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EEEEEEE MM MM AA IIIIII LLLL From: John Bray
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AA PPPPP AA 55555 13th October 1991
AAAA PP PP AAAA 55 5 Editorial - John Bray
AA AA PP PP AA AA 55 Bollox
AA AA PPP AA AA 5555 Dead Genre Sketch - Phil Raines
AAAAA PP AAAAAA 55 They Won't Come here from There - Paul
AA AA PP AA AA 55 55 Marrow
AA AA PPP AA AA 5555 John's rambling reply to it
The Wonders of ASCII graphics
Usenet and mailing list reviews
Old Bray's Kentish Ways

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Down a Dirty Line - John Bray

Back we are again after the (unplanned) summer break. The gap was partly due to lack of material, and partly my concerns over the future of it all, which I expressed eariler. Neal, Alex, Dave and Phil where in favour of editing, Simon happy with current format, and Amanda suggesting some editorial dialogue with contributors before publication. I feel the last smacks of academic peer review, and wouldn't work here. I don't feel up to the role, and it would almost certainly put people off sending anything at all.

Mark's comments didn't really jel. He pointed out that paper APA's can't be edited by their nature, and as I'm combining the material into one copy I at at liberty to edit it. He suggested editorial guidelines and possibly separete APA/fanzine sections, but while seeming happy to have editorial control imposed, went on to say that he personally would only LOC a fanzine, as opposed to writing articles for an APA. Does anyone else feel like that? I've really not got the time or the opinions to run this as a personal fanzine, with the only external input being letters of comment. I run this as much to receive other people's articles on their interests as to express my own. This why I've never been tempted to join the fanzine set where people present their masturbations to the world. Mutual masturbation is much more fun!

Not much ready for next time. To stop me posting loads of alt.tasteless,

please send stuff in. Deadline about a month away, though that's not very tight. If I've got nothing much by then, I'll just extend forever ...

Bollox

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Mel felt Armageddon - The Musical was crap, but has yet to say why. She promises to to depress us with Edmund Cooper next time, and wants to write the popular songs for alien cultures. Can anyone quote the derivation of the expression 'A Load of Codswallop'?, and why South Africans say "Yurra Pit" when exasperated.

Simon

1/ In reply to Matt requiring me to produce the physicists who hold such stupid views, I should have said in the Godel article that the views attributed to physicists are all quotes (though maybe not verbatim - it was some time ago) from a seminar I attended in Oxford in 1989 on the relationship - if any - between physics and theology; they are remarks made by physicists and not theologians.

2/ A question about Paul's Genetic Drift - Is the fish example workable? I don't know anything about the subject, but I would assume that genetic drift rate would be to at least some extent determined by the average length of time between birth and production of offspring (i.e. it would be faster in yeasts than in elephants) and on the number of offspring produced. Has Paul scaled the figures to take these things into account? If not, then the figure of 3,000 years is not easy to justify. If each fish generation reproduced after about one year of life and each adult pair produced 100 offspring that survived to reproduction, then the equivalent time for humans would be in the order of hundreds of thousands of years.

3/ A slight quibble with the technical appendix. There are two past political systems that I can think of that would at least claim 1,000 years worth of political (and indeed policy) continuity - the Roman Empire (from 23BC to 1453 in the East) and Imperial China. These were both absolute monarchies in form, and later rulers would claim that policy changed little over extremely long period of time. It mattered little to the Byzantines whether their external enemies were Persians, Arabs, or Turks - what mattered was that they were enemies, and that is what determined the policy towards them. Whether such a political system would have the will to set out on as grandiose a scheme as the colonisation of the galaxy is another question entirely. As opponents of the idea of change, the rulers might seek to channel energy which could otherwise be used to ferment rebellion into some such grand scheme. This sort of idea is behind a lot of the background to David Wingrove's Chan Kuo novels. They would also be expert in preventing the kind of political change which would lead to the grandchildren turning the spaceship round. I'm sure I've read at least one story (though I can't think of any specific examples offhand) about such changes being prevented by a religious structure being imposed which would promise all kinds of things if the inhabitants kept going, doing their jobs....

