

The Wednesday

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

Ontological Commitments

I have recently attended a debate on ‘mind’. The debate went beyond the familiar ground of whether the mind is just the brain or something more. The thesis presented was that mind is the whole reality. The mind here is not mental. It exists in the individual, but the individual and everything else are only appearances to it. I noticed two attitudes towards this thesis, the analytical one tended to dismiss it as irrational, and the more continental one took it seriously. It became clear to me that the difference lies in the type of ontological commitments of each side and in their different methods.

To be more precise, the method itself assumes some ontological commitment. If one starts from the analysis of language, one may become imprisoned within the limits of language. Take for example Russell’s theory of meaning. The meaning of a term is the object that it stands for. It is something that can be experienced or is within the bounds of sense. This will directly leave out metaphysical terms, such as Being, the Absolute, or Mind, in the specific sense spoken of here. It will limit reality to physical objects and physical laws. It will also purge moral and aesthetic values of their cognitive, idealistic meaning and reduce them to natural properties.

But if analysis is what you expect from the linguistic turn, with its concern with the particular, the opposite tradition starts from a general concept and follows it up, or explores what Heidegger calls Formal Indicators, i.e. choosing a concept that refers to a phenomenon and gives it a preliminary sense that is open for further analysis, and at the same time avoids pre-conceptions that would foreclose the analysis and stop it short of a genuine understanding of the phenomenon, such as the concept of Dasein. Another example is Husserl’s method of phenomenological reduction to reach the essence of things, and of the self.

But this does not sit well with linguistic philosophy. Dummett thought that the study of language is ‘far more fruitful than phenomenological intuition of essences, since as Wittgenstein remarked, “Essence is expressed

by grammar” (*Investigation*, 371)’. (Dummett: *The Nature and Future of Philosophy*, 149).

There is now an increasing interest in post-Kantian studies and German Idealism in particular, but many philosophers who come under these titles are committed to major ontological concepts that are rejected by the linguistic, analytical philosophers, for example, the ‘I’ of Fichte, or the Absolute of Schelling and Hegel. These are not concepts generated by analysis but the very foundation of constructing a system.

I understand that in the last forty years or so, more continental philosophy has been taught and published in the English-speaking world and more analytical philosophy has been absorbed by many continental philosophers, but in a compartmentalised, separate way, rather than in a genuine interaction. For example, ontological commitments of continental philosophy are rarely taken seriously by analytical philosophers. Dummett blames it on scientism: ‘If the scientism prevalent in present-day American philosophy is intensified, a breach may open up between analytic philosophy as practiced in the United States and as practiced in Britain and continental Europe. This in itself may help to bring about a rapprochement between European philosophers of different traditions’.

Dummett cites the example of a scientist approach to consciousness and calls for a collaboration of different traditions on this topic. But what happens when a continental philosopher insists that what really exist is consciousness and nothing else? Here a state of open-mindedness is required to see whether this ontological commitment is justified philosophically and not to be rejected outright. I am not judging this thesis, or any other thesis, to be right or wrong, but only that it should have the right to be heard. A thesis may be strange or unfamiliar, but there have been many stranger theses talked about in the history of philosophy.

The Editor

Umberto Eco and Semiotics

This paper is based on an analysis of three novels by Umberto Eco: *Foucault's Pendulum*, *The Name of the Rose*, and *The Prague Cemetery*. The aim is to inspire readers to read Eco's work. The paper will cover a vague outline of the plots, and there will be no spoilers.

DAN MCARDLE

Eco is known for his work with 'semiotics'. As with many other topics, a glance at the *Wikipedia* page for the term is underwhelming. From it, we learn that semiotics finds its origin in the Greek words for 'signs' and 'observing'. There is also a list of contributing philosophers such as Saussure and Peirce, although *Wikipedia* leaves out significant ideas from Freud, Jung, and others. The simplest way to explain the concept is the observation and consideration of signs (or words, or symbols) and how we infer meaning from them.

On the Nature of Words

This leads us to ask: what is the purpose of words? In some cases, we use words in a functional sense. Perhaps the most well-known examples of this are biblical. In *Genesis*, God says words to create the world. Following this, Adam uses words to name the animals, thus having some power over them. Later, when Cain is mad at and preparing to kill Abel, God attempts to negotiate with him, using the Hebrew word 'timshel'. John Steinbeck explores this passage extensively in *East of Eden*, engaging in a deep study to uncover the meaning and context, and thus the power of that word.

Words can also be descriptive. We see this frequently in ancient Greek texts. Consider the *Iliad*'s list of ships preparing to battle against Troy, or the counting of Persian soldiers that Herodotus tells us King Xerxes sends to battle in Athens. Or we can borrow a more analytical approach and look at how Aristotle, an accomplished botanist, navigates a myriad of descriptive labels in *Categories*.

The use of words – or signs – is a major way that we interpret reality and thus seek truth. Once we have determined the meaning of a given word or set of words, we can then use those meanings to learn

what truth is. However, words are complex. One word could have multiple meanings. Words also encounter semantic drift, where their meanings will change over time. To borrow an Aristotelian approach, we have two extremes: one in which a word has one meaning and only that meaning, and one in which a word is completely disconnected semantically from its meaning. Clearly both of these views are wrong, and the answer must be somewhere in between.

How Words Construct Truth

If there is fuzziness between a word and its meaning, then this must also apply to the words from which we inherit our concepts of truth – and it is this fuzziness that Eco loves to exploit. When we study a historical record, especially pre-photography, the overwhelming majority of the record is composed of words, be it books, scriptures, memos, personal letters and so on which have survived. And this extant record presents the body of evidence that we use to determine what transpired in the past, and why.

In *Foucault's Pendulum*, we see this examined by way of conspiracy theories, diving headfirst into the Knights Templar. Eco benefits from time (as most original sources are from the Middle Ages), lost works surviving in references only, and historical lacunae, to take us on a roller-coaster ride – and then forces us to ask whether our conclusions resulted from following bread crumbs, or from following a path we liked and imagining that bread crumbs were there. While it is true that the scientific method employs a notion that we need to rely on evidence to form conclusions, when there is a gap between the conclusion we found and the conclusion we want, it is far too easy – and human nature – to come up with theories to explain away the difference, especially when something rides on

the outcome.

