

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Need for a Synthesis

It may be the case that Kant was the first to suggest the concept of synthesis. For him, the manifold of the senses and the concept of the understanding are synthesised through the imagination, with the help of the 'I think' that accompanies all my representations. This is the famous Kantian 'transcendental unity of apperception'. But the idea soon moved from the limited scope that Kant gave it to a much broader one with Fichte and later on Hegel.

Fichte's synthesis is in the opposite direction from Kant's. For Kant the manifold of experience is a given and the mind supplies concepts. For Fichte, the mind (intellect, or I) posits itself and the not-self (not-I), both are posited absolutely. This leads to a contradiction that needs a resolution through a synthesis. But another contradiction will arise and will be resolved again with another synthesis. Fichte's system is a cascading arrangement of syntheses. This is an *a priori* transcendental deduction. But the same method could work in the opposite direction, as in what he calls a 'genetic account of reason' or the 'pragmatic histories of reason'. He is the one who suggested the triad of synthesis, anti-thesis and synthesis. One could say that Hegel followed this scheme in the *a priori* conception of his *Logic* and pragmatically in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The point we are trying to make is of contemporary relevance. Every time there is a contradiction, there is a need for a synthesis. Take the history of philosophy since Plato, there is often denigration of the body and the senses. Even in Kant, the talk is of a pure reason, with the reason as the highest court with its ideas and disinterestedness in morality or aesthetic experience. The philosopher as a person, as an individual, falls out of the picture. But with a philosopher like Nietzsche, philosophy becomes the confessions of the particular philosophers who produce it.

Schiller, in his letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, recognised this problem before the birth of Nietzsche. Being a playwright, and writing during the life of Kant, and just after the publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, Schiller recognised the limitation of rationality and its impact on the individual and society. He thought you would impoverish the individual and society if you emphasised reason to the exclusion of the aesthetic (in its original sense – the sensible) and you get a similar influence from promoting the senses but limiting rationality. He thought there was a need for a synthesis, and the task of culture is to bring together the two and to create the perfect synthesis. Incidentally, Jane Austin's novel *Sense and Sensibility* could be read in this way.

Schiller's idea had a strong influence on his contemporaries. Changing the terms slightly, the unknown writer of *The Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism* (it could be Hegel, Holderlin or Schelling) thought that philosophy and science, and philosophy and mythology should come together. He thought that this would liberate physics: 'It does not appear that present-day physics could satisfy a creative spirit...' The writer says: 'I would like to lend wings once again to our sluggish physics.' Philosophy is aesthetic: 'The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy...one cannot reason intelligibly about history without aesthetic sense.' And that 'poetry thereby attains the higher dignity.' But 'until we render the ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythology, they are of no interest to the people.' That is why he calls for mythology to become philosophy and philosophy to become mythological.

The ideas above are relevant to the debate about the supposed antithesis of continental and analytical philosophy and I think a synthesis between the two may be the way of the future.

The Editor

Are We All Dead?



The analysis in this article is intended to highlight the (a) four basic assumptions in order to validly consider Bostrom's simulated universe, and to illustrate (b) that through analysing this hypothesis with reference to science fiction, we may explain the concepts of reality (virtual and non-virtual), creator, soul and afterlife.

DR. ALAN XUEREB

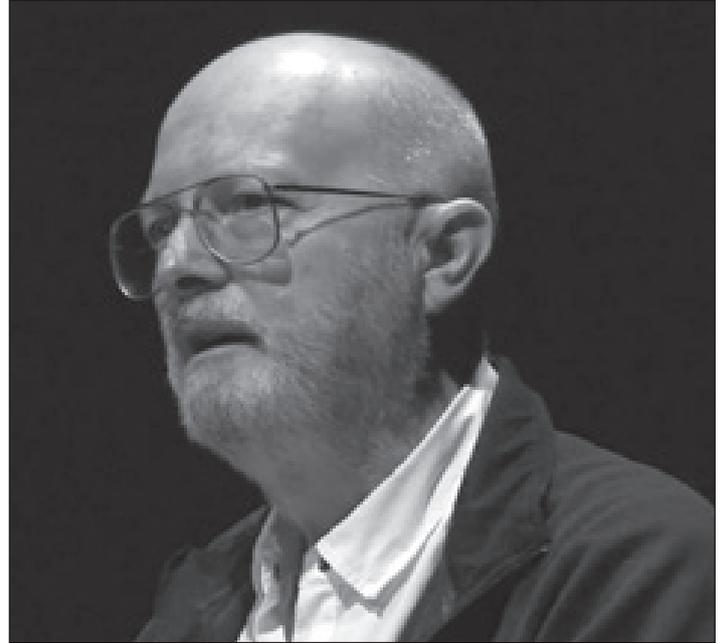
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What really makes us human is the prediction machine in our heads - from daydreaming to movies - running scenarios is the most unique activity humans possess. Despite the fact that some authors like Vinge in *The Coming Technological Singularity* (1993) argue that science-fiction authors cannot write realistic post-singularity a future period with rapid technological development when humans transcend their biology) characters which surpass the human intellect, as the thoughts of such an intellect would be beyond the ability of humans to express, there is a lot of sense in linking science fiction works (such as *Caprica*, *The Matrix* and *Terminator*) to Nick Bostrom's hypothesis, stating that we may be living in a simulated universe (see his: *Are you living in a computer simulation?* *Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 53, No. 211 (2003).)

