

March 1, 1990 (Vol. 5, no. 13)

Dear Colleague:

After some eighty letters, written over a five-year period, it is time I introduce myself more formally. My name is 段義子 . I am 1,860,624,000 seconds old and I weigh 17,697,000 insects.

Expressing my age in seconds (here I follow the example of Samuel Becket) makes me feel geological rather than biological. Also, with the wealth of that astronomical number behind me, I feel that I am at last in the same league as the Donald Trumps of the world, who wallow in such numbers. As for my weight in insects, a moral issue arises that I can't quite resolve. If my life is put in the balance against that of a thousand insects, I say--and even animal rightists may say--that my life is worth more. But 17,697,000 insects? How will I choose if either I or my equivalent biomass in insects will have to go? If I can go painlessly, I think I may well yield to the arthropods.

Sir Fred Hoyle and N. Wickramasinghe estimate that the odds against blind chance producing a single self-replicating microorganism to be $10^{40,000}$ (1 followed by 40,000 zeros) to one. Well, I think this is the kind of fact that should make any would-be suicide pause.

The Russian Sergei Didik's current world record for weight lifting is 575 lbs--a little more than the weight of five average 18-year old American girls. I wonder what other warm-blooded animal can do that. Can even the strongest elephant lift, say, three times its own weight? Is it possible that the human dominance of the earth has as much to do with our brawn as with our brain?

Shakespeare used a total vocabulary of 31,534 different words, 14,376 words just once, 4,343 words just twice. As an efficiency expert, I mutter under my breath--What a waste! Imagine learning to use all those words and apply them only once or twice in a lifetime. Now Racine is more my kind of guy. I gather he has used only 2,000 different words in his collected works.

Bertrand Russell wrote 70 books, 2,500 essays, and one letter for every 30 hours of his 97-year life. Will he get tenure at UW?

Best wishes,