Eco takes a different approach in *The Name of the Rose*. Rather than following the path of a truth seeker, we find ourselves amid Benedictine Monks, who have devoted their lives to the imitation of Christ. But then questions arise, such as what kind of a person Christ was, and what precisely does it mean to imitate Him? For example, if Christ did not own property, then is owning property inherently sinful? And is it ok to laugh, even though we have no evidence from the Gospels that Christ himself laughed? A large subplot of the book revolves around what Aristotle may have written in his lost second book of Poetics, and asks us to examine the nature of a student. If we are to be disciples of Christ, are we allowed to question what he says? And if not, then does this same rubric extend to people like Aristotle, who, while not a Church Father, very clearly heavily influenced them? And why is it that we would grant such infallible authority to evidence, when we recognize the shortcomings of the senses we use to collect and observe it?

Finally, in one of his later works, *The Prague Cemetery*, Eco takes on the concept of propaganda. In this book, every character is a real person except for the narrator. Through tiny gaps in chronology and source attribution, Eco is able, through his invented protagonist, to completely flip the historical narrative into a mirror image of his own crafting. The story explores how propaganda can influence people and politics, and it is executed through the description of at times extremely anti-Semitic statements. Set in late 19th century France, Eco gives an alternative explanation for the origins of the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, an infamous text claiming to reveal a Jewish conspiracy for world domination. We can all appreciate the significance of this message, as it played a large role in the rise of Nazi Germany and the subsequent Holocaust. Whereas in *Foucault’s Pendulum*, we were following breadcrumbs, in *The Prague Cemetery*, we are creating them.

Interpretation of Evidence

Eco’s philosophy, as manifested through his works, seems to suggest that when trying to ascertain the truth, we must seriously and critically examine the means by which we came to our conclusions. Even if we are not swept away by confirmation



Umberto Eco

bias or some propagandist working to manipulate us, we must still validate that we interpret what we have found correctly. This is a difficult task, and potentially impossible. Additional roadblocks impede us: translation and tonality, and context.

Translation is a lossy process. Consider major legal cases whose arguments rest on establishing the meaning of a word, or how the meaning of a word can change based on whether it is being used ‘legally’, ‘technically’, or in some other manner. Now, take all of this and transpose it into another language which may not have a complementary word. Or, taking a note from Eco, slightly rephrase things in the second language to fit a narrative or guide towards a desired outcome. Perhaps when we pick the word (or phrase) in the second language, there are two possible choices which seem like equally valid candidates, but the chosen one contains some elements which aid the translator. Although this seems subtle and innocuous at first, a careful propagandist could, through hundreds of these tiny selections, subliminally craft a message with hidden meanings.

Next, tonality matters. It’s no secret that Italians have produced more operas than Germans; one argument to explain this is that the Italian language is inherently melodic, and can sometimes sound to a non-Italian like singing. Germans, known for structure and discipline, speak a language filled with sharp words like ‘jetzt’ and ‘genau’ which can be off-putting to foreigners based on the sounds

Philosophy

alone. The French, on the other hand, are known for their language of love. Imagine if the poetic words of Cyrano de Bergerac were delivered in a monotonic fashion by a disenchanted court reporter.

And lest we forget, context is king. Even if we assume that a set of words is chosen appropriately, or that they are written or spoken in a form that best captures their meaning, without knowing the manner and situation of their writing, our interpretations are often simply grasping at straws. Similar to a well produced play or movie with a twist at the end, Eco's stories will often introduce a key element that rips away a veil of ignorance we didn't even know existed. And while ancient scriptures are generally considered to be 'settled', each new archeological discovery, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Enuma Elish, threatens to disrupt centuries or more of traditional wisdom with the possibility of new details which could change how we must interpret scriptures.

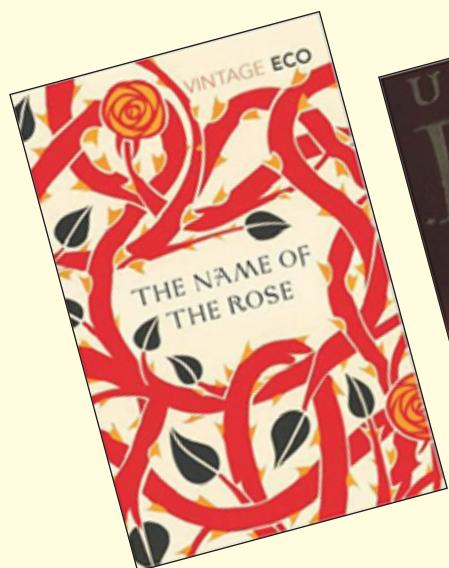
The Ethical Questions

Setting aside for a moment the question of whether truth is obtainable, we should ask two additional questions: first, is there a way to separate truth from propaganda, and second, if false propaganda leads to a better outcome, is it not better to maintain it than to disrupt a healthy equilibrium? Put another

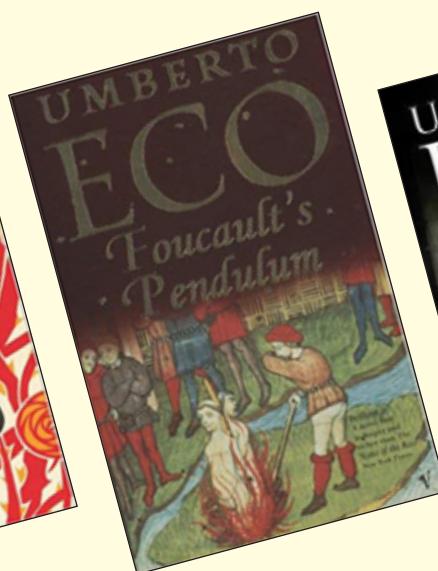
way, could we make the argument that Eco's novels should be banned because they encourage people to question what they consider to be true? While there is no clear answer to either of these questions, we can at least attempt to address them. The first assumes there is such a thing as truth, and that it differs in some way from propaganda. If we define propaganda as crafting a message to deliberately lead the audience away from the truth, before we can answer to its ethical validity, we must determine the author's intent. Compare a well-known 20th century political dictator who used propaganda to create horrors that left a stain on Europe, to Orson Welles, whose 1938 'War of the Worlds' broadcast lead to mass panic. If someone mistook a fictional radio broadcast for a real news report because they missed the opening disclaimer, should Welles have been held accountable for any malice that followed?

Based on our previously established nature of words, it is not possible for the speaker or writer to control how the words are received. However, if one ensures that the tonality and context are appropriate, and, if necessary, includes a disclaimer to manage the setting, we could argue they have taken reasonable actions not to unreasonably disturb the social peace.