Caprica is an American science fiction drama television series. It shows how humanity first created the Cylon androids who would later turn against their human masters. It is unlike *The Matrix*, which examines the moral implications that a simulated universe may have on a civilisation. *The Matrix* describes a future in which the reality perceived by humans is actually the Matrix, a simulated reality created by sentient machines in order to pacify and subdue the human population while their bodies' heat and electrical activity are used as an energy source. *The Matrix* examines a *fait accompli*, where the post-singularity machines have already taken over humanity, and the post-singularity humans are nothing more than a battery. *Caprica*, on the other hand, portrays the transition from pre-singularity (non-post-human) civilisation to the post-singularity



Nick Bostrom



Vernor Vinge

civilisation (or Transhuman). In Caprica humans start interfacing with the virtual world but have not completely fused with it, as in The Matrix. The Caprican simulation is there mainly for entertainment and one can enter and exit at any time by putting on and taking off the interfacing device in the natural world.

Bostrom's Hypothesis

Nick Bostrom argues that at least one of the following propositions is true:

- (1) the human species is very likely to go extinct before reaching a 'post-human' stage;
- (2) any post-human civilisation is extremely unlikely to run a significant number of simulations of their evolutionary history (or variations thereof);
- (3) we are almost certainly living in a computer simulation.

It follows that the belief that there is a significant chance that we will one day become post-humans who run ancestor-simulations is false, unless we are currently living in a simulation.

Four Basic Assumptions

There are four, non-exhaustive and non-exclusive, assumptions that are proposed as pre-requisites for this hypothesis to be validly examined.

First Assumption - Consciousness

If we are living in a simulation without us knowing, our creator has managed either (a) to reproduce an existing natural consciousness or (b) to produce one from scratch, and either of these/or a mixture of both for every single individual in this universe. The other option (c) is one that would hint at the creationist story of Adam and Eve – an initial virtual reproduction of natural humans that when transposed into the simulation gave rise to a simulated humanity. Then we would all be completely simulated - with a preceding evolutionary simulation that would have happened in the natural universe, but not in this one, but of course recreated as a simulation. This hypothesis starts fitting the religious narrative in a very disquieting way.

The Oxford Dictionary defines consciousness as: 'The fact of awareness by the mind of itself and the world'. This definition harps back to the old Cartesian maxim of *cogito ergo sum*. Consciousness translates mainly into self-awareness: I am aware of the fact

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that I am here thinking about thinking itself whilst I am writing this essay.

This leads us to the issue of reproducing in its minutest of details the consciousness of a human being or recreating a consciousness *ab initio*. The copied or created consciousness has to be able to pass the Turing test, which is a test of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a natural human. If I am in a simulation, anything less than this would probably not allow me to be capable of thinking about 'myself' thinking about my own thinking. This argument is captured in Caprica through the question: 'Are you alive?' The simple answer might be: 'you are alive, because you can ask that question'.

There has to be a way in order for the simulation hypothesis to be plausible theoretically to somehow copy, save and paste human consciousness, onto an avatar. Moreover, after having this consciousness uploaded to the mainframe of the simulation, similar to Skynet, one needs to give the avatars autonomy of behaviour to provide them with the perception of being real and to make them evolve like any natural human would do. (Skynet is a fictional neural net-based conscious group mind and artificial superintelligence system that features centrally in the Terminator franchise.)

