The *Wednesday*

Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Philosophy and Self-Transformation

We have recently discussed in our weekly meeting the relationship between philosophy and wisdom and we reported on the debate in the magazine. This is part of going back to basics and connecting philosophy with the life of the individual and society. Philosophy has become too professionalised and remote. The personal and intimate relationship with philosophical thinking is missing and the point of philosophy as the love of wisdom is disappearing. It was Kierkegaard who objected to Hegel's system on the basis that you can talk about absolute knowledge, truth and system but what would all that do for me – what is truth for me?

The question of wisdom also connects to other topics: self-transformation and the meaning of life. The first of these is the topic of a forthcoming conference next summer and the second is the subject of several books with similar titles. We will deal with the first question and leave the other for a future occasion.

What do we mean by philosophy and self-transformation? The circular for the conference at University of Konstanz, Germany, says:

> 'It seems that the notion of transformative experience might be productively applied to the therapeutic and transformative aspects of the enterprise of philosophy itself. Indeed, from its ancient beginnings to the present day, philosophy is not a purely theoretical endeavour but also has a strong experiential aspect and might even be conceived of as a practice of self-transformation. This application of transformative experience to the activity of philosophy has not yet been developed in any detail....'

But where do we start? Philosophers gave us their view of how their lives were transformed but also demanded from us that we read their text and assume its truth to be able to change our outlook on life.

The experience of self-transformation started with Socrates. Philosophers before him were were interested in either science (the Pre-Socratics) or politics (the Sophists). His own thoughts were reflected back on his own life. He was totally committed to them. For example, he thought that there is a certain knowledge that one may have that does not allow weakness of the will. One will also be happy and unaffected by any miserable circumstances. Socrates was utterly convinced of the eternity of the soul and faced death calmly.

But how does the transformation happen? Socrates thought that it comes through examining one's life and concepts. But for others, starting with Plato, it was a vision-like experience. Avicenna, towards the end of his life, thought that all his work on Peripatetic philosophy was not worth the effort and that there was a more direct way of knowing through illumination. A similar experience was reported by St. Thomas and both these examples were life-transforming experiences. Descartes and Jung believed in the power of dreams.

There is also the bookish answer. Hegel, Fichte and Schelling thought that reading their texts would influence their readers. The German Romantics had a similar belief but with a strong emphasis on poetry (mainly philosophical poetry) and novels as a way of self-transforming and changing the world. In our time, both Sartre and Camus have done the same.

Another way of finding self-transformation is through an inner dialogue, as in St. Augustine's confessions, as opposed to the conversational way of Socrates. Nietzsche talked about all these ways of transformation but added music. He also warned against following his path and wrote that the reader had to make his own way: be yourself. We do agree with the organisers of the conference that there is an urgent need to analyse the concept of philosophy and self-transformation. The thoughts above are our contribution to the debate.

The Editor

Towards
A Reasonable Belief

Reason is the power of mind to think, form opinions and judgements and reach logical conclusions. For it to reach logical conclusions, however, it needs to be based on a firm factual premise. Belief is a principle or idea accepted as true, without proof. The quality of a reasoned conclusion or judgement is wholly dependent on the verity of the premise. So, what has belief got to do with reasoning? In theory, absolutely nothing; in practice I argue that belief and reason interact in most of our cognition.

DAVID **BURRIDGE**

Jung

I n this essay I want explore three common manifestations of the interaction between reason and belief:

(i)   Beliefs are formed through short-term psychological pressures, where reason may eventually become more soundly based. It may also be a tendency in us to operate intuitively.

(ii)   Beliefs are part of a culturally internalised system. Open dialogue allows reason to form a different premise to be explored. This depends on society and us allowing it.

(iii)   Where an unyielding dogmatic belief distorts reasoning, no questioning is tolerated, and all conclusions are made internally valid, even if externally unsound.

In all these situations reason is like a vehicle which travels from wherever the driver turns on the ignition. Belief does not necessarily supress reason, but rather directs it. Experience is the raw material of all cognition. It triggers us to reason but also may invoke perceptions that are consistent with beliefs.

Hume identified it as the overwhelming basis of reason. He asks the question 'What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning the matter of fact?' (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Part II paras 28-36.)* He concludes that the relation of cause and effect is founded on experience. Nature, he says, 'has kept us at great distance from all her secrets […]' (Ibid). In his example of bread, he claims that 'our senses inform us of the colour, weight and consistence of bread: but neither sense nor reason inform us of those qualities which fit it for nourishment and support of the human body' (Ibid) It is experience; the frequent repeating of the experiment which enables us to reason that nourishment occurs. He concludes: 'Custom then, is a great guide of human life. It is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect for the future, a similar train of events with those that have appeared in the