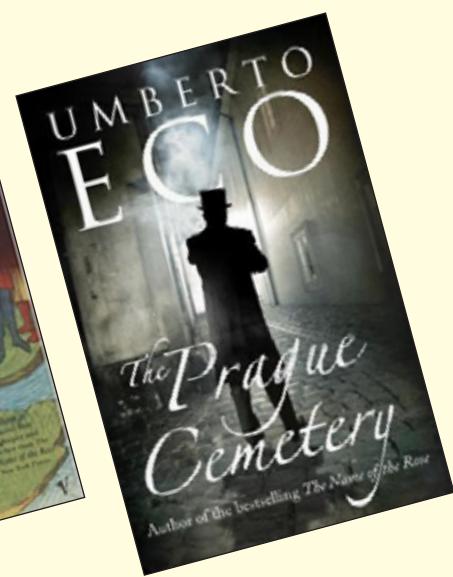
This then leads us into the second question, that of



The Name of the Rose



Foucault's Pendulum



The Prague Cemetery



Sean Connery in *The Name of the Rose* (1986)

how to maintain civil order. We could argue that the answers to the first question also apply here. After all, if Eco or anyone else writes a book that could disrupt the social order, leading to looting, murders, and worse, then don't we have a duty to contain it? In fact, we could imagine this exact question with different wording being posed at the highest levels of the Soviet Union when they saw their controlled economy disintegrating. Perhaps borrowing a bit from Socrates' Noble Lie, Stalin and others fabricated a narrative against which opposition was punishable by decades in the Gulag work camps. While this approach did technically maintain a social order, with time, nobody could argue that the social order was healthy, any more than they could point out that the Emperor was naked. And it is worth noting that the Soviet practice of banning books lead to an underground railroad of sorts to distribute works by Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, and others.

Conclusion

And now we come back to the core question: how much do the words impact whether something is true? Do words construct our reality completely, to the extent that a change in a word's meaning could change the meaning of truth itself? Here is where

Descartes threw the baby out with the bath water. Just because we change what we call something, does not change the nature of the thing itself. For example, if you have a terminal illness, changing your diagnosis on the medical form and walking out of the hospital is only going to promote a timely death. And if a little boy is hungry, telling him he has already eaten if he is starving, is tantamount to child abuse.

While words may impact our *perception* of truth, they do not push aside or dismiss what is objectively true. When Thucydides comments on the changing of the meanings of words during the Corcyran civil war, although the meanings of the words changed, they reflected the reality of how civil disorder was growing; therefore, we could argue that words change their meanings to follow truth, not the other way around. And, thus, authors like Eco are doing us a great service, by finding potential holes in our understanding to help us recalibrate our own words and narratives to be correctly tuned to the truth.

(This paper is going to be presented to *The Wednesday meeting 4th January 2023*)

Philosophy

Cosmology and Soul

Classical philosophy was originally conceived as love of wisdom, but arguably today cleverness trumps wisdom. Wisdom has a living, dynamic and holistic quality; it discerns the essential, and sees through illusions, deceptions, herd conformities and diversions of attention. Wisdom includes, but goes beyond intellect, applying the ratio of feeling and intuition. For example, with the benefit of hindsight we can determine where wisdom lies in comparing a native culture that lives according to values of cooperation with nature in a sustainable world, and a Western civilization that thrives on values promoted by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) of torturing and exploiting nature for human benefit. Cultures reap what they sow, but it seems like there is a driving force that wished civilized humanity ill.

WILLIAM BISHOP

In *Cosmos and Psyche* (2006) Richard Tarnas argues that the challenging conditions of the modern world owe their origin to the ‘Copernican Revolution’, because this new cosmology affected other worldviews and as a consequence Western materialistic science took on the dominating role for ‘objective truth’, rendering relative (subjective) all world religions. Tarnas thinks that what is urgently needed (and he is not alone in this) is not piecemeal change, but the challenge of another cosmology to spark a new Renaissance.

The Mayan civilization envisaged a future return to consciousness of the so-called fifth element, recognized by the Greeks as ‘quintessence’, the power governing the four ‘elements’ (states of matter) of earth, water, air, and fire, that channels the forces of



Richard Tarnas

life, form, organization, and number into the material world. Significantly this is the very *ether* intimated in *Projective Geometry* and recognition of *etheric activity* in nature would turn modern science inside out with the consequence of potentially changing the scientific picture from a heartless cosmic void into a meaningful cosmos, where Plato’s *World Soul* could regain relevance. The crux of such a more *inclusive* cosmology will be recognition of the connection between the inner world of spirit and the external bodily world.

Since the time of Euclid (with his book on geometry: *Elements*) and Descartes with his fixed framework of rectangular axes, Western humanity has lived conceptually in a three-dimensional earthly space of point-centred forces characterized by the sense of touch. But *Projective Geometry*, which surfaced in the nineteenth century, synthesizes Euclidean *point-centred* space with an opposing yet complementary *peripheral-planar* force. Euclidean geometry employs the point, straight line, circle and ellipse, while projective geometry is based on the three elements of point, line, plane, plus *infinity*. So when a point expands to *infinity* it becomes a plane (which paradoxically is spherical in that it envelops all). This pictures the idea of a periphery from which *peripheral* forces act from the surrounding external universe in polar association to forces related to the planetary *point*. Point-centred Euclidean geometry is usefully applied in mechanics but is wholly unsuited to the *life sphere* within Nature, and Projective Geometry reveals that Euclidean space is a one-sided vision of ‘real space’ because it restricts cognition to a gravitational point-centred physical space – yet realistically, if only point-centred forces

existed there would be no physical world because this requires the *polar life-forces* to engage with gravitational (point) forces. It is the combination of the forces from both point and periphery that create the kind of *dynamic space* (real space) where substance and life are possible.

Light

Light is a fundamental principle in projective geometry, yet light is deeply mysterious. For example, it enters the picture on two separate ‘days of creation’ in the Genesis biblical account: *original light* on the first day, and the sun (and moon) on the fourth day. On earth we live within forces of gravity but also are bathed in life-giving forces of the ether. These extensive *planar* moulding forces from the infinite distance flow into the *intensive* space of earthly gravitation. Whereas Euclidean (gravitational) space connects with the sense of *touch* (yielding tangible objects), projective space relates to *line of sight*. This ethereal space is also where thinking ‘takes place’ (utilizing the archetypes). The mathematician, George Adams, puts it this way: ‘*Geometrically speaking, the domain of real forces within which we live when we are thinking is polar to the spatial objects of our thinking. The objects of ordinary thought are physical – that is, of paramountly pointwise form and structure, – yet in the very act of thinking them we live unconsciously in a planar; in other words, etheric realm.*’ The reason why we do not recognize this is because it is a sphere we live within (like fish in water). Massimo Scaliger, in his book on light, asserts: ‘*Things, the world, and entities appear because they clothe themselves in light. But this clothing is the encounter of soul-light with the light of matter by means of the eye. It is the recognition of the original light, as an act of consciousness. And yet we are unaware of the presence of the principle of light.*’

The reality of an etheric dimension challenges the current cosmology of Western science. Indeed it is possible to understand that Light is spiritual (as is darkness) so at the infinite periphery this spiritual Light (because it is not spatial) requires the *light ether* (one of the four active ethers) to reach a point on earth to project it centrifugally as light rays. Due to the *physical force* (the dark density) this light becomes brittle (a condensing effect) so will not bend around objects.

