

NECESSITY THE MOTHER OF INVENTION?

John was glad to get out of the lecture hall. Yesterday the Conference had gone well; but the lecture this morning had been painful. Maybe, after talking last evening until the early hours, he was not at his brightest this morning. But he had had the impression that he had not been the only one in the hall having problems with the lecture. What had the guy been banging on about?

John got his coffee and looked around. He saw someone he knew over in the far corner and went to join him.

"Hello, Michael," he said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," replied Michael. "By the way, what did you think of Dr Prothero's lecture?"

"To tell the truth," said John. "I just didn't understand what he was on about. I guess I must've talked and drunk too much last night."

"You didn't drink that much!" laughed Michael. "It was a downright terrible lecture. Prothero had obviously just put the stuff together at the last moment. What he actually said could've been done in five minutes and boiled down to even less than the summary given in the program notes. I don't think the Association will be inviting him to speak again!"

"Glad it wasn't just me, then," said John. "What did he mean, do you think, by 'Necessity is the unmarried mother of invention'? Why unmarried?"

"It's a quote from Flann O'Brien's 'The Third Policeman'," Michael answered. "Presumably Prothero was making a pathetic attempt at being humorous – it didn't get any laughs though. The 'unmarried' epithet had no relevance to what he was trying to say. Besides the phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' is quite wrong; it's really the other way about."

"What do you mean?" said John. "I don't understand."

"I mean," said Michael, "that invention is the mother of necessity."

"But that's not right," John said, rather tentatively, "things get invented because a need has arisen, don't they?"

"Oh," said Michael, "so what was the pressing need that led to the invention of television? Did we need to see, for example, what was actually happening during a play? Was there some epidemic which was causing people to lose the ability to *imagine* the scene? Were we no longer able to cope with just radio?"

"No," said John, "that's silly. But television has brought many gains. It has proved to be a great tool for education, and it has enabled the ordinary person to be much better informed about the world."

"That may be so," said Michael. "But these are after-effects. What was the *need* that prompted its invention? But now, practically all households have at least one television set; in fact it's now rare, I think, that there is just one in a household. And if you suggested to most people that they didn't actually need even *one* in the house, they'd think you were crazy. 'Yes,' they might agree, 'I can do without it for a day or so, maybe even a week. but never to have one – I couldn't do that'. Why," continued Michael, "people even expect to find television when they go on holiday. They complain if there is not a set in the hotel room. The thing has become a *necessity* for most people."

“OK,” said John. “May be television. But that, surely, is an exception.”

“Is it?” replied Michael. “Have you ever tried suggesting to a teenager that they do not *need* mobile phones? if you tell them that their dads didn’t have them when they were young and that when their grandfathers were young not many houses had phones at all, they will look at you as if you’re going soft in the head. They will tell you that the world has changed now. How could they text their friends if they didn’t have a mobile?”

“They’re just being short-sighted and not thinking,” said John.

“Ah, the folly of youth!” said Michael in slightly mocking tones. “Well then,” he continued, “how about telling your wife she doesn’t need her washing machine? How do you think she will react when you remind her that for millennia clothes got washed without the aid of a machine?”

“That’s different,” John said with some feeling. “I wouldn’t want my wife to have spend every Monday toiling over a boiler full of steaming hot water like they had to in Victorian times. The washing machine has made life a lot better for women.”

“That’s not the point,” said Michael. “I’m talking about *need*. Even today millions of women the world over keep their family’s clothes clean without the aid of a washing machine. In some places it’s a social event where the women all gather together at the washing place and exchange gossip. You don’t do that with a washing machine.”

“Yes,” protested John. “But things are different now. I know we need our washing machine at home. I couldn’t expect my wife to go out to work *and* have to wash all the clothes, bed linen and so on.”

“Then you could do it instead of her,” laughed Michael. “Many men do, you know.”

“But we’re *both* working,” protested John. “We *need* the machine!”

“No,” said Michael, “the machine may have enable you both to earn money and enhance your standard of living. But the simple truth is that for millennia clothes and linen got cleaned without a machine and that even now millions of people wash clothes without using one. You do not *need* a washing machine in order to clean clothes. But now that the machine has been invented, most people in the western world consider the machine is a necessity – if not absolutely needed in the home, at least it’s needed in the laundrette. The invention come first and the need follows.”

“OK, I see your point,” said John. “But you cannot deny that some inventions have come about because of necessity. I mean, otherwise we’d still be living in the Stone Age.”

“Well,” asked Michael, “did we actually *need* to leave the Stone Age? The human race was not exactly unsuccessful before it started using metal. More than 150 000 years ago our ancestors left the savannahs of central Africa and had migrated not only into Europe and Asia but all the way down into Australia *and* across the bearing straights into north America and eventually down into the southern parts of south America. I know it took nearly 40 000 years for humans to get to the southern part of south America, but they did get there – *and* they got there using Stone Age technology. Humans had virtually spread right across the globe over many millennia without developing the use of metals.”

John felt he needed another coffee and went to get one for himself and for Michael. When he got back, he said, "That's all very well, but you must admit that life is a lot better now than it was for our Stone Age forebears."

"Thanks for the coffee," said Michael. "But is life really that better? Stone Age technology did not enable people to build gas chambers in order to murder others in their thousands; it did not produce bombs that can destroy whole cities in one blow; it did not enable people to destroy one another by flying aircraft into tall buildings. Even if some Stone Age people practised human sacrifice – and we don't know that they all did – it was as nothing compared with the whole scale human sacrifices of recent times. And Stone Age technology would not have produced global warming and climate change."

"There's always good and bad in things," said John. "But you must admit that life is a lot pleasanter now for most people."

"It is if they live in the west or other newly developing countries," said Michael, "but I doubt that the people of Darfur would agree with you. And if anyone's in need, they certainly are. But is their need giving rise to any invention?"

"No," mumbled John.

"You bet it's not!" said Michael with feeling. "Now if there was oil in Darfur, things might be different. Profit and gain are great motivators. Just think," he continued, "for nearly three quarters of the time modern man has been around, we managed quite successfully with only Stone Age technology. It wasn't need, but rather greed, that made us take up metal working. Once bronze was discovered it enabled us to make better weapons."

"But that made hunting more efficient," interrupted John. "We could feed ourselves better."

"Oh yes," agreed Michael. "We could hunt better but it also gave people the edge over their enemies. People found they *needed* bronze weapons to deal with their enemies and, of course, their enemies *needed* bronze weapons to defend themselves! As I said – the invention comes first and the need follows!"

"Umm," said John. "You've certainly given me a lot more to think about than Dr Prothero did with his boring lecture."

"So I should hope," said Michael. "That was a truly lamentable lecture. Any way," he added, "I've got to go now. I said I'd meet Andrew Hutchinson at half-past. I'll probably bump into you later during the Conference – cheers!"

"Yes, cheers," said John, as Michael hurried away. 'Yes,' he thought to himself, 'If I could invent the next necessity, I could be set up for life. Now I wonder, I wonder ...'