

litmus paper

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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



David Cameron
Is Blue the New Green?
4–5 pm/Town Hall

Richard Branson
5.15–6.15 pm/Town Hall

James Goodman et al
Climate Change and You
8–9 pm/Town Hall

Dan Hon et al
Virtually Nowhere
8.30–9.30 pm/Town Hall

Quest for the happy grail

Adam Horovitz

What makes us happy? Is it answers or the pursuit of answers? If Mark Vernon and Richard Schoch are to be believed, it is most definitely the chase, given that their talk on that subject yesterday gleefully skated right around the issue.

Schoch, author of *The Secrets of Happiness*, began proceedings in cheerful mode, dismissing the utilitarian scientific approach to happiness, which “cannot be reduced to feeling good”. “Science risks turning happiness into a selfish act,” he said. He was also scathing – in his resolutely charming way – about the approach of politicians to the subject of happiness, who only want a happy work force “because they take less sick days”.

“People who have goals become happy,” he said, “not the other way round.” He also spoke at length about the morals of happiness: “Happiness is hard work. [It is] not



Richard Schoch knows the secret

about feeling good but being good.” It was no surprise when he told the audience that he was a Catholic.

Mark Vernon, author of *The Philosophy of Friendship*, was equally dismissive of the science of happiness, suggesting that the study – in its current form – treated life as a simpler thing than it really is. The modern world is very good at serving biological need – Aristotle’s “zoe” – but has lost touch with the

“bios” – the spiritual.

He also worried that as society becomes more and more rigidly structured – particularly for children – and trust is worn away, less and less people will make the Aristotelian ideal of “excellent friendships” and love people purely for who they are.

I was left with the distinct impression that both Vernon and Schoch believe that the pursuit of happiness is much akin to an Arthurian Grail quest – if you keep your eye firmly on the goal, you’ll never achieve it. Only by unselfishly pursuing all the secondary goals that you may or may not achieve will you – perhaps – find happiness. This was not the most scientific of talks and it would have benefited from a scientist to joust with the two speakers. I, at least, find arguments make me happier than preaching, however much I might agree with the sentiments.

Something to be sneezed at

Jon Andriessen

Judging by the woman sat in front of me, sniffing into her hanky and rubbing her eyes, we truly have become a nation allergic to life. That’s the prognosis of allergists Pamela Ewan and John Warner, who presented us with the startling evidence of allergies on the increase over the last 20 years.

In Britain we now have over 20 million sufferers, double the amount recorded in the late 1970s, and those diagnosed are even more likely to experience what Ewan described as “multi-system disease”, a condition where asthma, eczema, rhinitis and many other conditions can affect a single person at the same time. She also reported that latex allergy, rarely

seen in recent years, was making a comeback, but didn’t elaborate.

Warner, late due to traffic, arriving on stage with a Reggie Perrin swagger, believes research into the prevention of allergies at the foetal stage of life is our only real way of curtailing what has already become an epidemic. Children suffering with damaged immune systems will become adults with the same problems leading to long term and expensive treatment.

For all their sound research and immense knowledge of their subject, it seems that even Warner and Ewan have no definitive answers on how to curb the illness. Without more research, time and money invested the solutions still seem a very long way off.

Dawkins: the king of the swingers?

Mike Chirgwin

Anthropologist Chris Stringer and Richard Dawkins yesterday discussed the movement of humanoids and their common ancestry. Stringer started by visually comparing chimpanzees and George Bush to show their genetic similarities: the conclusion was that there was little difference.

The first real humans, Homo Erectus, lived in Africa 2 million years ago; from them Homo Sapiens and Neanderthal man evolved. The common belief was that Neanderthals and humans interbred, but Stringer suggested that this was unlikely, given the lack of evidence. The extinction of Neanderthals was probably due to sudden climate change and the influx of



Homo Sapiens into their territory about 50,000 years ago.

Homo Erectus were adept at tool making, ate meat and used fire. All the groups from this period share these skills. It’s what links them.

Dawkins ended the discussion noting that in Darwin’s day the idea of a “missing link” evolved due to a lack of evidence. Darwin’s theories cannot be dismissed; there is more than enough evidence now to complete the chain of humanity.

Heroines' affliction

Catherine Jopling

The heroines of Victorian novels were particularly sickly people, with a worrying tendency to die in agony a couple of days after getting their feet wet. The question of what killed them was addressed in a lively discussion, *Ailing Heroines*. The panel, comprising science broadcaster Vivienne Parry, literature specialists John Sutherland and Neil Vickers, and infectious diseases doctor Jane Leese, considered the fates of characters in *Wuthering Heights*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Bleak House*.

Tuberculosis was a major problem at the time *Wuthering Heights* was written, and seems to be the most likely cause of death of many of the characters. The long and unpleasant decline it induced made it a popular narrative device in 19th century fiction.