Polarity

Projective Geometry was unknown in Goethe’s time (1739-1832). If it had been known it would have given scientific backing to his colour theory where colour arises from interaction between light and darkness. This was just one instance of Goethe’s opposition to



Infinite Universe

the Newtonian world governed by heavy point-centred bodies moving along straight lines. Here Goethe revealed awareness of buoyant ethereal influences pervading the world; his natural scientific studies interpret the plant as an etheric form (a process in time *characterized by levity*) filled in with mineral substance. However it does take a leap of imagination to accept a space structured by *life-giving* forces acting from the periphery, when we have been educated to conceive it the other way around. According to George Adams, if the mutual relationship between the centre and the periphery is not intellectually acknowledged then the rhythmic interplay between polarities can only be known through feeling and expressed poetically. Yet in the past universal influences from the heavens have been recognized. The etheric *counter-space* carries rhythms in the universe borne by light from the periphery; these inform central (earthly) points. In this way the extraterrestrial and the terrestrial (the heavenly and the earthly) meet in chemical action to create ‘things’, which exist due to the polar tension that created them. Contemporary physics is ingenious but from its materialist standpoint does not fully understand matter. In the prologue to her book: *The Human Cosmos* (2020) science writer Jo Marchant speaks of ‘high profile scientists’ voicing previously taboo concerns that ‘physical matter isn’t all that the universe is’ and that ‘science may be seeing only half the picture’ so that a fight is shaping up ‘that just might transform the entire western worldview’.

Philosophy



Copernicus



Goethe

So what difference would it make if mainstream Western science accepted a polar-active etheric space? We already live in this space (without realizing it), yet consider what difference it made philosophically when the heliocentric system was finally accepted, even though people had been unknowingly living in this system. Acceptance of etheric *projective space* and all that it implies should have an equally far-reaching effect. Interrelationship between powers above and below will be clarified and ethereal life-forces could be cognitively integrated into our vision of the world. If Western science adopts this knowledge a whole new technology can become widely available based on the etheric forces acting in Nature. An example of which in the past has been Viktor Schauberger's (since suppressed) model flying saucer that employed rapid rotation, water vapour, and a vacuum to produce levitation. He said of this: '*Impulsion is no invention in the conventional sense, but rather the renaissance of ancient knowledge, lost over the course of time.*' Schauberger also transformed matter into energy in a harmless and quiet natural form of *cold* nuclear fusion.

8

Nature's life and energy

Impulsion is an example of motive power that could replace the world's current exploitative and wasteful point-wise power based on explosive force (Nature uses point-wise forces only for dissolution, while etheric forces integrate). Abandoning the Euclidean geometry of straight lines and circles, Schauberger developed a number of prototype machines that

employed spirals and curves of open forms consistent with non-Euclidean geometry. These machines operated silently with the great efficiency close to free energy. Their suction power was over 120 times more efficient than those driven by explosive power. A group of top atomic physicists in Birmingham in 1950 found Schauberger's ideas 'unchallengeable', but when asked what they were going to do about it they said '*Nothing. Because it would mean altering all the text books.*'

General recognition of a paradigm-changing conception with far reaching technological potential would inevitably meet with strong opposition from interests vested in carbon-based point-wise technology. Forces of reaction will always strive to protect their own interests with unconcern for general wellbeing. This is '*only human*', but it is this egocentric aspect of the human that evolution, to which we are all subjected, seeks progressively to overcome. As earthly human beings we live within the interaction between the polar forces of light and dark. From a spiritual point of view the human has *being* in relation to *Being*, but problematically an incorporeal human being is conjoined with a bodily nerve-sense system that restrains it.

Acceptance of a 'new' conception of space that includes the etheric dimension would help us to relate science, art, and religion within a holistic vision. In the ancient world religious leaders, as scientists and mathematicians, saw no separation between matter



Viktor Schauberger

and reason and the world of spirit and Divinity. They used numbers and form in a way that satisfied the spiritual sense of meaning and the scientific need for structure and reason, and out of this came ‘Sacred Geometry’. But the fracture of areas of knowledge today is symptomatic of an atomized (point-wise) view of the world; whereas synthesis of opposites to form unity yields wholeness (health). The demonstrable way in which the non-material (energetic) ethereal domain interacts with the solid earthly world raises the question of whether *unknown to science* there are further non-material levels beyond the ethereal, such as *soul*, and a multi-layered *spiritual world*. Are there geometries that can model these ‘territories’ or must we enter the sphere of religion and belief, or can we trust to the potential for further knowledge available to an evolving scientific mind? Are there today still open scientific minds not functioning as closed systems?

The philosophical significance of projective (synthetic) geometry is that it provides mathematical backing to a dimension of reality that Western science cannot recognize. This, however, is not merely a limitation for science but for the entire world influenced by science’s mechanistic worldview based on point-wise ideas and technology that causes environmental destruction and the collateral damage of spiritual devastation. By contrast *real knowledge* of an ethereal dimension would help humanity ‘see’ and experience the world differently. Philosophically this ‘discovery’ could conceptually open up for us a deeper dimension to reality. Such meeting between the ethereal and



Massimo Scaligero

physical – levitation and gravity – illuminates the exchange between energy and matter, the universal and particular, and idea and thing. The ether yields the insight that the sense-world is an externalization of an incorporeal (interior) world so that the external world is but one level on a continuum of interpenetrating levels of Being. One way of seeing this continuity between the inner and outer is through the extension of the human soul into the ‘collective unconscious’ as the connection with non-material (inner) space. This is a space polarized by the forces of light and dark. *Line* connects the *point* and *plane at infinity* and this *point* now connected to the *infinite* (spherical) *plane*, merges with the *instantaneous* whole of the plane, and in so doing reveals relationship between eternity and time, transcendence and immanence.

