

Something Understood

This year's SOF annual conference on *Brain, Belief and Behaviour* was held in Leicester in July as usual. This issue of *Sofia* contains shortened, edited versions of the three main speakers' talks. Uncut recordings of the three talks will be on SOF website www.sofn.org.uk

Gwen Griffith-Dickson spoke about the breadth and variety of religious experiences and warned against any kind of reductionism – scientific or religious. Colin Blakemore spoke about neuroscience and its growing capacity to locate specific functions in the brain. Nailing up 7 theses, Alan Allport argued that the functional beliefs which implicitly guide our knowing are more powerful than our explicitly stated beliefs.

The talks were not theological but gave interesting information and insights into how our brains work. With scientific discretion, in their talks all three speakers refrained from expressing an opinion about whether 'religious experiences' – it is possible to view what is happening in the brain while these are occurring – have a supernatural or natural cause. However, all three made it clear that there was no *need* to resort to a supernatural explanation for them and 'religious experiences' cannot prove or disprove the existence of God.

For example, Alan Allport related how in a Quaker meeting, some people thought of certain 'peak' experiences as supernatural, as coming from outside themselves, while others described 'what I suppose are essentially the same experiences as coming from within their own nature.' He carefully did not give his own opinion. However, having remained professionally impartial throughout his talk, at the very end he launched into a passionate declaration of his two most profound convictions: that the two most important things are how to live, and 'being and knowing myself to be part of the communion of all conscious beings.' I found that last-minute breakout very cheering.

Gwen-Griffith Dickson looked at the similarities and differences between psychotic and religious experiences. (I thought of Theseus' speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact: / One sees more devils than vast hell can hold, / That is, the madman...') Her plea was: 'Don't narrow the scope!'

Colin Blakemore spoke about the big human brain and speculated how this could have evolved. He explained that it was not just a question of size but complexity: 'Elephants and whales have much larger brains than human beings, but the cells are bigger and are more widely spaced, so human beings have twice as many cells as any other species.' He described how the brain can grow *more cells*. Experiments have

shown that the hippocampus of London taxi drivers gets bigger when they have passed the fiendishly difficult exam called The Knowledge (see picture on back cover).

This idea of increasing complexity made me think of the German word for writing poetry: *dichten*, which sounds very close (but sadly, is not etymologically related) to the word *dicht*, meaning thick or condensed. We do not have much room for poetry in this issue, but oddly enough two very different writers – Anne Ashworth in her third *Part of a Pilgrimage* and Stephen Mitchell in his SOF Sermon – both appeal to George Herbert. In talking about simplification, Anne says, 'It would be good to talk with George Herbert, that lover of English words, that freshest of poets, who so well understood the matter.' And in his sermon, Stephen quotes Herbert's poem *The Call*:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
Such a Life, as killeth death.

He points out that every word is a monosyllable except the word 'killeth', but goes on to look at how concentrated such 'simple' language is. The Herbert poem *Prayer* on page 15 is a string of metaphors for prayer, except for the last two clinching words: '**something understood**'. This most famous of 'list' poems was echoed in the 1960s and 1970s by many 'list' poems beginning 'Love is...'; 'Revolution is...', for example, Liverpool poet Adrian Henri's poem:

Love is feeling cold in the back of vans
Love is a fanclub with only two fans
Love is walking holding paintstained hands...

Gwen Griffith-Dickson ended her talk with Hawaiian song, and explained how in it 'the layer of meaning known as the *mana* and that known as the *kaona* may be self-sufficient, coherent, *related* to the others, and still irreducibly different'. Similarly in other cultures, much love poetry, like the *Song of Songs*, can be read as mystical poetry. Everywhere the best poetry is 'thick' with meaning and resonance.

Having learnt much from the speakers, I came away marvelling even more at how 'thick' our brains are, not because they are the absolute biggest in the animal kingdom, but because they have the most cells, they are the most complex, the most condensed, and therefore the most poetic, with the poetic genius to create all gods.