Paul Marrow

[I enjoyed reading this, reminiscent of the traditional paper APA, 'can I fill up 2 pages with what I did at work' approach. At least this isn't a

problem with Paul]

I've recently returned from a SERC Graduate School in Durham- it was very interesting and very useful. I learned a lot about management and also working in groups. It was very enjoyable, but also astonishingly hectic, most days we started at 0845 and went on to 2130 at night at least! The introductory literature said that it would be a breathing space before the final year, but there wasn't much time to breathe... Some sessions even ran over meals, so we had to eat quickly in order to get things done in time. The last day or so was the most busy, all morning spent doing mock interviews, followed by a marketing case study in the afternoon (we had to market a deodorant called Frisky- it was remarkably stupid). Now I _know_ that marketing is a load of bullshit, previously I just thought this was so. The marketing case study was followed by a review of the week, and then a party which went on till 0430 on Saturday morning. A ludicrously small number of hours later I had to get up to do the accounts of the firm I had been running in the Business Game which we had been playing all week. Then I had to do a presentation on them - some 5 and a half hours after the party had finished! It was successful, but how I don't know.

[One of the reason's the Apa has been delayed so long is that I've just returned from a 'System Specification and Design Course'. I'm sure you want to know nothing about the content, the only point of note being that the food was so good and so copious that I was in severe difficulty trying to tie my shoelaces one morning. Must find a way of getting fit that doesn't involve sport or mountains, any suggestions?]

Dead Genre Sketch #1 - Phil Raines

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FAN: (entering Forbidden Planet with a copy of 'Nightfall' by Asimov and Silverberg under his arm): Hallo, I wish to make a complaint.
OWNER: Sorry, we're closing for lunch.
FAN: Never mind that, my lad, I wish to complain about this genre book that I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.
OWNER: Oh yes, Science Fiction - what's wrong with it?
FAN: I'll tell you what's wrong with it - it's dead, that's what's wrong with it.
OWNER: No, no - it's resting, look...
FAN: Look, my lad, I know a dead genre when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now.
OWNER: No, no - it's not dead, it's resting.
FAN: *Resting?*OWNER: Yes. Remarkable genre, Science Fiction. Got powerful metaphors, hasn't it?
FAN: The metaphors don't enter into it - it's stone dead.
OWNER: No, no - it's resting.
FAN: All right then - if it's resting I'll wake it up. (Shouts) Hallo, Sciffy! I got a nice Booker Prize for you when you wake up, Sciffers!
OWNER: (pulling out a recent issue of Interzone) There, it moved.
FAN: No it didn't! That was you recycling a trope!
OWNER: I did not!
FAN: Now look, mate, this is definitely a dead genre.
OWNER: No, no - it's stunned.
FAN: See here, my lad - I've had just about enough of this! That genre is definitely deceased! And when I looked at it not half a decade ago, you assured me that it's lack of movement was due to it being tired and shagged out after a long renaissance.
OWNER: It's probably pining for the ghetto.
FAN: Pining for the ghetto - what kind of talk is that? Look, I took the liberty of examining that genre and I discovered that the only

reason it had been on the shelf in the first place was that it had been held in place by a fantasy trilogy and a collection of essays on the future of cyberpunk.

OWNER: Course it was - otherwise it would have muscled up to those ghetto bars and vroom!

FAN: Look, matey, this genre wouldn't 'vroom' if I put four thousand post-structuralist English graduates into it. It's bleeding demised.

OWNER: It's not - it's pining for the Golden Age!

FAN: It's **not** pining - it's passed on! This genre is no more! It has ceased to be! It's expired and gone to meet its maker! This is a late genre! It's a stiff! Bereft of life it rests in peace - if you hadn't have held it up with Interzone editorials it would be pushing up the daisies! It's rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible! THIS IS AN EX-GENRE!

OWNER: Well, I'd better replace it then.

FAN: If you want to get anything done in literature, you've got to complain until you're blue in the mouth.

OWNER: Sorry, guv, we're right out of radical new science fiction.

FAN: I see, I see - I get the picture.

OWNER: I've got some slipstream.

FAN: Does it have technological and social extrapolation?

OWNER: Not really, no.

FAN: Well, it's scarcely a replacement, then, is it.

