

Disappearing deity

From Tracey Hemingway-Wright
It was wonderful to read Keith Ward's comment just to laugh at how far his God of the gaps has been shoved from the adored-memor-be-damned genocidal megalomaniac to become the ever-so-cryptic "cosmic conscience" (27 November, p 19).

His article has shown me that even if there is a limit to what

That said, the many worlds idea seems an odd choice.

Certainly, as he suggests, in an infinite multiverse we might find "an indefinite number of forms of beauty, intelligibility and bliss". But surely the other half contains an infinite number of forms of ugliness, incomprehensibility and pain. More than half, if we understand Boltzmann's idea that "ordered states are less probable".

More generally, Ward falls into the trap of thinking that science is attempting to discover why the world is the way it is. "Why?" is a question we cannot answer. "How?" we're pretty good at.

As to why the universe seems so well suited to intelligent life, I offer him the late Douglas Adams's argument based on the puddle which cannot fathom why the depression in which it finds itself is so mysteriously suited to its existence.

Aghalee, County Armagh, UK

Stoned research

From Charles Tart
Thomas Kuhn argued that many scientific paradigm shifts occurred not because of rational discourse and incremental progress but because the holders of the old paradigm died off. When my "state-specific sciences" proposal was published in 1972, as mentioned in your article on intoxication (13 November, p 32), about 100 letters to the editor were submitted to *Science*. Compared with the quiet obscurity in which almost all scientific articles linger, this was an amazing response.

Science had space to publish only four. But among the rest I noticed an interesting pattern. About half the letters objected to the article having been published in the first place. All altered states of consciousness were inferior and pathological, they protested; only normal consciousness was suitable for science. The other half all said, in essence: "Great idea, let's get on with it."

Judging from famous names I recognised or titles that implied seniority, such as "professor", the antis were all quite senior people, while the pros were young scientists. Well, it has been more than 30 years, and most of the antis will have retired or died off. The pros, the younger ones, many of whom had personal experience of doing science in altered states, are now the establishment. Are we ready for a paradigm shift?
Berkeley, California, US

Academic boycott

From Steven Rose, Open University
The initial call in April 2002 to boycott Israeli academics, of which I was one of many signatories, was prompted by Israel's acceptance into the European Research Area despite being in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights and numerous UN resolutions (20 November, p 20). The call for a much broader boycott has come from the Palestinians themselves. It has the support of nearly 60 of the most prominent academic, cultural and professional associations and trade unions in the Occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Bond argues that a boycott would penalise those Israelis who work with Palestinians. But both the Palestinian call and ours make clear that we exclude from boycott, and actively support, those brave Israelis who work with the Palestinians to oppose Israel's apartheid-like policies.

Unfortunately there are very few such. The overwhelming majority of Israeli academics are actively or passively complicit. For many Israeli scientists the joint projects Bond describes are a soft route to foreign funding, contingent on Israelis finding nominal Palestinian partners. It is significant that Bond quotes an Israeli collaborating scientist, but either has not spoken to, or does not choose to quote, any Palestinian.

Bond argues that, if it is to work, any such boycott should be part of a larger campaign. Indeed it is. It parallels, for example, the divestment campaign initiated in the US (by American Jews as it happens) and is part of the wider boycott called by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, UK

From Rita Giacaman, Birzeit University

The aim of the boycott of Israeli academic institutions has little to do with bridging the gap between individual Israelis and Palestinians and more to do with bridging the gap of justice for the Palestinians. It is about taking a stand in the face of terrible injustices that are befalling Palestinian academic institutions and the Palestinian population as a whole because of Israeli government policies and action.

For too long, Israeli academics have benefited from European funds for collaborative research, while the academic infrastructure and life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories were being destroyed. How does this collaboration enhance prospects of peace and justice, and who benefits from it? These are important questions in the face of the deafening silence of the Israeli academic establishment to Palestinian scientific, educational, economic, social and political strangulation.

Joint academic Palestinian-Israeli projects initiated by outsiders lead peace nowhere, as peace does not hinge on developing personal, scientific or other relationships but on a platform of understanding and on the restoration of justice. While scientific cooperation can contribute to reconciliation in a post-conflict setting, it is difficult to believe that such cooperation can achieve much during ongoing conflict. Our experience has indicated that the only tangible and positive impact of such



science can explain, there is no scientific bandwagon too high for these lunatics to jump onto to justify their lame-brained notions of sky fairies.

Leeds, UK

From John Hoggart

Ward pays deserved tribute to Kant for his rigorous demolition of arguments for the existence of God, but then subtly reintroduces a form of one of these discredited arguments. As Kant correctly pointed out, the fact that something can be conceived does not imply that it exists: to paraphrase Kant, a hypothetical notion of God is as different from the real thing as 100 hypothetical euros are from the actual cash. Shop assistants have much to teach professors of divinity here, it seems.

Little Neston, Cheshire, UK

From Steve Graham

Ward can cherry-pick whichever cosmological theory seems to support his "supreme being" hypothesis, in defiance of those of us who think that Occam's razor provides a better rule of thumb.