

**Cut out the middle men**

SIR - I agree that a few lessons need to be learnt from the dispute between Russia and Belarus over energy ("Loveless brothers", January 13th). The biggest lesson is that Russia wants to sell its gas at market prices to all consumers, irrespective of their political relations with Russia. This is a business issue and should not be politicised, for instance by suggesting that Russia is punishing its "former vassals".

The lessons for east Europeans are: learn to live without Russian subsidies, and don't blackmail Russia with threats of disruption to Russian energy supplies. The best way to stop these threats is to route energy directly from Russia to Europe. For example, Nord Stream will eventually pipe gas from Russia to Germany beneath the Baltic Sea. Projects like this should be supported as they benefit energy stability; eliminating the intermediaries between suppliers and consumers is normal business practice after all.

VASILY KUZNETSOV  
London

**Lord Kalms**

SIR - I refer to the article entitled "UKIP if you want to" in the Bagehot section of the 20th January 2007 edition. You state in your article that David Cameron has been "pushing [me] and [my] chequebook" away from the Tory Party and towards UKIP. The article goes on to say that Mr Cameron need not worry about "the blackmail of former donors", again a reference to me.

I have been a leading Eurosceptic for many years. I have not, however, made any donations to the Conservative Party for some considerable time, aside from modest contributions towards the campaign costs of individual Tory candidates. I am in no position to threaten to withhold funding in an attempt to influence Mr Cameron's policies nor, contrary to what is said in

your article, have I suggested that I might do so. Your use of the word "blackmail" in this context is factually inaccurate and, I am sorry to say, offensive. I had hoped that *The Economist* could be trusted not to overlook facts in favour of journalistic colour.

LORD KALMS  
London

**Theatre critic**

SIR - The Georgians and the Edwardians were not the first to condemn new forms of entertainment as morally reprehensible ("Don't shoot the messenger", January 20th). In his "Policraticus" of 1159, John of Salisbury lamented the lives of those who filled their time enjoying actors, mimics and jugglers, for

"actors give [idleness] new life. Tedium steals upon unoccupied minds and they are not able to endure their own company unless they are pampered by the solace of some pleasure. Therefore spectacles and the countless hosts of vanities by which they who cannot endure to be entirely idle are occupied, but to their greater harm. Better it had been for them to have idled away their time than to have busied themselves to their own ruin."

Woe to the billion or so of us who will soon be tuning in to watch the Oscars.

CAZ ZYVATKAUSKAS  
Toronto

**Winners get to write history**

SIR - Lexington's comment that the American revolution "got rid of feudalism" is bizarre (January 13th). Did he mean to describe the Britain of 1776 against whom the American colonists revolted? The parliamentary democracy where Adam Smith was publishing "The Wealth of Nations"? Most historians agree that it was precisely the absence of feudalism during the period that helps explain the start of the Industrial Revolution. Yet American mythology about 1776 portrays Britain as a cross between a Renaissance

autocracy and Nazi Germany, rather than as the country that bestowed upon America the legacies of personal freedom, the rule of law and capitalism.

ANDREW PORTER  
Wirral, Merseyside

**Brainiacs**

SIR - Your survey of the brain captured the complexities of current thinking about consciousness (December 23rd). One of the greatest challenges confronting research into consciousness is to define what it is. But not only do we not know what it is, we don't even know who, or what, is conscious. Is a cat conscious? A worm? A thermostat? My boss? And even if we were able to settle upon an acceptable definition of consciousness, we really have no idea how to study the problem.

This conundrum is a philosophical dilemma. Can consciousness be studied using a reductionist approach, or is consciousness an emergent property arising from brain complexity and thus not amenable to the divide and conquer approaches of reductionism? Conceptually, reductionism is the greatest triumph of modern science, enabling multifaceted problems to be reduced to their constituent molecules. Such thinking permits the design of drug molecules to treat complex human diseases or to modify other difficult biological disorders.

However, if we are unable to reduce consciousness to simpler building blocks or concepts, it may be impossible to apply the tried and true tools of modern science to the daunting task of understanding consciousness. Although some people (like me) are passionate reductionists, others believe this is a path doomed to failure when it comes to trying to comprehend "why I think" and "why I am".

DONALD WEAVER  
Professor  
Departments of medicine (neurology), chemistry and biomedical engineering  
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SIR - You missed the point regarding opposing sides in the nature versus nurture debate. The key difference is not between genetically determined and culturally determined views of human behaviour. Rather, it is about how biological and social scientists should contribute to the improvement of human well-being. Those who try to do so through physiological research look for a technical solution to suffering in an adjustment of the brain's neuro-mechanics. Those who try to improve well-being through social research find political solutions requiring adjustments in social relations.

GREGORY FELDMAN  
Assistant professor of international migration  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver

SIR - With regards to criminals, your argument that without free will "the idea of responsibility for one's actions flies out of the window" is spurious ("Free to choose?", December 23rd). On the contrary, if people respond deterministically to their environment, all the more reason to pass laws and hold violators accountable. In any case, the reduction of the brain to a mechanistic process does not necessarily add anything to the debate on responsibility. As David Hume would have it, either our actions are determined, in which case we are not responsible for them, or they are the result of random events, in which case we are not responsible for them.

JULIAN REIF  
Washington, DC

SIR - I think Isaac Bashevis Singer should have the last word: "We must believe in free will. We've got no choice".

GABRIEL GUILLOFF  
Santiago, Chile ■

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