

# litmus paper

Issue 3 Saturday 11 June 2005

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## TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS



Frances Ashcroft, Ben Saunders and Sam Kirby  
Going to Extremes  
**4.45–5.45 pm/Town Hall**

Olivia Judson  
Dr Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation  
**6.30–7.30 pm/Town Hall**

Timandra Harkness and Sarah Angliss  
Sci at Night Cabaret  
**8.45 pm – late/Town Hall**

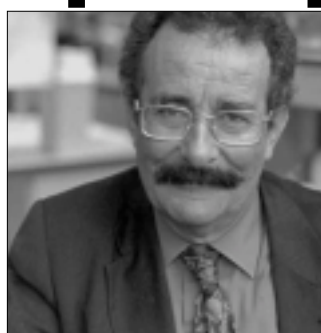
# Humanity: well, that just about wraps it up for God

by Hannah Jewkes

"There is no God-shaped hole in my life," declared Philip Pullman as he eloquently mapped out an alternative framework for morality in last night's packed event, The Science of Belief.

The author described a "republic of heaven" in which morality is based on mutual dependency within society, and anything that increases understanding and deepens wisdom is morally good. Honestly done science contributes to this republic.

Pullman, who has been condemned by the *Catholic Herald*, explained that he wasn't against a religious view of the world, but against the structure and perceived certainty of religion. He pointed to the "amount of infamy, folly and cruelty carried out in [its] name."



Winston: 'tached by the hand of God?

"I don't think that I want to trust the morality of science," was Winston's counter to Pullman, arguing that science is essentially amoral. Despite holding a strong belief in God, he thinks that religious tendency is something that can be determined by genetics. Similar

patterns of belief have been shown in twins separated at birth, and although particular genes have now been linked to belief, this doesn't bring into question his faith in the existence of God.

The debate sparked eager questioning from the audience and Pullman did concede that the negative aspects of religion are apparent in other forms. A strictly run office or school could have the same constraining effect.

Both speakers did seem to agree that science and religion aren't compatible, but two different ways of seeing the world. Winston and Pullman also questioned the certainty of their own different beliefs. As Winston put it: "When you start to be certain about science or religion, a danger exists for humanity."

## Magical mechanical match-maker

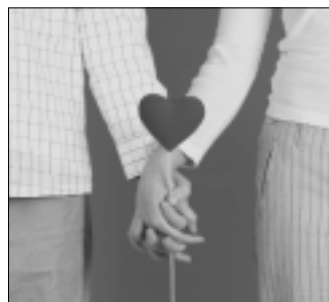
by Diana van Gent

Cybersuitor Jon Cousins, genial broadcaster Quentin Cooper and sex guru Dr Mark Lythgoe hosted an evening in the name of love.

The crash course in the Science of Love covered aspects of lust, attraction and attachment. Ladies were warned about high levels of testosterone resulting in infidel "übermen", and guys were warned of women's desire for good genes, wit and intelligence at fertile moments of the month, and their search for cute "baby faces" or money and stability the rest of the time (so there's still hope for ugly blokes).

Next, human guinea pigs were asked to text in answers to a Compatibility Quotation Test – a combination of "17th-century Japanese match-making and 21st-century technology," said Cooper.

As "Dr Mark" gave sex advice to a couple of eight years and tried to



sell drugs to women to keep their men addicted, Quentin remarked that we should go for straightforward sex preferences, and forget about the fruity alternatives.

Tension rose as the results poured in. However accurate the test, the male of the above-mentioned couple found himself in trouble after being identified as gay, but fortunately he matched 96% with his fiancé. All we are waiting for now are the wedding invitations!

## Out of the undergrowth

by Avril Staple

"There are 200 million insects to one human ... but it's only now that we have the apparatus and techniques to film at this level," Mike Salisbury told us at the BBC On Stage event yesterday.

He began his career 30 years ago in Bristol's BBC Natural History unit. Since then, he and David Attenborough have produced a great deal of popular TV, including a series looking at the private lives of plants, birds and mammals.

In November, the BBC will air its latest project – *Life in the Undergrowth* – which takes us into the tiny world of insects and invertebrates. Five programmes will cover the development of insects, from their first move away from the sea to complex social systems.

A thermal camera is used to show how a bumblebee gets the edge on

cold days by shivering its flight muscles, and infrared exposes the complex behaviour of ants at night: they carry the fertile males from one canopy to another on their backs.

An endoscope, originally made to detect cracks in jet engines, is used to get right into small places. Its flexible tube is surrounded by a fiberoptic light fitted to a rheostat, which allows the light to be adjusted. An electronic video camera records 600 frames per second for more depth.

Salisbury entertained with enthusiastic anecdotes about the making of the film, revealing a close relationship between the 11-strong team. The audience were treated to snippets of film and a musical montage demonstrating the techniques used.

The series promises to be as fascinating as Salisbury and Attenborough's previous endeavours, if this talk was anything to go by.