This type of simulation, indistinguishable from natural reality, requires some degree/version of Vinge's and Kurzweil's 'singularity' where technical progress is so fast that unenhanced human intelligence will be unable to follow it. This autonomy and self-awareness is a pre-requisite since all avatars in the simulation would need to feel real. This point is being made here because this type of programming cannot efficiently be run *physically* by natural human beings, it thus needs either enhanced human beings who may have fused with artificial intelligence (AI) or a post-singularity superintelligence that is running the simulations continuously in some sort of evolution either because it was initially programmed to do so, or because it is trying to find out something through these simulations; or because it just can do it so it does it for entertainment.

It is legitimate to assume that the avatars are not necessarily continuously being manoeuvred by someone external, or if they are, the manoeuvring must feel

as if the avatar itself is thinking it. This is not much different from the 'holoband' in Caprica which when activated, projects an artificial virtual world into the wearer's mind. However, more plausibly the avatars would be running on independent subroutines. (A set of instructions designed to perform a frequently used operation within a program.) It is superfluous to state that such programming would need a very sophisticated AI that is capable of processing in real time and react exactly in the same way a natural human would. The avatar would not realise that the simulation was paused, for example.

The connection between this type of simulation and Caprica becomes central to this essay, since the series revolves around the creation of a race of sentient machines created by humans: the Cylons.

Second Assumption: Technological Advancement

From what has been already said we can legitimately conclude that a key part of this idea is that we will be able to capture the intelligence of our brains in a machine. In order to achieve life-like simulations indistinguishable from reality there has to be a degree of technology and computational and processing power of elevated magnitude. The creation of artificial neurons in the real world is essential if Bostrom's hypothesis is to be sustained.

Bostrom's simulation hypothesis is not a metaphor or allegory visualising the universe as a digital mainframe and all sentient beings in it as avatars, his argument is directed towards a 'real' simulated existence of the universe. How can this be achieved?

Ray Kurzweil's book *The singularity is near* (2006) breaks this argument down into hardware and software requirements. In his book, he shows how we need about 10 quadrillion (10^{16}) calculations per second (cps) to provide a functional equivalent to all the regions of the brain. Supercomputers are already at 100 trillion (10^{14}) cps, and will hit 10^{16} cps around the end of this decade.

To understand the principles of human intelligence and thus create avatars capable of being sentient, we need to reverse-engineer the human brain. Nowadays, scanning tools can see individual inter-neuronal connections, and watch them fire in real time. IBM is now creating a simulation of about 10,000 cortical



Caprica

neurons, including tens of millions of connections. The first version will simulate the electrical activity, and a future version will also simulate the relevant chemical activity. By the mid-2020s, it is conservative to conclude that we will have effective models for all of the brain.

Third Assumption: Non-Self-Destruction

Living in a simulated universe would explain the Fermi paradox. It would explain why there is an apparent contradiction between the lack of evidence and yet high probability estimates for the existence of extra-terrestrial civilisations. That would mean that we are probably alone in this simulated universe. Conceivably, the Great Filter is actually the simulation itself and not necessarily the self-destruction of a civilisation before it becomes post-human. But this is debatable.

The Great Filter concept originates in Robin Hanson's argument (1998) (*The Great Filter — Are We Almost*

Past It?) that the failure to find any extra-terrestrial civilisations in the observable universe implies the possibility that something is wrong with one or more of the arguments from various scientific disciplines that the appearance of advanced intelligent life is probable. It could well be, that after reaching a certain level of advancement these civilisations just annihilate themselves. This is connected to Bostrom's first argument, and appears to, somehow, validate it. If there is a civilisation that is capable of creating a simulated humanity it must not have destroyed itself. However, another explanation supporting Bostrom's hypothesis is that an advanced civilisation did actually make it to the singularity era, and then destroyed itself soon after, leaving the AI running this simulated universe. That would mean that if we are in fact avatar copies existing in a simulated universe and our creators have destroyed themselves leaving us evolving in a post-singularity AI, we (the natural us – if we are not digitally created from scratch) are all already dead.

Events

The last programming instruction if at all to this AI must have been 'keep them alive'. The AI might cater to the conception of a resurrection like a god would do, minimally interfering in everyday affairs and giving humanity guidance from time to time through visions, miracles, commandments, realisation of an afterlife etc.

Fourth Assumption: The Will To Run Scenarios

As stated at the outset, the human brain is an 'anticipation machine' and 'making future' is the most important thing it does. The civilisation(s) that has/have this capability of running such scenarios ought to want to run scenarios. Bostrom's second argument states that is highly unlikely for a post-human civilisation (so one which has gone beyond the singularity threshold) to have any interest in running a simulation of humanity's existence.

