



Private prescription:

A thought-provoking tonic on the lighter side

Column by Raymond C. Rowe, AstraZeneca, UK

Please note that these are the personal opinions of the author and do not necessarily represent those of AstraZeneca.

Philosophy is 'phun' – a celebration in limericks

Philosophy and science have always been closely related and many scientists have indulged in philosophy, although the reverse has not generally been true. Philosophers enjoy asking awkward and provocative questions concerning such things as the nature of reality, the certainty of time or the meaning of meaning. To the layman, these questions often appear to have little relevance to life and the answers given are often ambiguous and inconclusive; unintelligible answers to insoluble questions, or as so aptly stated in the limerick [1]:

The truth about truth is elusive.
Is philosophy merely delusive?
What seems rubbish to you
May be, for me, true.
Which leaves everything inconclusive.

Despite this difficulty with interpretation – or even because of it – many limericks have been written that attempt to put into context, in a humorous way, the philosophies of many of the famous philosophers.

It is generally accepted that philosophy was invented by the ancient

Greeks, the most famous philosopher being Plato (427–347 BC). He proposed the doctrine of 'Innatism', the belief that humans are born programmed with certain kinds of knowledge because they possess immortal souls that have had a previous existence. Hence, what a human feels or learns is just a recollection or anamnesis [1]:

Said Plato, 'The things that I feel
Are not ontologically real
But just the excrescence
Of numinous essence
Our senses can never reveal'.

Perception and thought

The dual concepts of perception, or the act of combining sensations into recognition, and thought, or the act of revolving ideas in the mind and making judgements about them, and their relation to knowledge, have exercised the minds of many philosophers. Rene Descartes (1596–1650), the French mathematician, emphasized the difference between the two processes, concluding that there is no knowledge that can be guaranteed. He could not even be certain that his own body was

real, but could be certain that his thoughts existed. This was expressed in the maxim 'cogito ergo sum' or 'I think, therefore I am'. George Berkeley (1685–1753), an English bishop, took a different view expressed in the maxim 'esse est percipere' or 'to be is to be perceived'. An implication of this is that when things are not being perceived they no longer exist. The differences between these philosophies and their implications are summed up in the two limericks [1]:

A toper who spies in the distance,
Striped tigers, will get some assistance
From reading Descartes,
Who holds that it's part
Of his duty to doubt their existence.

But if he's a student of Berkeley,
One thing will emerge, rather starkly,
That he ought to believe
What his senses perceive,
No matter how dimly or darkly.

The implications of Berkeley's maxim have been expounded in a more direct way in the limerick [1]:

The philosopher Berkeley once said
In the dark to a maid in his bed,
'No perception, my dear
Means I'm not really here,
But only a thought in your head'.

Causation

Before the 18th century, there was a belief in the certainty of causation because it proved the existence of God. A Scottish historian and economist, David Hume (1711–1776), analysed the concept of 'cause' and found that it was no more than a human belief based on past experiences. These are based on the observation of events in the past but none of these has any logical certainty. Hume thought that there were virtually no human beliefs that could be proved, as suggested in the limerick [1]:

Cried the maid, 'You must marry me
Hume'.
A statement that made David fume.
He said, 'In cause and effect,
There is a defect;
That it's me you can only assume'.

A philosopher who disagreed with Hume's assertion was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German mathematician and physicist. Kant proposed that humans see causation in the world because they are constituted that way. The human mind is an active rather than a passive recipient of information. The mind organizes and systematizes what is experienced with its own programmed intuitions and categories that make sense of all the data that constantly flood in through the senses. Indeed, some of the concepts applied to present experiences do come from past experiences, but the most important ones precede experience. Kant published these ideas in a series of books, among them *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *Prolegomena* (1783). Both are mentioned in limericks [1]:

The famous philosopher, Kant
Said, 'Why, when I run, do I pant?
I fear 'twould be treason
To my *Critique of Reason*
To think I'm unfit, so I shan't'.

The cryptic philosopher, Kant,
Announced, 'I most certainly shan't
In my *Prolegomena*
Allow that phenomena
Are anything but what they aren't'.

Logical atomism

Logical atomism is a philosophy based on the tenet that the best way to understand the world is to split everything down into individual components. Individual propositions can then be shown to refer to individual sensations in the mind, themselves caused by individual 'bits' of the world. A proponent of this was Ludwig

Wittgenstein (1889–1951), an Austrian engineer. In his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in 1922, Wittgenstein adopted 'atomism', which dictated that ordinary language must be broken down into its logical form if it is to be unambiguous. He then attempted to show that meaning ultimately derives from 'atomic logical' sentences that form an accurate picture of what he called the 'atomic facts' of the world. The implication of this is that there are limits to the type of meaningful thoughts that can be had with language. Metaphysical problems only arise because philosophers are always trying to 'say what cannot be said'. His book ends with the words 'Of what we cannot speak we must remain silent'. A limerick puts this in context [1]:

Said Wittgenstein, 'Don't be misled!
What can be shewn, cannot be said'.
He aimed to be sensible
Not incomprehensible
But wrote the *Tractatus* instead.

Final word

Of all my articles on limericks, this has
been the most difficult to put together
because, to appreciate the humour

behind the limerick, I have had to
research the lives and works of the
individual philosophers mentioned.

*'...unintelligable answers to
insoluble questions...'*

For an experimental scientist such as myself, many of the ideas and concepts are alien to say the least. However, having a limerick as my guide, combined with an excellent introduction to philosophy [2], has made the process interesting and productive. Philosophy can indeed be 'phun' and limericks can provide an insight into complex concepts.

References

- 1 Parrot, E.O., ed. (1983) *A Penguin Book Of Limericks*, Penguin Books, London, UK
- 2 Robinson, D. and Groves, J. (1999) *Introducing Philosophy*, Icon Books, Cambridge, UK

Raymond C. Rowe
Pharmaceutical and Analytical R&D
AstraZeneca
Alderley Park
Macclesfield
Cheshire
UK SK10 2NA
e-mail: Ray.Rowe@astrazeneca.com

Do you want to reproduce material from *Drug Discovery Today*?

This publication and the individual contributions contained in it are protected by the copyright of Elsevier Science. Except as outlined in the terms and conditions (see p. VI), no part of *Drug Discovery Today* can be reproduced, either in print or in electronic form, without written permission from Elsevier.

Please send any permission requests to:

Elsevier
PO Box 800, Oxford,
UK OX5 1DX