In *Sense and Sensibility* the heroine, Marianne, becomes perilously ill with brain fever a few days after a walk in the rain. Jane Leese suggested that this was probably due to a bacterial infection leading to septicaemia. John Sutherland pointed out that many Victorian heroines may have suffered from anorexia. A hearty appetite was considered unseemly when suffering from a broken heart and malnutrition would definitely have increased their chances of contracting a life-threatening illness.

Bleak House provides the most exciting selection of illnesses: smallpox, opium poisoning and even an incident of spontaneous combustion. Lady Deadlock's dramatic end was probably a result of her poisoning herself with opium, which could be bought in any local chemist at the time and was very commonly used.

For those who missed the event and would like to know more about the terrible dangers of life in a 19th century novel, the discussion will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 later in the year.

Fat of the land

Sara-Jane Arbury

A wholesome audience gathered to chew the fat about the epidemic rise in British obesity levels yesterday and judging by the latest percentage figures, there's plenty to get your teeth into. A quarter of British adults and 15% of 6–10 year olds are now obese and the situation is growing out of all proportion.

So when did this epidemic begin and why? A distinguished panel of scientific bods proffered a variety of dates and possible explanations for our expanding midriiffs, ranging from the nation's desire to embrace an attitude of consumerism after war-time rationing, to the arrival of supermarkets in 1948 and Britain's introduction to self-service and inexpensive "cosmetic food". Nutritionist Susan Jebb expanded the timeline further by suggesting "the date of your conception" as the significant moment for obesity propensity, citing genetic make-up, breast-feeding and weening as the root causes.

The subsequent debate became a game show as the audience were asked to plump for a specific date, 1984 being declared the favourite.



Unhealthy food was cheap, microwave ovens spread like wildfire into the nation's kitchens and the effort was finally taken out of hunter-gathering with the availability of ready meals.

Removing food advertising from television, teaching all children to cook and play sports in schools, tackling alcohol intake: just some of the solutions offered by the audience but the discussion shied away from biting chunks out of the more insidious political issues. Scientist and former hill farmer Tim Lang urged a more radical approach: "Why is there no Greenpeace for obesity?" A bemused silence. "Let's go for a drink then," he said.

Pontificating on pessimism

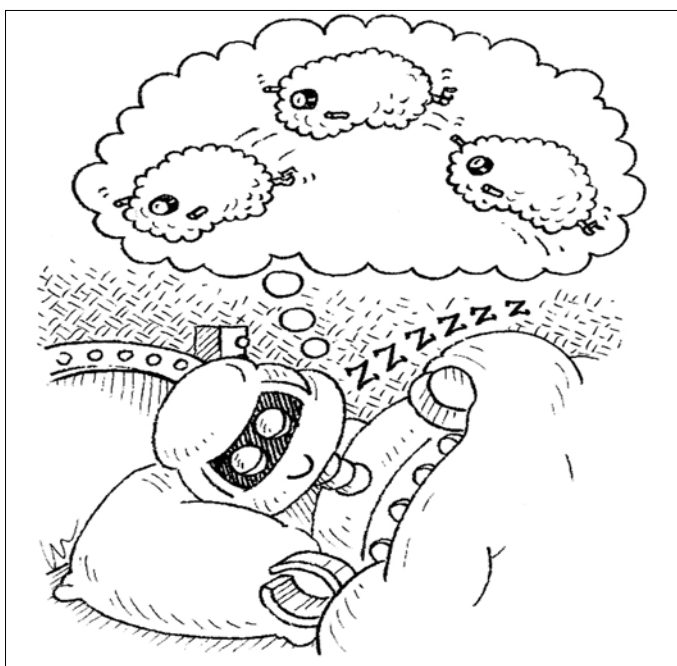
Marie Deans

When Steve Jones appeared on *Desert Island Discs* his luxury item was the stuffed corpse of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, which is displayed at UCL. His music choice was on evolutionary themes, Haydn's *Creation*. The subjects of decay and life are integral to his ideas on evolution and intelligent design.

"All scientists have to be pessimists," said Steve Jones. They have to begin with doubt. Creationists are fundamentally optimists.

A video from a creationist channel in the US showed a moustached man delighting in the beautifully intelligent design of the banana and telling us how God made it with a non-slip surface. He pointed towards the human face and demonstrated how it is designed to fit perfectly into the human hand. There must be an intelligent designer in the picture somewhere?

Steve Jones elaborated on Darwin's theory of evolution and stated his case for it, using examples from Captain Cook and HIV to fruit flies and martian jokes. If only there were more pessimists.



"Oscar in Dreamland" by Gemma Hastilow

THE DROID

Describing how unpasteurised milk can prevent allergies, John Warner said cautiously, "that doesn't mean reintroducing TB is progressive".

Reports that those entering the obesity event were prevented from taking in crisps and chocolate were untrue.

The sight of a lone bicycle in the Festival bike shed yesterday gave rise to reports that "Dave" Cameron had arrived early. This was also untrue.