One must be reminded here that Bostrom's arguments are statistical. He goes on to say that if such a post-human civilisation does not have the will to run these scenarios, then there is an elevated probability that we are already living in a simulated reality. But why would an advanced (not yet post-human) civilisation create a virtual world?

Reason 1: Accumulation of Knowledge

A post-human civilisation or post-human AI may have the desire to accumulate knowledge far greater than the current human desire for knowledge. This type of civilisation/AI would need constant input of data; it would want to understand everything there is to understand about humanity, in detail.

Reason 2: Avoidance of Responsibility/Entertainment

If the simulation is not carried out by a post-singularity AI for its own purposes, but run by an advanced civilisation which is not yet post-human, there could be the desire to avoid consequences.

For example, in such ancestral simulations, since the legal and moral regime is only real for the avatars in the simulation but not for the natural humans, there would be the 'desire' to live the ancestral experiences that would not be possible in their natural universe. They would be able to do and to be whatever and

whoever they want to, without incurring any 'real' legal or factual responsibility.

Reason 3: Time Travel – Without Travelling

The other reason is accessory to the previous one. The simulation would be just one way - to time travel into the past of one's own civilisation without actually travelling in time. This would imply that some of the persons running the scenario could be somehow participating with the rest of the avatars in the simulation, as observers. One would assume that anthropologists, historians, psychologists and so on, would want to glean all the important details on how their ancestors lived.

Reason 4: Catastrophic Event

Some event might have occurred that would have changed the way of life of that civilisation and the only way to understand what caused it is through running simulations.

As a corollary to this and perhaps in the wake of such an event, the members of the advanced civilisation would have fused with the super-intelligent (so they would have become post-human) in such a way that they would not need their physical bodies anymore and are living in their 'reality' and living in our 'reality' at the same time/or in and out at will. It would be like day dreaming for them. When the gods are dreaming we are living. This again would lead us to think that if we were copied saved and pasted we must already be dead in the natural universe.

Final Thoughts

I am tending towards concluding that the more realistic simulations become the more the members of a civilisation - whether they would be advanced humans, post-singularity humans or post-human - would desire to run them (consider the concept of the holodeck in Star Trek.) In the event that only the AI may be left of the original civilisation and we are existing only as data in a supercomputer, I agree with David Chalmers's interpretation of the simulation hypothesis, that everything in the simulation would still be real, and considering it as an illusion would be a philosophical mistake. At least from the avatars' point of view. As he puts it:



The Matrix

'Just say it turns out that we discover somehow that we're in the 'matrix'. And the tables, and chairs, and buildings around me are all coming from a computer simulation. Should we say, "They don't exist"? I think not! I think we should say that we've discovered something about what tables, and chairs, and buildings are made of.'

Moreover, if we are living in a simulated universe consider how easier it would be to explain miracles happening at the right time, to explain how Lazarus woke from the dead, how Jesus disappeared from his tomb and appeared to the Apostles, how Noah got visions of what to do before the flood. It would also explain how the great religions' concepts of heaven and hell were formed.

It would certainly explain the concept of afterlife brilliantly and flawlessly, since afterlife would be a sort of reloading of the avatar's data that deserves to carry on existing on another plane, in another dimension - within a resurrection programme (or a reincarnation programme). This is exquisitely portrayed in the episode entitled 'the Unvanquished', where using Zoe's avatar program, Clarice wants to create a virtual heaven which allows believers to sacrifice themselves in the natural world to live forever in a virtual one. Such a hypothesis would also easily explain the omnipresence and omnipotence of God. It would also

fit the idea that God created us in His image.

Whilst the passage of time for the avatars in the simulation would feel real, for the external entity controlling and/or examining the simulation the passage of time could be different. The entity running the simulation would be able to go back to a specific event and re-live it without affecting any of the other content. (See the followings in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: Talbott, Thomas, 'Heaven and Hell in Christian Thought', (Fall 2017 Edition), Hasker, William and Taliaferro, Charles, 'Afterlife', (Winter 2017 Edition), Wierenga, Edward, 'Omnipresence', (Spring 2017 Edition), Hoffman, Joshua and Rosenkrantz, Gary, 'Omnipotence', (Winter 2017 Edition))

If Bostrom's hypothesis is indeed correct then, the question asked here is: are we really alive? It is best to reply to this question with another question: 'does it really matter?' If we are artificially sentient and our sentience feels as 'real' as that of the natural humans who created the simulation in the first place, is there really a difference between the concept of reality of the simulated and the simulators? Are we ghosts in a machine? Are we zombies, dead and alive, at the same time? The answer to all these questions is probably no. We are sentient and that is what should really matter!