Whatever our point of view, it can be said that from a philosophical (and historical) perspective, we see in part, yet it is our partial view of the world, dependent on our epistemology, that decides the kind of world we live in spiritually, psychologically, and physically. Small steps are being taken towards a new cosmology while still awaited is that giant leap for mankind.

(A debt for this article is owed to *George Adams: Interpreter of Rudolf Steiner*, Henry Goulden Ltd, East Grinstead, Sussex, 1977; and *Hidden Nature: The Startling Insights of Viktor Schauberger* by Alick Bartholomew, Floris books, Edinburgh, 2003)

A Beautiful Tree

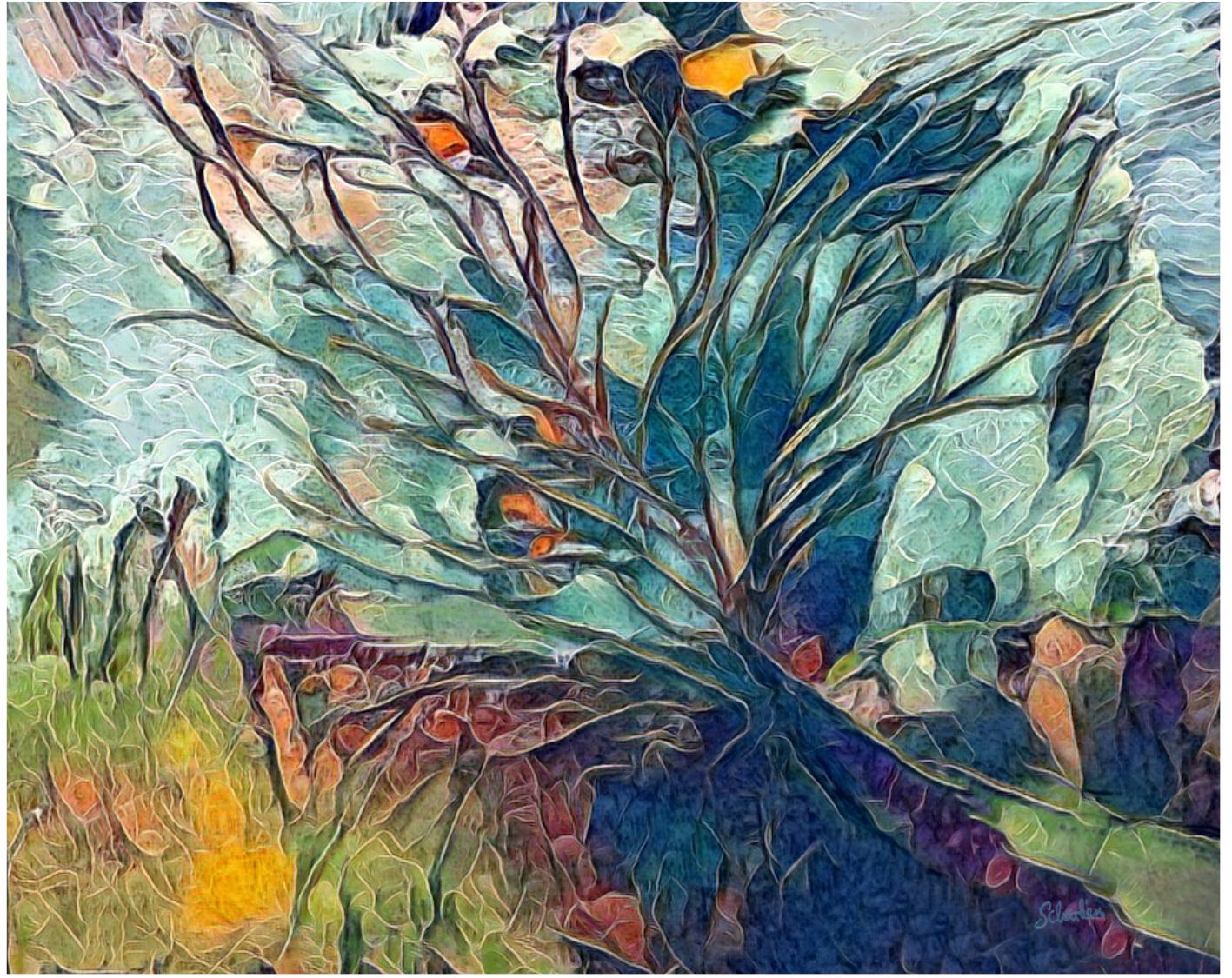
When you are lost and feel
that your world is upside down, time
has run out and the ground under your feet
sways, also your skin has become
translucent over the dark web of your veins,

if you have lost your orientation
and all signs show directions
that are alien to you,
when you see strange symbols in the sky
and you feel your heart is dissolving,

you realize it could just be the start,
the moment, when flooded memories do not
anymore reach the shores of dusk,
as bottomless dreams
separate you from daylight...

Then do not look back, but slide down
fearlessly into the unknown.

You might lose your body but your spirit
will grow tree-like, giving
refuge to the many arriving birds
in their luminescent lives
and you will be safe.



Follow Up

Friedrich Schlegel: Philosophy and Literature

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 30th November.

RAHIM HASSAN

We have a tradition of making the talk of the first week of December related to the theme of Friendship. It is in memory of our late friend and member of the group Raymond Ellison. The end of November was the closest date and Edward Greenwood chose to talk about the friendships that developed around Jena at the beginning of 19th century. The main figure in this talk was Friedrich Schlegel (1790 - 1832). Edward followed with a talk on Goethe before the end of December, and we will report on it in the next issue.

Friedrich Schlegel was an important figure in German literature and philosophy, especially in the movement known as Early German Romanticism. Edward Greenwood gave *The Wednesday* meeting a paper on Schlegel's life and work, touching on his contemporaries, particularly his brother August Schlegel. Heinrich Heine wrote in 1835, about the brothers Friedrich and August Schlegel: 'Jena, where these two brothers and like-minded spirits were to be found, was the central point from where the new aesthetic doctrine spread out'. They were both influenced by Fichte and Schelling; both thought highly of Shakespeare; and August Schlegel's translated his works.

Schlegel wrote a novel, which according to Edward had an influence on the German theologian Schleiermacher, who was to put forward the very influential notion that religion is a matter of sentiment rather than of theological dogma. Later in the 1820's Schlegel was to become interested in Indian mystical thought and 'the Sanskrit language'. At the same time, he converted to Roman Catholicism.