[#2 to come at Illumination, You didn't want it, and now you're not going to get it, courtesy of Jason]

"They Won't Come Here From There" - Paul Marrow

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SETI, Evolution, and the extremely boring nature of most of the universe

The biological problems that humans would have to face in travelling to the stars have long interested me, but it was only the other day when I happened to be looking at a copy of 'Skeptical Inquirer' (v.15 Spring 91) that my ideas crystalised. The article was about the validity of most of the arguments used to support SETI, i.e. arguments about the density of intelligent civilised life in the universe. Basically, it seems extremely likely that it isn't there.

This is why.

Intelligence, as found in humans, has arisen through evolution, an inherently unpredictable process. This unpredictability arises out of both the components of the evolutionary process; variation, and selection. There need to be inherited differences between living things for evolution to occur. Differences between creatures arise in a number of different ways, of which the most important is probably mutation. However one common factor uniting these mechanisms is that they occur at random, that is not at all related to any features that may already be present. Thus the generation of variation introduces one level of randomness into evolution.

Natural selection 'acts' on variation to produce adaptation, that is the varieties with the more effective adaptations to the environment in which they find themselves endure and produce more offspring. They hence become more represented in future populations of that species. Adaptation is not a random process, strictly speaking. If you cannot eat any food in your habitat, and you can't leave it, then you will starve and your kind will not be represented in future generations. This is a physiological

consequence of a certain maladaptation (failure of adaptation), and it is clear that it will be predictable.

But the real world is a mess. No creature is perfectly adapted, and in fact all creatures are mixtures of good features and bad features for their particular environments. Since the environment is always changing through the action of weather, and human beings, to name but two of the most important influences, whether or not a certain type of creature will survive and produce offspring becomes unpredictable, and is to a large extent determined by chance, like whether a zebra will go and drink at that waterhole where the lions are waiting. So the process of adaptation is itself random, adding the second layer of unpredictability to the evolutionary sandwich.

What this long preamble is leading up to is an attack on the idea of evolutionary progress. I am sure this idea will be familiar to everybody from the pictures of humans evolving from hunched apeman to upright, striding, WASP. Many science fiction writers have taken this idea further with human evolution seen to progress to creatures with huge heads with magnified brains, and tiny, atrophied bodies, eventually leading just to great brains kept alive by machinery (Olaf Stapledon, "Last and First Men", for example). This is an idea whose time has gone.

Dating from the Ancient Greeks, through many other biological thinkers until quite recently, the idea of an ordered progression in evolution, a tree of life or 'Scala Natura' is intuitively appealing but not at all backed up by the detailed fossil evidence or what we now understand about the mechanisms of evolutionary change. Although we are near the top of the 'tree of life', having evolved quite recently, our intelligence doesn't appear to be the result of a preordained trend leading towards intelligence, rather the case of a mammal being in the right place at the right time.

About three million species have now been described (about a million of these insects) and estimates of the total number still around range from about eight to about forty million, depending on whose estimates you want. This number, of course, is probably changing even as you read this, as human alteration of the planet drives even more extinct. Extinction is the rule rather than the exception- most species that have ever existed are extinct. At a conference I attended recently in Norwich, a question from the audience bemoaned the fact that most research in biology concentrates on the species that survive rather than the odd features of species that result in extinction. Somebody else in the audience corrected him by saying that the ones which survived are exceptions.

Obviously a species which ends up extinct is not going to communicate across interstellar distances. Concentrating on the survivors (already a small proportion), how many are likely to evolve intelligence? I am not sure whether this question can be answered in general, after all we only have one possible replicate, but in this specific case we have one (and possibly, very_very possibly, a few others). If statistically similar patterns of the occurrence of intelligence are found on other worlds (an eventually we can have absolutely no certainty about, but which I shall adopt at present in the total absence of any other information), then only a tiny minority of species, one in several million, evolves intelligence and the potential to construct a technological civilisation capable of communicating with the stars.

This probability is so small, and since the civilisation must be around in very small time-band so as to communicate with use, that the probability of SETI succeeding as measured in the Drake equation begins to look vanishingly small. Fermi's question may now be answered.

"Where are they?"

