15	The Almighty Dollar <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Dharshini David</i>
Jul 29	Turning the Tide on Plastic: How Humanity (and You) Can Make Our Globe Clean Again <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Lucy Siegle</i>
Sep 2	<i>Subject and speaker TBC. Please check website for details.</i>
Sep 16	The Pink Pound: Do Homosexuality and Capitalism Have a History? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Dr Justin Bengry</i>
Sep 30	How to Rig an Election <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Nic Cheeseman & Brian Klaas</i>

TALKS, DEBATES & LECTURES

Jul 16 18.30 to 20.30	Out-of-the-Box Thinking: Will Democracy Survive the Age of Big Data & Artificial Intelligence? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>David Wood, Indra Adnan + Dr Lina Dencik</i>
Jul 18 19.00 to 21.00	Central London Humanists: Is Fake Information Destroying Democracy? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Mike Flood</i>
Jul 19 19.30 to 21.00	Who Put Bella in the Wych Elm? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Cathi Unsworth</i>

COURSES & WORKSHOPS

Jul 13 13.30 to 16.30	Zine Workshop
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SUNDAY CONCERTS

Start at **18.30** unless specified otherwise.

Sep 9

Simon Wallfisch & Fitzwilliam Quartet

- *ScSchubert / Wallfisch / Barber*

Sep 16

I Musicanti

- *Beethoven / Robin Walker / Lachner*

Sep 23
17.30

Hiro Takenouchi pre-concert recital

- *Mozart*

Sep 23

Trio Chausson

- *Chaminade / Ravel / Laroche Lambert / Wagner / Korngold*

Sep 30
17.30

Robert Hugill pre-concert talk

Sep 30

Louise Winter & Primrose Piano Quartet

- *Brahms / Clara Schumann / Robert Schumann*

Oct 7
17.30

Hiro Takenouchi pre-concert recital

- *Mozart*

Oct 7

Franco Mezzena and Stefano Giavazzi

- *Beethoven / Bloch / Ravel*

Oct 14

Alauda Quartet

- *Schubert / Bartók / Mendelssohn*

Oct 21

Barbican Piano Trio

- *Schumann / Joseph Phibbs / Schubert*

Oct 28

Royal College of Music

- *Haydn / Missy Mazzoli / Farrenc / Barber*

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