Friedrich Schlegel came from a family of Lutheran pastors who set a high premium on individual freedom. In 1792 he fell in love with Caroline Rehberg who, along with Dorothea Veit the Jewish salon hostess from Schlegel's Berlin period, lies behind the heroine of Friedrich Schlegel's novel *Lucinde*. In that same year arose his friendship with Von Hardenberg who wrote under the name of Novalis and who died young.

At this period Friedrich Schlegel had a great admiration for the poet Friedrich Schiller. Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* played a role in the rejection of Kant's aesthetic views which Schiller found too austere and dutiful. Later Schiller came to detest the Jena group while his friend Goethe was much more tolerant of them.

Friedrich Schlegel had a special interest in both Greek and



Friedrich Schlegel

Roman poetry. In 1797, he wrote his influential essay '*On the Study of Greek Poetry*'. He contrasted the classicism of the Greeks with modern poetry. Modern poetry is self-conscious, and the poet could stand back from it and contemplate it ironically. Philosophically, Edward referred to the work of Ernst Behler. According to Behler, the main theme in Friedrich's early philosophizing is the ego philosophy of Fichte. But Schlegel came to recognize Fichte's limitations and he became more independent and critical.

Friedrich and his brother August founded a new periodical *The Athenaeum*. Friedrich and his friend Novalis wrote their ideas in a new format which came to be known as fragments, mostly short sayings. The fragments format was used later on by Nietzsche in his aphorisms and short essays. Edward mentioned that this magazine became a platform for a new way of thinking called *Sympathetic* or philosophizing together and *Sympathy* or making poetry together. These two features, Edward kindly pointed out, are also present in our publication, *The Wednesday*.

One idea of Friedrich Schlegel is considered as a Romantic manifesto. He wrote:

'Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and make life and society poetical; poeticise wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humour...'

Minding Other Minds

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held 7th December 2022

RAHIM HASSAN

The Wednesday meeting was treated to a wide-ranging discussion on the concept of mind, and the problem of other minds. Peter Stibrany responded to a recent paper on the question of other minds by Peter Hacker. The paper challenged the idea that minds do exist. It suggests that any talk about minds should be translated into talking about persons or people. ‘Mind’ seems to be a false and unnecessary word in Hacker’s view, but Peter Stibrany thought that it still has a function in the way we live and talk.

Hacker wrote that the problem of other minds was created by the Enlightenment distinction of primary and secondary qualities. The Greeks, for example, did not have this problem. But the concern with mind is not only of historical interest. As our abilities to create complex technical and biological systems grows, we now have pressing modern needs to know how to recognise minds. And the light of such understanding could also change how we see people and animals.

Peter Stibrany gave a succinct summary of Hacker’s argument. He said: ‘Grossly simplified, Hacker’s argument starts esoterically, saying the conceptual understanding of us as “minds” is mistaken. And if there are no such things as minds, the problem of other minds is nonsensical. We should understand the problem of other minds as the problem of other people - and nobody doubts there are other people. As to what’s going on inside other people, we are sometimes fallible. But the idea is ‘risible’ that our perceptions of other people’s emotions are always wrong’.

Peter agreed with Hacker that ‘mind’ is an often misused and even non-sensical concept. For example, we perceive what we think of as minds in others, but do we have a ground for supposing that we have minds? We can’t perceive our minds because, as Peter put it, ‘I can’t perceive myself because I am my perceptions’. This resonates with Hacker’s argument.

Peter argued against two points at some length, first the idea that instead of ‘minds’, we should talk of ‘persons’ or ‘people’ and secondly, the idea that we intuitively know other people feeling and thinking just by observing them. The first idea moves the discussion from minds as entities to persons and this changes the debate. We now need a definition of a person, a point which was not expanded on in the debate.

But the other idea had some interesting thought from Peter Stibrany. He called it the argument from ‘observability’: ‘How do we perceive the feelings of others? We feel what



Peter Hacker

it would be like for us to behave as the other person is behaving. We do this intuitively without even thinking about it. But a person can have different feelings with the same behaviour. Sometimes a nod feels like “yes I agree”, sometimes “I hear what you are saying”, and sometimes “hello”’.

A more interesting example of confused perception was the following example Peter took from Edmund Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*: ‘Roxanne’s feelings of love are triggered by Christian, who says and writes what Cyrano tells him to. He is a conduit; we might call him a philosophical zombie. But Roxanne does not perceive this. She intuits the wrong conjecture about who loves her and then relies on this conjecture, failing to perceive that Cyrano loves her even after spending years talking with him. She only realises the truth when, as he is dying, he recites by heart a letter sent by Christian’. To what extent are we all like Roxanne and Christian?

Considering the attribution of agency and mind endemic to ordinary language when we speak of objects, software, and biological systems, Peter thought that there is no harm in doing so, as long as we tacitly apply the modifier ‘as if’.

Peter offered that ‘mind’ can be used as an abbreviation of ‘current awareness’: ‘By this definition, if a surgeon stimulates a particular part of my nervous system, the image, feeling, or thought that arises, however fleeting, is my mind. And further, my feeling of continuity and identity is just one of these feelings. It’s wrong to say that images, feelings, and thoughts are in my mind. But I have a degree of sympathy for anyone using this way of talking, so long as they don’t confuse themselves’.

Shades: a haunting



CHRIS NORRIS

When Dame Helen Gardner, famous for her academic ferocity, lay dying, she too was visited [as Richard III was in Shakespeare's play] by the figures of those whose theses she had failed, whose careers she had marred; they stood round her bed.

A.D. Nuttall, quoted by Reynolds Price,
Ardent Spirits: leaving home and coming back

1 Avaunt, you shades: you have no business here!
Your failures, errors, faults are all your own.
Avaunt, you shades: you have no business here!

Merton Professor, now a dying crone,
I tell you: haunt no more my deathbed scene.
Your failures, errors, faults are all your own.

'The terror of the Faculty she's been',
I hear you whisper, but it's waste of breath.
I tell you: haunt no more my deathbed scene.

You faced exams or vivas; I face death.
Guilt finds me out, but that's not down to you.
I hear you whisper, but it's wasted breath.

For scholar-faults you paid the scholar's due.
Failed paper, thesis, book: what fault of mine?
Guilt finds me out, but that's not down to you.

Here I am, dying, I who held the line,
Dashed hopes, spoiled lives, trashed many a career,
Failed paper, thesis, book: what fault of mine?
Avaunt, you shades: you have no business here!

2 Some think the line I held a last retreat
For rancour, bigotry, or scholar's bile.
Some think the line I held a last retreat.