Bishop Berkeley's Apology



CHRIS NORRIS

That there is no such thing as what philosophers call material substance, I am seriously persuaded: but if I were made to see anything absurd or sceptical in this, I should then have the same reason to renounce this, that I imagine I have now to reject the contrary opinion.

George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*

Berkeley, after abolishing matter, is only saved from complete subjectivism by a use of God which most subsequent philosophers have regarded as illegitimate.

Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*



Mere common sense, though mostly thought absurd.

Mere common sense,

though it was quite a while

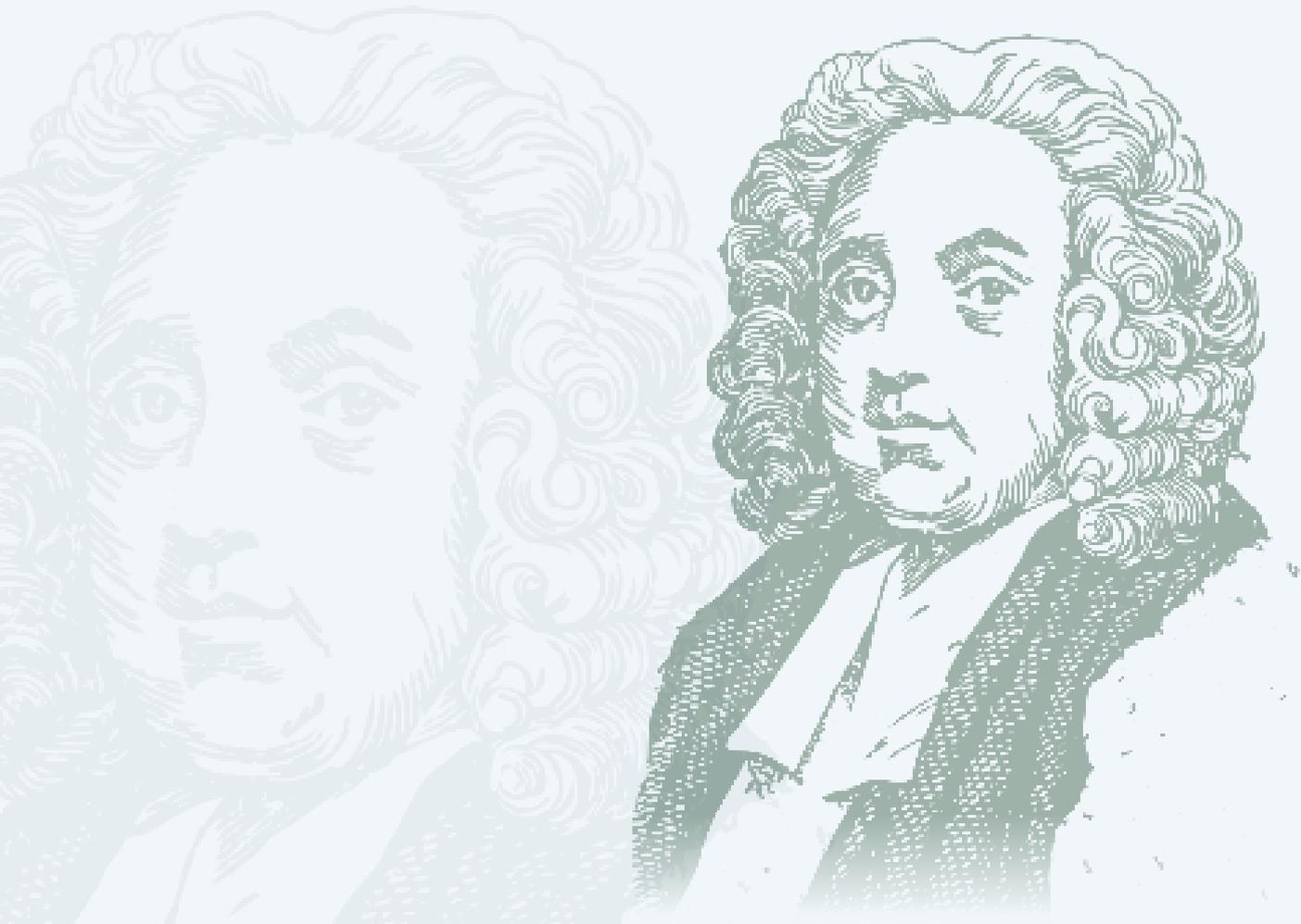
Before my first few acolytes concurred.