Answer: in the mud of their home planet, as they didn't evolve the adaptations to go anywhere else. Does this mean that SETI is pointless and taxpayers money (or taxpayers in the USA at least) should not be spent on it but on something else closer to home? The above argument from evolutionary biology would seem to imply that. But, in my personal opinion, that argument is built on almost as many assumptions and guesses as the standard _physical science_ arguments about SETI. Quite frankly, we in the field of evolutionary biology are hamstrung by the lack of any other independent history of evolution to compare our world with.

Although I suspect the above argument to be largely correct, this is not on the basis of evidence I would like to use as support if there were any better. As an evolutionary biologist _and_ science fiction fan, I would like to keep the opportunity open for that comparison to take place. It may be a _very_ long shot, but it's the only chance we've got, and the discovery of any extrasolar life would revolutionise biology (not to mention most of the rest of human social endeavour). SETI probably won't work (at least not soon), but at least it should be given a chance, even though most of the universe is extremely boring...

[Normally, being a good editor, I'd wait till next time to reply, but this time I can't restrain myself, as your conclusions are utter crap.

I'm not disputing your description of evolutionary processes, and the frequency of extinction. But your inferences towards SETI are ludicrous.

There are 2 issues here, the Drake Equation and Fermi's Paradox, and these should really be kept separate.

The Drake equation is aimed at producing the number of civilisations in the galaxy we can communicate with, and while 'Never in the field of human knowledge has so much been said by so many about so little' {I feel a future article coming on}, the result is the number of point sources of such civilisation. While intelligence does not evolve in most species because it does not benefit them, once it does in any species, evolutionary change has a much reduced influence. Intelligence produces civilisation, where the independence between mutation and breeding advantage is broken. It seems to me that once developed, civilisation control nature, domesticating or destroying. Even if multiple intelligent species arose at the same time (very unlikely given different rates of genetic and memetic change), they would be incorporated into the overall structure. So concerns about the fraction of species on a planet that become intelligent are pointless, as it only needs one to consider the the whole eco-system as intelligent.

We then have the problem of the time-scales of any civilisation. Here are sample size is too small to make many intelligent comments. Its bad enough to be only able to consider the patterns on one planet, but hopeless to try to assess the control of civilisation on it. You cannot use the arguments about the dominance of trilobites and dinosaurs, mass extinctions, and punctuated equilibria (about which you know much more (and feel much less certain I expect) than me). These arguments only apply within an evolutionary framework, and civilisations do not work on those rules. They may rise and fall, but the rules governing change are not genetic (random mutation, selectively preferred breeding) so cannot be applied. I don't know what arguments we could use, perhaps Phil as a historian could comment?

As far as the Fermi paradox goes, with all its possible zoo theories, galactic federations et al, I feel the paramount one is one of economic

cost and political will. The distances between stars are just too big, and travel costs too much. To reach other stars, the following conditions must be met:

1) A practical method. It is generally accepted that a generation starship, large enough to hold a genetically viable population, and self-sufficient for a few centuries, could be built. The problems of launching and slowing the ship at its destination could be solved with enough money. (The Fermi paradox does seem to indicate that short cuts through hyperspace are out)

2) The economic capacity to do it. At my party Malcolm, Matthew (Brock), and I hammered hammered away at each other about resource usage. They took the view that resources will expand with technology, I tried to point out the cliff edges. I think its likely that environmental considerations will force the still-birth of most of the space programme. The economy will not expand to allow space tourism or scientific enquiry to generate enough money. Possbily orbiting solar power stations will be more viable than fusion power, but will we achieve either before green issues swamp them both. Even if we reach space, and expand Schizmatrix-like through the asteroid belt, would there be the spare capacity to fund such a project.

3) The political will. Why should we spend the money? Comparisons with colonising the New World and South America fall down on 2 counts. The timescales were short enough for the individual backers to make money, and the colonists could raise their own families in the new land. Why would any company/government put money into the scheme (and the costs are above that for any individual), and who would seal themselves into a tin-box so their great^3grandchildren could struggle on a new world. (Yes I know some people would still do it, but would we want to send them, Neal knows what the extropian cryonics people are like!)

In what way do any of these have anything to do with biology? Once intelligence forms civilisation, evolution stops, so the only considerations are what evolution left behind. The obvious point is that the time-scales are only unreasonable for our life-span. Creatures living 300 years would have different perspectives on (3). Perhaps Paul can quote some research indicating the biological likelyhood of such species existing, presumably all depends on the generation cycle, with cell copying mechanisms not expected to last too long. What biological conditions would encourage long generation cycles, and how detrimental would this be to evolutionary rates?