They err, of course: I have the proofs on file.
Why vex me with your pleas for sloppy thought?
No rancour, bigotry, or scholar's bile.

A virtuous campaign, the one I fought.
You miscreants crowd my bedside, but in vain:
Why vex me with your pleas for sloppy thought?

At times mere pity conquers me again:
Your stifled sobs, stray tears, that cry suppressed . . .
You miscreants crowd my bedside, but in vain!

Unerring scholarship, the only test,
Though sometimes errant memories obtrude;
Your stifled sobs, stray tears, that cry supressed . . .

Maybe, amongst the whispering multitude,
A few went on to sorrow, grief, defeat.
Sometimes these errant memories obtrude;
Some think the line I held a last retreat.

3 The poet Eliot praised my scholarship.
I parsed his verse much as I'd edit Donne;
The poet Eliot praised my scholarship.

No scoops, no gossip, no new love-tales spun,
Just reading close and detailed as it gets;
I parsed his verse much as I'd edit Donne.

He liked my treatment of his Four Quartets,
Percipient, faith-guided, sensitive,
Plus reading close and detailed as it gets.

‘Ash Wednesday’ haunts me still: ‘Shall these bones live?’.

Small comfort now, his favouring my gloss:
Percipient, faith-guided, sensitive.

I followed them, his stations of the cross.
What solace as I face it, their j'accuse?
Small comfort now, his favouring my gloss.

The voices say: some rigours one may lose,
Some scholar-virtues virtuously let slip.
What solace as I face it, their j'accuse,
Warmly though Eliot praised my scholarship.

4 Courage: no classic work they'd not betray.
Those textual howlers have a tale to tell.
Courage: no classic work they'd not betray.

‘Choose variants that serve the author well,
Impute fine feelings, seek the best intent’ –
Those textual howlers have a tale to tell.

It’s Empson’s view of what Donne really meant;
Let Gardner’s smear not show him swine or cad!
Impute fine feelings, seek the best intent.

My shades would think such licence nothing bad.
It’s Grierson’s text, not mine, they read at school;
Let Gardner’s smear not show him swine or cad!’

I say: that shows you heretic or fool.
Good editing alone keeps thinking sound.
It’s Grierson’s text, not mine, they read at school.

I curse them all who’d put such views around,
The sons of Empson, those who see no way
Good editing alone keeps thinking sound.
Courage: no classic work they’d not betray.



Dame Helen Gardner

5 Still they encircle me, the plaintiff shades.
Can they not see what deep disquiet they bring?
Still they encircle me, the plaintiff shades.

Almost I yield to it, their whispering,
Those voices alien yet familiar:
Can they not see what deep disquiet they bring?

Like Waste-Land thunder, rumbling from afar,
The overtones resound in all I write,
Those voices alien yet familiar.

Perhaps the grievance of a lover’s slight?
A thought (they say) I’m anxious to dismiss,
Though overtones resound in all I write.

‘See how she seems to seethe at us’, they hiss,
Those vandals out to trash canonic works,
Corrupt good texts, and feast their eyes at this,

My deathbed scene. No pleading ‘special circs’,
Not for those Jacks of all the devil’s trades,
Those vandals out to trash canonic works.
Still they encircle me, the plaintiff shades.

Wittgenstein

The mystery of words should stop us in our tracks.
Yet on we plough through muddy fields of symbolism
Loose-scattering words like seeds, effectuating acts,
Obscuring sense and forcing meanings through a prism.

Then he turned up in shabby shirt and threadbare coat
Rejecting all his wealth and spurning common forms.
War-worn, thought-tossed, his brilliant mind made him remote
From most conventionality and slipshod norms.

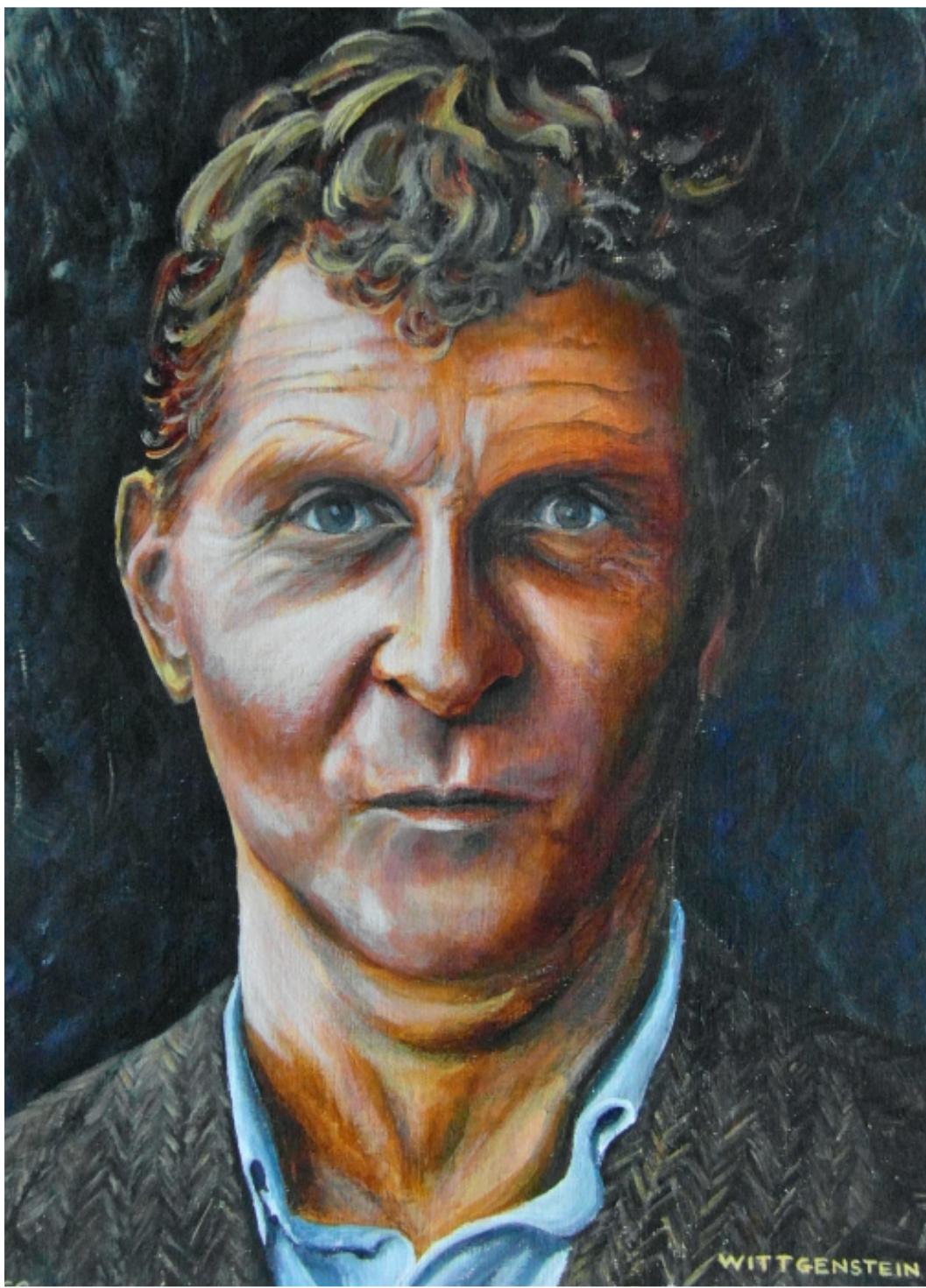
The language game, he said, keeps changing rules and players.
There is no certainty in words. They act as signs
To point us in a rough direction. Like surveyors,
But without measures, we still draw up sure designs.

