

Letter to the Editor

A two-box option

Sir,

Your 'Out of the Box' columnist (Cannon, 2005) says he is unconfined, and hence able to commend the aphorism of the Tao Te Ching: 'Be really whole, and all things will come to you'. I have no idea what this aphorism means. If it means anything, I doubt if it can be proved to be true or untrue, so I am not very interested in it. Is it wise for nutritionists to dispense with boxes entirely if, like me, they have average intellects and want to do research? Some mega-intellects like Peter Medawar did important research in many different fields, but some are like Bobby Fischer, who was a chess genius but an under-achiever in virtually every other field.

Researchers try to solve important problems: there are no brownie points given to those who ask unanswerable questions (Medawar, 1967, p. 7) or to the seventh person to proclaim an important new truth. Therefore the researcher with mediocre intellect can only compete effectively in the battle against ignorance by restricting his field of enquiry.

I commend a two-box strategy for the intellectually challenged. Take the first paper I had published in an international journal (Garrow and Piper, 1955). I am a very mediocre biochemist, and a barely literate electronic engineer, but at the time (50 years ago) I knew more about radiation detectors than the average biochemist, and more about the effects of malnutrition than the average electronic engineer; so by working in the tiny (virtually unpopulated) box where these two disciplines overlap I was able to get (temporarily) ahead in this field of expertise. Using the tool thus developed I was later able to report my results in a prestigious journal (Garrow, 1959).

Your columnist Geoffrey Cannon disparages facts and extols thought, but thought that does not lead to some action (such as establishing reliable facts) is notoriously ineffective (Matthew). Tyro researchers may find, as I did, that the best opportunity for research is to be found by working at the intersection of two (or even three) disparate boxes, rather than by scanning the universe and everything.

I mention this as a constructive criticism of the proposed 'new nutrition *science*' (my emphasis) (Cannon, 2005). The 10 dimensions listed, such as evolution, environment, ethics, are certainly relevant to nutrition, and extend beyond the biochemical frame established 150 years ago – I would be happy to describe it as a new nutrition *philosophy*. But I expect any new *science* to deal with

problems that are soluble, as Medawar requires. The term 'science' should not be hijacked for a non-scientific approach.

In his column Geoffrey Cannon also alludes to methods of referencing, including of books. Authors supply bibliographic references at the end of scientific papers for several reasons – some good, and some not so good. Good reasons include:

1. So the reader can check that a published fact or opinion of another person has been accurately and fairly cited. Often it is misleadingly quoted, which is why authors may desire that their adversary had written a book (Job).
2. To enable the reader to look up information (such as an experimental technique) that has already been published elsewhere, by the present author or another, and so which need not be repeated.
3. To give credit to a predecessor for previous research, on which the current research is based.

Not-so-good reasons include:

4. To enable the author to cite virtually all his previous publications, to boost his citation index.
5. Citation of work the author has not read, but lists to give his article a scholarly appearance.

Therefore the style of referencing should make it easy for the reader to find the work cited, and for a reviewer to see what other research has been cited. The Vancouver system that is the house style of this journal is particularly poor with respect to the second requirement, especially for review articles with many references. If I consult a review that has 100 references in Vancouver style, and wonder if the author of the review cites the work of Bloggs and Poppitt, I must toil through the list of references to see if these names appear. By contrast, with the Harvard system that I use, it would be instantly clear from entries under B in the alphabetical list if these researchers were cited. If they were cited seven times they would be conspicuous. This would be particularly helpful if the authors of the review were Bloggs and Poppitt. However, by the Vancouver system, multiple self-citations may be discreetly concealed in the text as (say) 3, 15, 21, 39, 48, 77 and 93.

On the referencing of books, Geoffrey Cannon makes a fuss about the authorship of the Bible, which has no single known author or editor. It is a standard reference work, as

are the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, telephone directories, dictionaries, pharmacopoeias, etc., with no authors that need to be sought out. The English Bible is, of course, a translation, of which there are various versions, between which there are small variations.

In the context of Geoffrey Cannon's column the reference 'Matthew 4:1–11. Holy Bible' would suffice, since the purpose of his citation was to draw an analogy between the devil's temptation of Jesus and the offer of a job to him by Robert Maxwell. In any of the English versions of the Bible the brief reference I suggest above would lead the reader to the account of the temptation of Jesus, so it is unnecessary to specify a particular version. Having led the reader to the correct book, he now needs a page number (or chapter and verse, if it is that type of book) to make use of the reference.

In the case of my own two biblical references it is necessary to specify the version of the Bible cited. In the Authorised version the last phrase of the verse in Job 31:35 reads 'My desire is ... that mine adversary had written a

book' and Matthew 6:27 reads 'Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature?', while other versions of the Bible have a different wording.

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