

## Editorial: Only Connect

In the old anonymous days of the *Times Literary Supplement* some of the unnamed reviewers would identify themselves by writing in their own familiar styles. Others were prompted by their exceptional judicial role to adopt a more impersonal manner of writing. When such a departure was successful it fostered a more detached judgment without repressing all interest and individuality. Conversely, the signed obituary notices in London's newest daily paper, the *Independent*, lose a sense of authority that the anonymous notices of the *Times* and the *Telegraph* still purchase at some cost in liveliness and intimacy.

A parallel phenomenon may strike some readers of a recent report by the Council for Science and Society: *The Value of 'Useless' Research: Supporting Science and Scholarship for the Long Run*. Few if any of her regular readers would identify from the text of the report the member of the Working Party to whom tribute is paid in Professor John Ziman's Preface: 'We are particularly grateful to our rapporteur, Mary Midgley, whose first draft transformed an inchoate mass of material into a connected argument that required little further revision. Both the form and the substance of the report owe a great deal to the work, and skill, that she put into it.'

Now that we know who wrote this text we can see or think we see her hand at work in such a passage as this:

In a situation of extreme urgency, such as earthquake, famine or total war, choices can of course become simplified in this way, so that everything is sacrificed for immediate food and shelter. But that is not where we now stand.

The painful complexity of our current choices stems rather from the richness of our resources, presenting a constant series of possible options. It would not look plausible to claim that existing financial pressures have reached the point where it makes sense to burn the Titians along with the floorboards and to eat seed corn, or to melt down all the saucepans to make fighter planes.

But most of the text of the report suggests by its manner that it is what it is, the report of a committee, balancing one consideration against another, being sensible and careful not to be partisan or tendentious or colourful. Even so, it is surprising to read, again in the Preface, that 'This report has the unanimous support of the Working Party and of the Council as a whole.' For the issues that the report deals with are not scientific: they are ethical and political and philosophical. And

## Editorial

while the Working Party consisted of only five people, the Council has more than fifty members.

This little mystery may become less mysterious if we reflect on a further philosophical question that this useful document raises. Professor Ziman asks it and implies his own answer when he writes:

. . . what is the justification for supporting research for which it seems difficult to imagine an ultimate use? This sort of research is, in fact, strongly supported by well-to-do countries throughout the world, so surely this justification must be very cogent. Indeed, even the most macho cost/benefit worrier is aware that there are good reasons why the UK should continue to support high energy physics at CERN, fund Iron Age archaeology, permit at least some academics to teach and study philosophy, and so on.

And yet those reasons are seldom uncovered, analysed and articulated into a coherent rationale. Apart from disconnected clichés referring to ‘knowledge for its own sake’, ‘natural human curiosity’, ‘the search for truth’, ‘science as a cultural form’, etc., neither scientists nor policy-makers have an organized body of argument to turn to when this type of issue comes up for decision.

Having noticed this disconcerting gap in current thinking about the place of science and scholarship in society, the Council acted immediately to fill it. The discussion was opened in the summer of 1988 at a public meeting where invited speakers and members of the audience addressed the whole topic from a variety of points of view. The present Working Party was then charged with collecting together these (and other) opinions, and integrating them into a comprehensive report.

There is a clear implication that the Working Party was engaged in original thinking, arriving for the first time at a coherent rationale for pure research, going far beyond what Professor Ziman openly dismisses as ‘disconnected clichés’.

But this mis-states the nature and value of what the Working Party and its report have achieved. It might seem unkind to say only that we now have connected clichés instead of disconnected clichés, yet that, if it is put into politer terms, is what has been produced. For the authors, like many of those effectively engaged in philosophical enterprises, are articulating a pre-existing understanding rather than discovering a new one or grounding and underwriting one that was already in the field. The desire to claim more comes partly from an insufficiently articulated consciousness of what and how much can be achieved without new discovery or original argument.

A more adequate articulation has long ago been achieved for us by our predecessors. Plato likened philosophy to recollection of what we

know rather than to discovery of what is quite new. Dr Johnson noted that mankind more often needs to be reminded than informed. Wittgenstein said that the role of the philosopher was to assemble reminders.

Why should we need to be told what we know? Often it is because, as Wittgenstein also knew, we have a wilfully confused understanding. There are many things we know that it is none the less a *struggle* to remember. This account of what is going on in the Council's report displays its limitations as well as its usefulness. What has been well articulated may still be hard to remember in the tangled reflections and debates in which we are involved when making decisions of policy and priority.

Ironically, one of the best actual examples of such confusion was in the thinking of the late Henry Miller, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, who was a pioneer in his determination to undermine frivolities like philosophy in order to free resources for more worthwhile activities. He started the process which eventually led to the closing of the Department of Philosophy of which Mary Midgley was a distinguished member. Yet Henry Miller was an enthusiast for music, who allowed that equally useless activity to flourish while philosophy withered. He thus provided in advance a counter-example to one of the CSS Report's conclusions: that 'knowledge can reasonably be seen as an "end in itself" simply because people find confusion very painful'. Some people find their confusions comfortable, and are disturbed only by efforts to unwrap them from their cosy blankets of misunderstanding.