All down to Locke, my world-upending style!

All down to Locke,

my wrecking the pretence

Of realist types to go that extra mile.



Though he demurred, I jumped right off the fence.
Though he demurred
 for fear that they should mock,
I came right out and broke the thought-suspense.

Let me not smile at this, their state of shock.
Let me not smile
 as the Locke-tutored herd
Of *faux*-empiricists reel from the dock.

Their recompense? To grasp what I inferred!
Their recompense?
 to grasp that minds compile
No world-accompt till by the senses stirred.

Poetry

The real's in hock to our sense-data file!
The real's in hock
to our not knowing whence
They come, those semblances that so beguile.

An otiose third, the realist's last defence.
An otiose third,
that 'real' dragged in to block
The truth of things that sense and God dispense.

How then make trial, how take your realist stock?
How then make trial
of whether that fine word,
'Reality', kicks back like Johnson's rock?

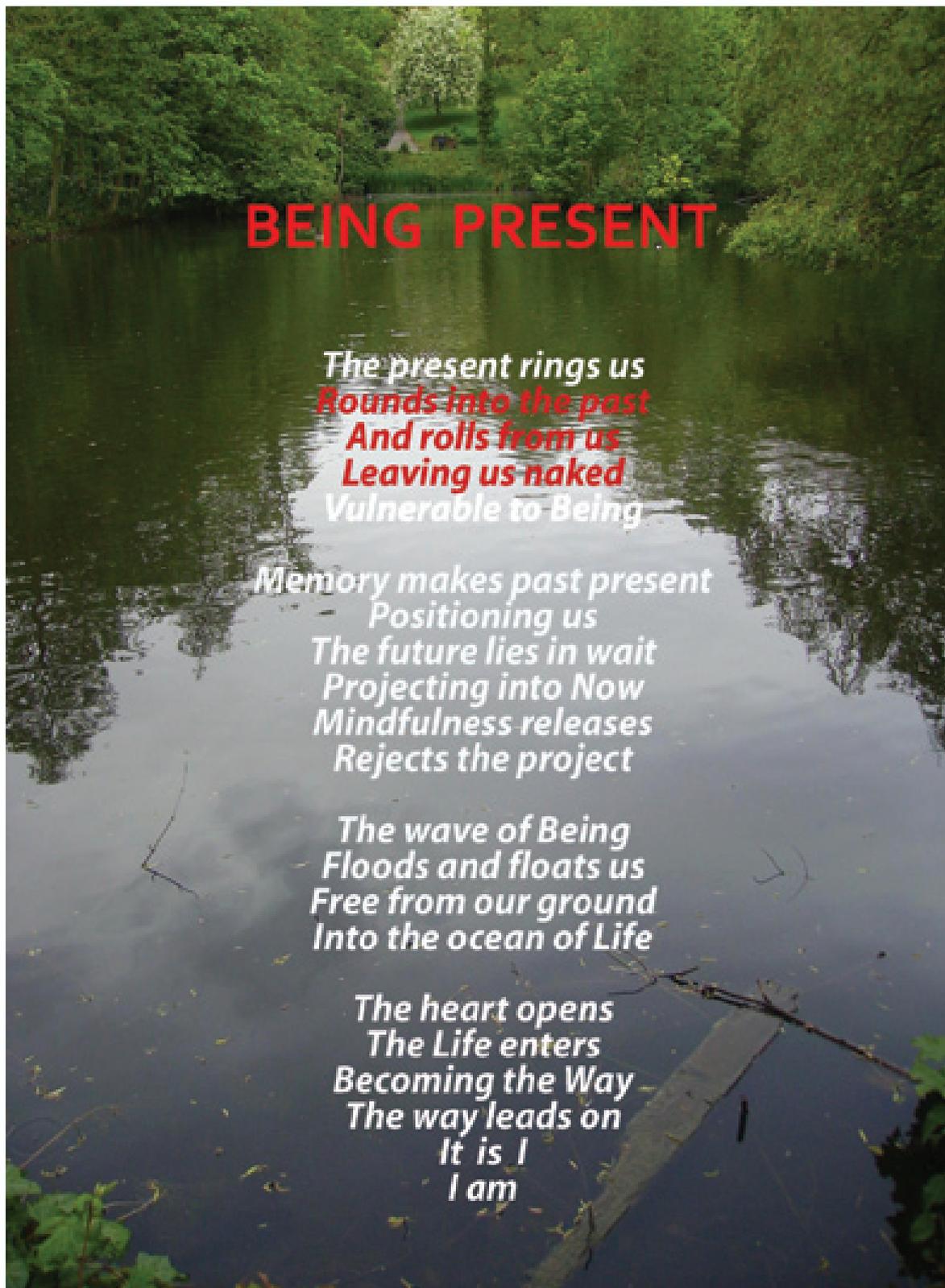
Sound thoughts commence with what's seen, felt, or heard.
Sound thoughts commence
with God to reconcile,
Through sense, the mind-world schism they averred.