...

I could go on, and probably will next time. Please shoot me down]

The wonders of ASCII graphics

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rupert@cix

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"Where is the Village?"
"How many episodes are there?"

At other times you can get a rich discussion on what Patrick McGooohan was really on about. This is what I feel the 'purpose' of the Prisoner was: to get people thinking, talking, and arguing. But then he may have just been out to make a quick buck. We don't know, so whatever your views, anyone can disagree with you but no-one can prove you wrong.

At other times you get asked where one can buy laserdiscs of the series. where one should go in London on a Prisoner walkabout, and what were the differences between the two episodes of 'The Chimes of Big Ben'. Unfortunately, for most fans of the show they either already know the answers, or don't care.

This is a low volume news group, so taking a peek won't break the bank.

Usenet, alt.slack - John Bray

5 messages a day in standard SubGenius style, so content always promised and never delivered. I tired very quickly of this.

Usenet, alt.alien.visitors - John Bray

Number of messages not too high, but each can be 20-30 k long. Any interesting information swamped in junk, very bad cut-paste copying goes on to obscure it all.

Usenet, alt.folklore.urban - John Bray

Very high traffic (80+ messages a day), more a general debunking area now. Not too American in outlook, some parts delightfully tasteless. Look out for the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) list, about 30k of one-liners proving or disproving things. I can send a copy if anyone is interested. This is well worth trying, but the volume defeated me. I kept considering it a chore rather than a pleasure to read it all. Unless threatened, I'm going to put some of the bits I liked best in the next few APAs. The only way to stop be is to write in with something else

Usenet, alt.tasteless - John Bray

10 messages a day traffic, mostly loony, but some revolting gems appear. Does anyone know whether the pictures they refer to get through the ukc screening process? Again examples will be posted soon.

Mailing Lists, cryonics and extropy - John Bray

{if anyone wants samples, ask me}

Extropy

{Run by the same lot as the Extropy magazine, Max More is a frequent contributor. Neal is to be seen there occasionally. Best to ask Neal how to get on the mailing list, though I can ask how the person on Cix who passes it on to be does it}

{Not moderated, so messages trickle in all the time}

The information content of the newsletter is very low, with great wads of network addressing information and pasting of material in the worse Usenet style. The information content of the disucssion is very low. As with many such libertarians, the talk is all intellectual masurbation saying nothing in elaborated prose.

A good exercise on such material is to play 'Wittgenstein (sp?) Charades', an off-beat party game where a sentence is taken from a philosophical tome, and charaded. The number of words needed before the whole phrase is known is a good judge of information content. Wittgenstein scores highly on this count, but extropy discussion does very badly. From just a few words, great reams of standard padding can be extrapolated. Extracting such verbiage leaves nothing.

BIN IT

Cryonics

{As above, only moderated, so only one message arrives every few days}

These newsletters are much better. The moderator strips off the headers from the messages, leaving the source information in a clear and consistent format. The text of the messages is reformatted to a standard style and layout, pasting of old text is removed (and it seems that many people are paraphrased). The discussion is more tightly controlled, and the messages apposite. The information content is pretty good, although it does rather reflect the gung-ho attitudes of the people involved.

I'll be getting more of this one.

Old Bray's Kentish Ways

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Puzzle time, what does myristicivorous mean? Where was this letter delivered?

WOOD
JOHN
MASSACHUSETTS

And some of those phrases you all love (not all mine this time, the well is drying up. Come on, sending something in yourselves)

many hands make a tall horse

pine trees are tall, but they do not reach the sky

he laughs last, who last laughs

never rub bottoms with a porcupine

it's a short leg that doesn't reach the ground

It's an ill blow that winds anybody any good.

It's a small cat that has no fleas.

Too many cooks, make a lot of broth.

You can take a horse to water....
But a pencil must be lead

It's an odd frog that has no head.

A fridge is most dangerous when cornered.

The geese fly high tonight

It's a large stone that has no turning.

Lets run it up the flagpole and see who salutes it

Enough blue sky to make a pair of Dutchman's trousers

His eyes stuck out like chapel hat-pegs