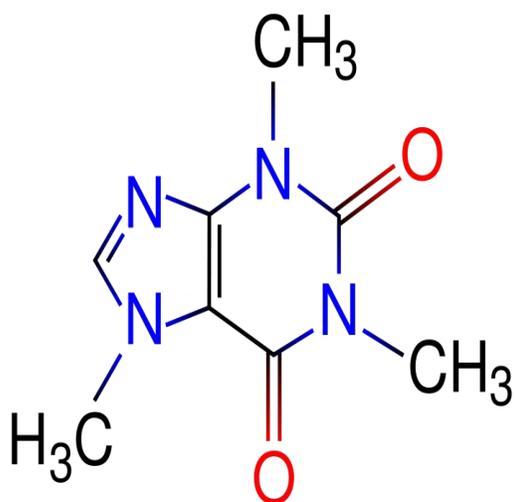


5-18-05

Dear Oisin,

Tonight I'm having troubling sleeping again largely due to my own mistake. At the end of dinner today, they served us coffee, which I shouldn't have drunk, but I did, and it's keeping me awake. As far as interesting questions go, that's another one, by the way. Why does coffee keep you awake? One simple answer is that it contains a chemical called caffeine, but that's just pushing the question back one step. Can you see what I mean by that? If someone gives you that reply, what is an obvious question that occurs? I'll let you think about it a bit. In general, my impression is that such questions of physiology are still not well-understood. That is, even people who study these things carefully have a hard time explaining in precise terms why eating or drinking one kind of thing has a certain effect. I may be wrong about coffee, so maybe we should ask someone who studies such things. I did hear recently that it's quite hard to explain why anesthesia works the way it does. Anesthesia is the kind of thing you drank at the dentist's office that put you to sleep. Given that the substance that puts you to sleep is still a bit mysterious, so might be the one that keeps you awake.



Caffeine



Coffee house

The dinner, in fact, was quite enjoyable. I ate mostly with a small party of four, myself, Mr. Coates, Mr. Sarnak, who are both mathematicians, and then a certain Mr. Tranah, who publishes books about mathematics at the Cambridge University Press. We were part of a largish group attending something called a 'high table' at Emmanuel College. In Britain, one still finds people continuing here and there rather old traditions, one of them, here in Cambridge, being these dinners at the high table. A group of people, most of them dressed in black gowns, sit around the master of the college at a long table, rather like a medieval banquet with the lord at the center. Of course it's not nearly as festive now as the pictures you've seen in books.



The Duke of Berry enjoying a feast

But it is still a bit unusual if you've lived in the U.S. for a long time. For example, the dining hall was surrounded by stained-glass windows and portraits of very serious-looking men dressed in flowing robes on the walls. Also, people drank a lot of fancy wine afterwards (except me) in a study with a very large fireplace and many beautiful bookcases made of mahogany. The master of the college is a real lord, a certain Lord Wilson. As with the case of knights, being a lord these days doesn't quite mean something as exciting as you might imagine, but they do go sit in a place called the House of Lords, and discuss what to do about the affairs of the country. You might have also

enjoyed how the meal began and ended with the tinkling of a bell followed by a prayer in Latin offered by the master.



Emmanuel College, Cambridge

I did go to Mr. Dennett's lecture before the dinner, but that was a bit disappointing. I'm afraid many philosophy lectures in modern times are like that. It's not so easy to explain why, but part of the reason is that many people who do philosophy professionally (meaning they are something like professors of philosophy at a university) are often more interested in writing clever books than seeking answers to really important questions. Of course, it's nice to write clever books and someone should, but that's not the same as coming to a real understanding of difficult and important questions, like 'what is thinking?'

or 'what exactly is the difference between simple and complicated things?'



The Thinker by Rodin

Mr. Dennett is a very famous philosopher these days who does talk a lot about rather important topics (including the one about getting machines to think for themselves), but he seemed a bit more concerned to talk about his clever book than to be serious about the questions that actually came up. Oh well, that's how it goes. One must judge people's efforts generously. He did entertain the audience quite well with many funny jokes.



Cambridge University

As you may guess, I didn't go to Marlowe's play after all. I may try tomorrow if I have the energy at the end of the day. On the other hand, Komo might come to see me this weekend, so I may wait and go with her.

Tonight, writing those few lines is already wearing down the effect of the coffee and I think I'm ready to sleep. I looked in town for the right sort of postcard without much success, so for now, I'll just send one with a panoramic view of Cambridge. Let Niall look at it if he wants to since he'll certainly grow tired of it quickly.

I'll conclude then with another poem by Mr. Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us late and soon,
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers,
Little we see in nature that is ours,

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.
The sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The wind that will be howling at all hours,
And are up gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for all this, we are out of tune.
It moves us not. Dear God I'd rather be,
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
That I might, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have visions that would make me less forlorn,
Catch sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.



Triton fountain in Rome

Well, there's all that Greek stuff again. Funny how many romantics loved Greece. As I wrote yesterday, there is something strange about that since Pericles and Aristotle really thought of science, philosophy, and art in a way that was rather different from the romantic sentiment. I'm not sure I've explained enough for this notion to make sense

(I will, by and by), but the Parthenon, for example, is very far from what one would call a romantic building. Nevertheless, Lord Byron, who was, in some sense, the most romantic of the romantics (I'll send you one of his poems soon), was in love with the Parthenon, and was terribly angry at Lord Elgin for shipping the frieze and sculptures off to London. He also fought to free Greece from its Turkish overlords. All this was in the nineteenth century around the time of Napoleon. Many people in Europe fell in love with Greece about then. Sometime later I may also tell you about the explanation of a philosopher named Nietzsche to these questions about Greece and the romantics. He is famous for saying things like 'the Parthenon was inspired by Apollo, while romantic poetry has a lot of Dionysus in it'. (To be honest, I doubt he ever said anything quite like that, but this is how many people remember him.) The point is they were both Greek gods but represented quite different ideas. Well, that's a long story, and not a very convincing one, I think. But of course, you'll have to study and judge for yourself. Incidentally, Mr. Nietzsche seems to have been aware of the complaint I had above against modern philosophers. A chapter in one of his books is entitled 'Why I write such clever books.' He wrote many long books, in fact, but he was funny in a clever enough way to make fun of himself.

Good night, Mr. A., I mean Mr. T., I mean Mr. O.
(You see, I *am* sleepy.)

Mr. Dzzzzzz



Parthenon

