

Ophelia Benson

threads



When we started, they didn't exist. Now the blogs are here to stay

I thought a good way to mark the 50th issue would be to look back at the birth of some prominent philosophy blogs, so I explored the archives. It turned out to be an irritating experience. In each case there was entry after entry that I wanted to read, which seems most unreasonable after three or four or seven years. Surely old blog entries should become stale as time moves on, when there are only so many hours in the day?

On July 8, 2003 Chris Bertram, who was already an old hand at blogging as “Junius”, kicked off the group blog *Crooked Timber* with an introduction in cod Addisonian style, then did a post in more modern vein.

“A common device in the broad-canvassed social-realist novel is to have events throw together people who don't seem to belong in the same universe, in such a way as to reveal the deeper social reality. ... Such a real-life even occurred yesterday when an express train hit a minibus in central England. On the train were the Bishop of Hereford and a Tory MP, in the minibus were men variously described as Arabs and as Iraqi Kurds. ... These people had all been

drawn to Worcestershire by the promise of work. The agribusiness that hired them obtained their Labour from gangmasters based in cities like Birmingham. Perhaps some of the shoppers who bought their broccoli or cabbages did so because they had a preference for ‘English produce’ over the sugar-snap peas flown from Zambia. Who knows? Anyway, those fields are not tilled by cap-tipping yokels with pieces of straw between their teeth living in tied cottages.”

I want to read more. This is an outrage.

Brian Leiter started *The Leiter Report* a few weeks later, on August 22, 2003. He began, and decidedly did not finish, with the Discovery Institute, then along with more on the DI, Intelligent Design, revisions to a biology textbook, and the Texas School Board (do we detect a theme?), there's an entry on “Derrida and Bullshit”:

“It was John Searle who famously remarked that Derrida's work is the kind of stuff that gives bullshit a bad name. And now we have yet another case in point, thanks to interviews with Habermas and Derrida about the September 11th attacks on the U.S. Although I have my reservations about Habermas as a philosopher, there is no question that he is an important public intellectual and critic, especially in Europe (there are no public intellectuals in the

Ophelia Benson is the editor of butterfliesandwheels.com and co-author of *Why Truth Matters* (Continuum)

U.S., since there is no public intellectual discourse, but that's a topic for another day). And the integrity of Habermas on this score, and the ridiculousness of Derrida, comes out very nicely in this interview."

But no, we can't read the interview, we must press on. To June 15, 2007, when Jean Kazez started *In Living Color* with a post on her recent trip to Alaska, which turns out to be "all mountains, all spruce trees, full of light, and prodigiously filled with cappuccino machines." Climbing up the page we get a post on the ethics of eating, one on examining ways of living and asking "how many planets would it take if everyone lived that way?", and one on the morality we share with other apes.

"Because we are not just apes, we are capable of feeling concern beyond our group, but that means going way beyond the deep-seated, emotionally-rooted morality we have in common with apes. We have to use 'reason', which is much more fragile and involves a much greater effort.

"We can see, for a moment, that animals matter just like human beings, but it's very natural to fall back to feeling that they don't matter much at all. Taking animals seriously means resisting the very strong pull of our genes and emotions."

On May 23, 2007 *Feminist Philosophers* began with posts on size-zero models, rape, a book on women's occupational health, immigration and breastfeeding, makeup and veils, and "Pornography and Labiaplasty". That's right.

"Lih Mei Liao and Sarah Creighton have recently published a study in the British Medical Journal looking at the causes and effects of

cosmetic labia/genitoplasty. They interviewed healthy adults who had undergone surgical reductions in 'normal' labia to find the reasons given for wanting this procedure. They found pornography was often implicated.

"They also suggest that the increase in numbers having this surgery is leading to a further increase in numbers wanting the surgery. They argue that the increased numbers of cosmetically altered labia contribute to the narrowing of our ideas about what counts as 'normal', leading women to feel greater concern about their own bodies, thereby increasing demand for labiaplasty."

Stephen Law of the eponymous blog is another 2007 entrant. On February 7 of that year he started with a post on Intelligent Design along with one querying "the conclusion that the designer is all-powerful and all-good". Then came Faith Schools, Moral Relativism, and "Relativism or Authoritarianism: you choose!"

"It's precisely because Liberals think there really is a non-relative truth to discover about what's right and what's wrong that they place so much emphasis on questioning and critical thinking. If we simply invent or make up morality, why bother being so scrupulously careful about getting it right? If every moral opinion is a good as every other, then the judgement I arrive at after much careful thought will be no better than the one I started with. If relativism were true, there would be *no point* bothering with the sort of critical thinking Liberals recommend."

A public conversation by and with philosophers has been a conspicuous feature of the past decade, and one that seems likely to keep expanding in the next one.