The realist flock deem such talk puerile.
The realist flock
reject my evidence
That *real's* a reading off the sensory dial.

Be not deterred by jests at our expense.
Be not deterred;
There's no hole they can knock
In truths God-vouched through human sentience.

Reflections

Text and Photo by William Bishop



Angels of Death

Everywhere shadows, there is a great silence.

Someone who will soon be gone.

Tell me

Ariel, Azrael, Azriel,

in the quiet impenetrable night,

tell me.

whisper the word

in the flower, barely, sweetly

like in front of an altar

impenetrable

in the deep darkness,

a gentle breeze is blowing

so quietly

I would like to sleep a little. My eyes are already closed.

Come.

Look.

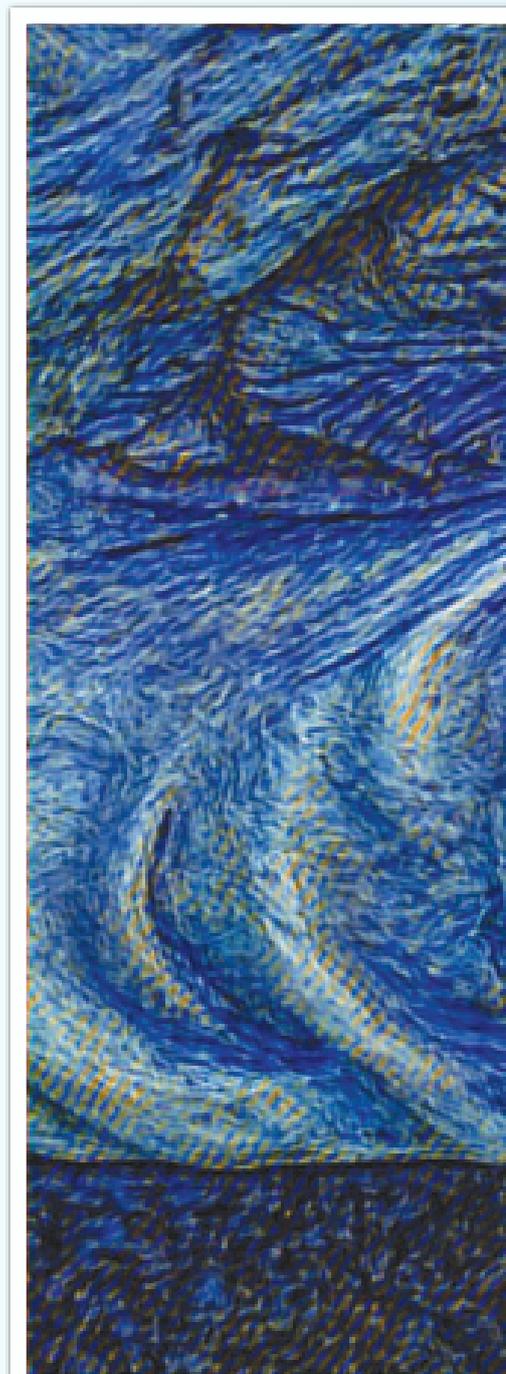
Weave

rays of light through the lonely night,

so lonely. Thirst.

Come.

Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws





After Reading Seamus Heaney

The page is an anvil to clout fired thoughts into
Keen edge tools, cutting into sod or soul.
Each line begins with a big letter, a workman's
Fresh wield to drive the point home. Every stanza
Perfectly bevelled to slide smoothly through the head.

Open the book and I am leaning against the roughly hewn
Guinness in hand listening to the fellah conjuring up
Those mythical blokes that emerge from a mist
Or yet to appear in meaningful dreams.