## Narcolepsy: the science revealed

by Emily Koch

"This will be an event different to any other," promised Dr Chris Hanning in yesterday's intriguing event about narcolepsy, "because if you nod off, the stewards will make you an appointment."

Hanning was joined by narcoleptic Gavin Fisher, who gave a moving insight into living with the disability. Cataplexy, one of its symptoms, causes sufferers to experience debilitating "weakness" when laughing. Yet Fisher recalled childhood times when he was able to laugh until he cried (the onset of narcolepsy usually occurs in your teens, when he said he found his condition a convenient way of enduring boring lessons).

Hanning introduced us to the science behind the sleepiness – an area that is constantly being developed. The condition has recently been caught in its earliest stages in two children, enabling them to be treated so that they will never develop full-blown narcolepsy, and there are very promising possibilities in stem-cell research. Don't worry if you're drowsy though – it probably isn't narcolepsy. Hanning reassured us that "...the most common cause of sleepiness is lack of sleep."

## THE DROID

Champagne maintained its reputation as an aphrodisiac, if only a verbal one, at the Science of Champagne event on Thursday. The Droid counted at least 15 mentions of Viagra from co-inventor Dr Gill Samuels as the bubbles slowly took control.

"We didn't want to say, as scientists, that astronomy is nonsense ... sorry, I mean astrology," said Kathy Sykes, introducing the Astrology debate yesterday. "My brain isn't feeling very big today."

## Piggy love for Jim

by Peter Wyton



*Oink oink! Here comes the bacon.*

Just when you thought that the entire farming industry had rolled over on its back for the pleasure of having its agro-corporate tummy rubbed by the supermarkets, along comes a reactionary in the shape of Jimmy Doherty, aided and abetted by that satanic tool of revolution: the BBC.

Mr. Doherty's Essex Pig Company is a warranted financial success in its own small way, despite a dodgy start. He introduced a boar (inappropriately named Blaze, who proved to be afflicted with major heart problems) to three randy Essex girl sows. This predictably led to a problem which was only solved by converting Blaze into crispy bacon and employing in his place a prison-

farm-reared stud called Porridge.

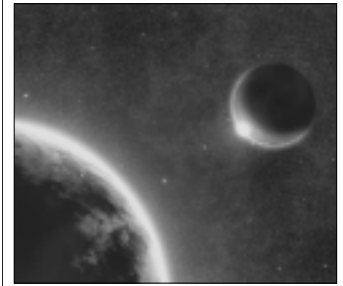
Jimmy Doherty started working life as an entomologist, but discovered that counting flies in a laboratory was a less than orgasmic way of making a living. So he turned to farming and bought an abandoned property near Ipswich.

For the last couple of years Doherty has lived a goldfish-bowl existence, with Auntie Beeb's cameramen dutifully plodding through the slurry in pursuit of the man and his assortment of rare breeds. Instead of being cooped up in sanitary indoor conditions, these pigs are permitted to roam free in untamed woodland, just like their wild ancestors (give or take the occasional electric fence).

The result, apparently, is some damn-fine-tasting pork, which is sold at farmers' markets, rather than the supermarket shelves.

The soon-to-be-televised second series featuring this personable and self-confident young man is flagged up as "diversifying into other forms of conservation-agriculture". What it will do for its frontman in terms of celebrity status remains to be seen, but he seems to be well on the way to becoming the Jamie Oliver of Sty City.

## The stars have it?



by Jon Andriessen

Once upon a time, astrology was a respected discipline, taught in universities throughout the world and the basis for such things as medicine and law. Today, it is shunned by modern science and dismissed by many of the public. So, as the hotel porter who caught George Best in bed with Miss World said: "Where did it all go wrong?"

Darin Hayton, historian and bike racer, put the academic death of astrology at some point during the 16th-century renaissance that saw the birth of science.

Percy Seymour, an astrophysicist, has raised a few eyebrows among colleagues by trying to determine whether science can find any evidence that astrology is based on fact. He believes that the sun and moon may emit resonating forces that have consistent effects on a person at the point of natural childbirth. For all this though, Seymour concurred with the rest of the panel: "I don't believe in astrology."

John Brown, Astronomer Royal for Scotland, debunked such ideas by suggesting these forces would have little more effect than a fridge magnet and anyway, "...the sun cycle is variable and unpredictable."

However, scattered among the audience – like Blair's enforcers at a Labour Party conference – were the astrologers themselves, ready to dismiss these power hungry scientists. Denying the need to prove their craft, the astrologers sought the sanctuary of mystery. "I don't need my astrology tested," said one, while another praised its contribution to birth control.

Brown ended by saying that a scientific study of astrology is "a waste of time", but it seems he'll be conducting one anyway, with the aid of his fellow panelists and some sketchy data secured from members of the audience. Well, that should wrap it up then.



**LOW-FLYING TOAST:** You will believe a bread product can fly (at 8.2 mph) if you visit the Null Hypothesis stall at the back of the Town Hall. The semi-satirical science magazine's editors are trying to discover whether gender variables affect toast landing butter side up or down, and all they need is your help. AH