His ideas hit me straight between the eyes – I saw
At once how all our understanding is misplaced
Unless allowances are made for metaphor
And sophistry with language tightly interlaced.

‘Reality laughs coarsely in our faces. Bewitched
By words, deceiving others and ourselves, we lift
The veils to inner worlds of mind and are enriched
By golden mountains, forgings of another’s gift.

This art, this is the language of the heart, distilled
And pure, eternal forms conceived in heaven’s womb.
Go, go beyond the limits of your world. Be filled
With life and light and love – escape the dreary tomb.

For death is no event in life. The restless now
Will carry you along and no horizon stays
Your passage – you are all that truth is – so allow
Your mind to soar and beat its wings in endless days’.



17

**Poem by Mike Churchman
Artwork by Chris Churchman**



'Protomolecule'

2022, Polyurethane foam
sculpture (26 cm)

The Expanding Universe

Dr. ALAN XUEREB

'The Expanse' is an American science fiction television series developed by Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby for the Syfy network, and is based on the series of novels of the same name by James S. A. Corey. The series is set in a future where humanity has colonized the Solar System.

In this series we watch humanity's first contact with an alien civilisation via their technology. The *Protomolecule* is the name given to the fictional alien technology discovered on the moon Phoebe in the *Expanse* novel series and television show. The exact nature and operation of the *Protomolecule* is never really described, but it appears to have the ability to reproduce itself, and to reprogram living material it comes in contact with for its own purposes.

The original purpose of the *Protomolecule* was to find a planet with simple life on it, and then re-purpose that

life into machinery useful for the alien race that created the *Protomolecule*. They would embed a payload of *Protomolecule* into an asteroid and then throw it across interstellar distances at a potentially life-bearing world in another solar system, where the *Protomolecule* would then lay the foundation for colonization of that system.

The notion of extra-terrestrials is somewhat ancient. Long before human civilizations developed a scientifically precise grasp of the universe, people across the world looked up at the heavens and speculated what was out there. When the philosopher Anaxagoras—who sought to provide scientific explanations for seemingly supernatural phenomena—suggested that 'the moon is not a god but a great rock and the sun a hot rock', he was arrested and sentenced to death. Anaxagoras would have met a fate similar to Socrates, but was banished instead of killed thanks to the pleading of his friends. Anaxagoras also considered the possibility that the

moon might be inhabited, a highly controversial supposition that contradicted the dominant view of the cosmos as outlined by Plato and Aristotle. Anaximander, writes Wade Roush, ‘was the first to propose that Earth is a body floating in an infinite void, held up by nothing’. Democritus, starting from the premise that there existed an infinite number of atoms, argued there must also exist an infinite number of worlds.

Belief in the existence of other worlds caught on with a number of philosophers, including Epicurus, who once wrote to the historian Herodotus that ‘there is an unlimited number of cosmoi, and some are similar to this one and some are dissimilar’.

Church doctrines did not stop Polish polymath Nicolaus Copernicus from writing *On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres*, but they did prevent him from publishing it. Copernicus’s work was then published posthumously.

The Dominican friar, mathematician, and cosmological theorist Giordano Bruno did not wait until his death to share his ideas about the universe. In three dialogues, published between 1584 and 1591, Bruno speculated that some distant stars might be suns, that these suns were orbited by planets of their own, and, last but not least, that some of these planets might be inhabited by life similar to Earth.

Nowadays, things have changed even from a theological point of view. In fact, regarding the existence of extra-terrestrial life, Father O’Meara told Catholic News Service in 2021 that the fact that there are billions of planets increases the likelihood of planets with both life and intelligent life. That belief, O’Meara added, would probably be supported by one of the church’s greatest scholars: St. Thomas Aquinas. Fr O’Meara stated that: ‘Thomas Aquinas’s view of the world is that God has made a world that is quite vast and quite diverse’. O’Meara thought this would apply to other living beings.

I brought this up here because it is often claimed that all religions and philosophies around our planet would instantly become somehow irrelevant if another more advanced civilisation were to contact us. One would definitely need to revisit and rethink certain ideas. There would be a period of re-adjustment within all fields of knowledge. This is pretty much what happened with newly discovered territories on our own planet a few centuries ago. Of course, it also depends on how ‘extra-terrestrials’, if they exist and decide to visit, would behave to us. The Conquistadores were not very kind to the Indios.

The difference would be that the whole planet with all its civilisations would possibly be a harder nut to crack than the Indios were. Or not?

One last remark, we often think of extra-terrestrials as anthropomorphic beings – humanoids – what if somehow those beings are long extinct and have sent something like the fictitious *Protonucleus* around the galaxy, in order to propagate their civilisation? Are we ready for that? Would we recognise it?

The Wednesday

Editor: Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

Copyright © Rahim Hassan

Website:

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

Editorial Board

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

Chris Seddon

Correspondences & buying

The *Wednesday* books:

c/o The Secretary,
12, Yarnells Hill,
Oxford, OX2 9BD

We have published fourteen cumulative volumes of the weekly issues. To obtain your copy of any one of the cumulative volumes, please send a signed cheque with your name and address on the back

*£15 for each volume
inside the UK*

or £18 for readers outside the UK:

*Please make your cheque out to
‘The Wednesday Magazine’*

or pay online

Account Number:

24042417

Sort Code:

09-01-29



Lavender Light - Photo by *Virginia Khuri*