Is the sight of Adam toiling the dust, a defining image,
Cursing God for the stretch of another day.
I can recall when living was a heavy chore.
Backs cracked, knees sagged, men stumbled to their graves.
Can't blame the lumpen-lads for lying on their backs
Resting sweat-less paunches waiting for the final stab.

But what is missing now and why the chomp of the axe
The ring and slice of the spade is still in our ears,
Is the workman's pride, to be more than a senseless
Knot of muscles. Eye and hand a perfect unity
To shape a scratch of land, until time drags it back again

Who needs a catechism when you have the entire sky to bawl at?
The only true belief is that you have it in you
To get up tomorrow and begin again.

David Burridge



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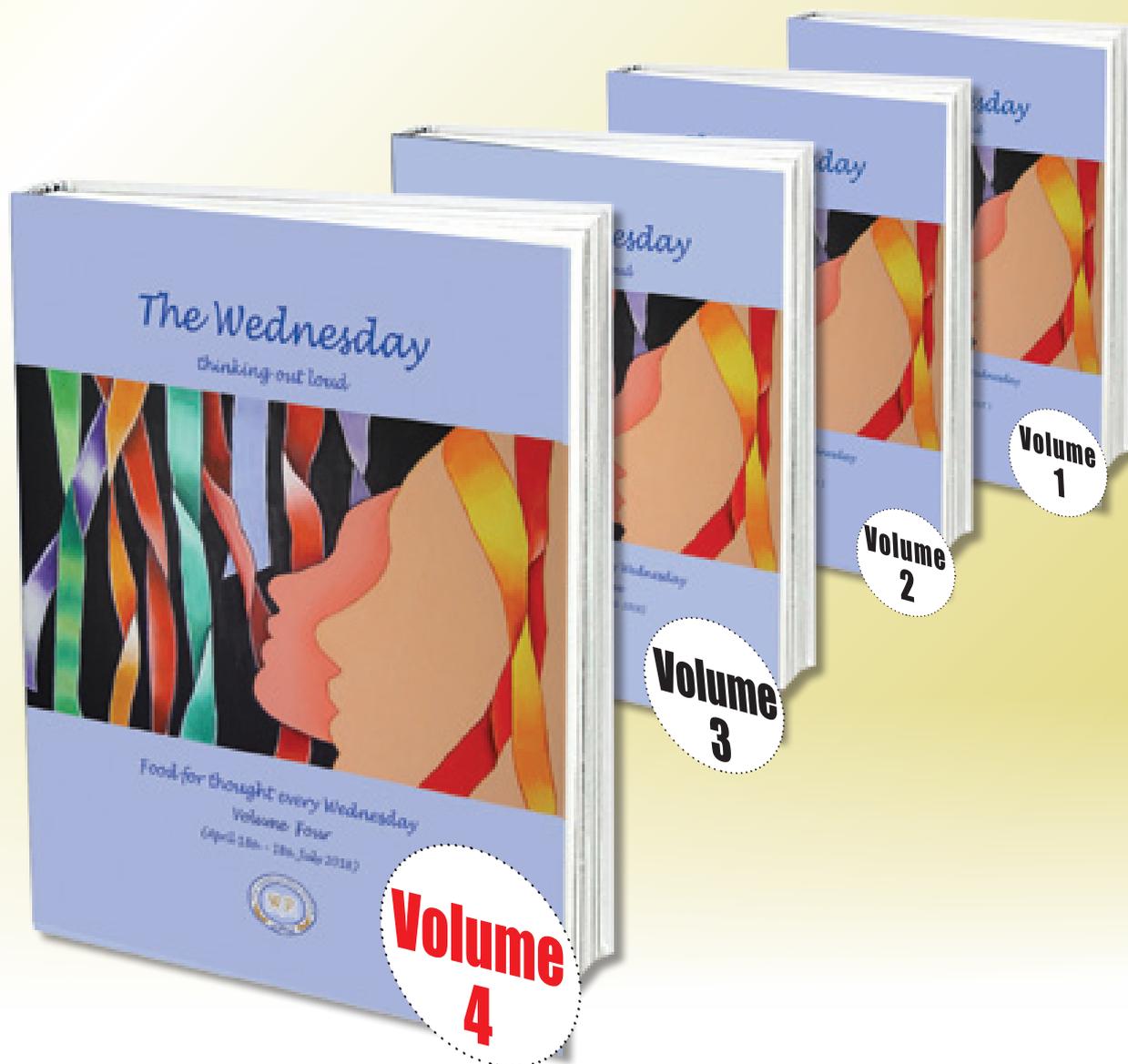
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