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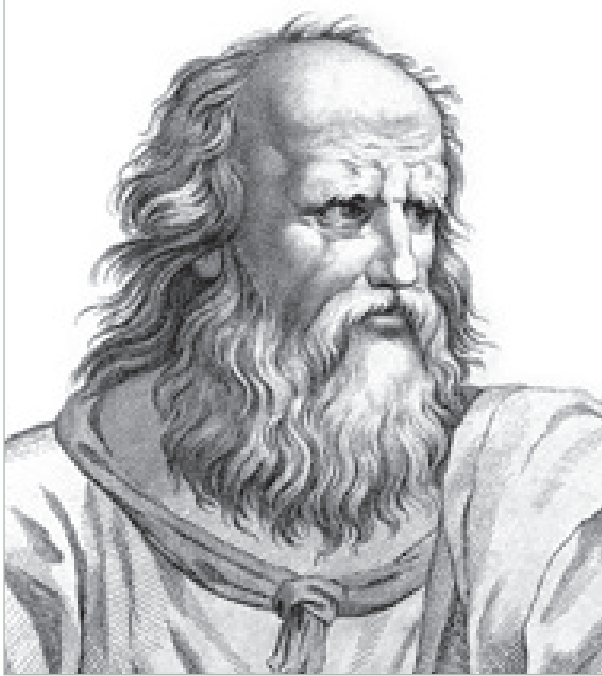
Plato

Jonathan Glover

past.' (Ibid). Hume concludes that experience has its own inherent logic, which would reduce belief to an extension of past experience.

Kant puts experience into context in the introduction of his *Critique of* pure reason: "Experience is without doubt the first product that our understanding brings forth as it works on the raw material of sensible sensations […] Nevertheless it is far from the only field to which our understanding can be restricted. It tells us, to be sure, what is, but never that it must necessarily be thus and not otherwise." (*Critique of Pure Reason* –Introduction - On the difference between pure and empirical cognition.) Kant enables us to consider belief as something derived from a cognitive faculty quite separate from sensory experience. For experience to be a sound basis for judgment, one needs to carefully examine the facts on which the premise is constructed and the reasonableness of the projected period. It is common sense to look at past patterns, but they are open to interpretation and beliefs can configure that interpretation.

Science proceeds with a careful blending of deductive and inductive reasoning. But what of life on the street? I want to look at the first manifestation mentioned above through an example:

A production manager is asked to find a solution to a particular product quality problem. There is an urgent order for an important customer and everyone is putting him under pressure, even questioning his ability to do the job. He searches his memory for a similar experience, remembers two factors: poor workmanship and faulty raw materials. Because of the pressure he is under, he comes to believe that faulty materials is the answer. His self-belief eliminates all doubt and he goes ahead with his solution. One outcome might be that the faulty material was the problem. The other outcome is that the doubt that was eliminated made him miss an important fact and he had not trained his operators properly. An objective analysis would have identified the true solution to the problem. The particular psychological pressures prejudiced the process of reaching a sound solution. This is

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Philosophy

an example that could be easily remedied with an open organisation, stressing the importance of facts, and some management coaching.

We all, to a greater or lesser extent, operate on what I am calling short-term beliefs*: I believe this is the way to go, therefore let's give it a try*. Jung differentiates between rational and intuitive types. (*Jung Selected writings* ed. Anthony Storr, Part 5, Introduction to Psychological Types). So, someone who operates intuitively (sometimes known as gut-feel) is processing reality almost regardless of any sensory data. His judgements are based on internalised knowledge, past experience or the interpretation of past experience. So, there is a tendency for belief and reason to interact either because of pressures of circumstances or personality bias.

By and large, what I call short-term beliefs can be altered by being open to the experience of reality. But what of those beliefs internalised by culture and education?

The philosopher Jonathan Glover suggests that beliefs have to be considered holistically, and no belief exists in isolation in the mind of the believer. (*On Systems of belief* - Philosophy Bites Podcast Oct 9th, 2011). Glover emphasizes that beliefs are difficult to change. We might seek to try to rebuild our beliefs on more secure foundations, like rebuilding a house. He says; however, we should see beliefs not like houses but like boats: 'Maybe the whole thing needs rebuilding, but inevitably at any point you have to keep enough of it intact to keep it afloat'

He uses the Neurath Boat concept where there is a recursive replacement of rotten planks with new ones, without the danger of sinking the boat. Glover explains that philosophers should encourage a Socratic dialogue of peoples' beliefs, where the sense and reason of aspects of the belief are explored, rotten plank by rotten plank, without the fear of drowning. (Ibid). The *rotten planks* are of course aspects of beliefs which do not stand up to sound reasoning or are perceived to have a negative social impact. Whether a plank is rotten or seasoned is always open to discussion. Such a discussion should be led by the believer who is open to reviewing his boat's structure. A group of young students may well be in that position.

For some people, beliefs take the form of a complete dogma and believers have the tendency to adjust argument to fit the beliefs, even to shape their perception of reality to suit them. Why don't we set aside all belief systems and operate with tested premises and pure reason?

One answer might be that we have all been through a process of internalising norms and values through our childhood, and it requires a changed consciousness to see that these are not the whole truth. Erich Fromm described the difficulties of seeking freedom from ingrained values. And whilst the journey to freedom can be wonderful, there is a dangerous and painful journey of leaving the old values behind. He describes how we are often prepared to surrender to authoritarian control rather than lose our mooring. We are freed from authority but that leaves us with a feeling of hopelessness. We need to belong and therefore we are easy prey to dictators. (*Fear of Freedom*, particularly chapter V, Mechanisms of Escape.)

How do we reconcile belief and reason? Not by socially outlawing belief as something false or strange, but more by allowing beliefs to be expressed and then encouraging dialogue. This works on all of my three types. In the case of what I have called short term beliefs, it is about encouraging open meetings, coaching and counselling. With the more internalised belief systems, encouraging the kind of Socratic dialogue proposed by Jonathan Glover is the answer.
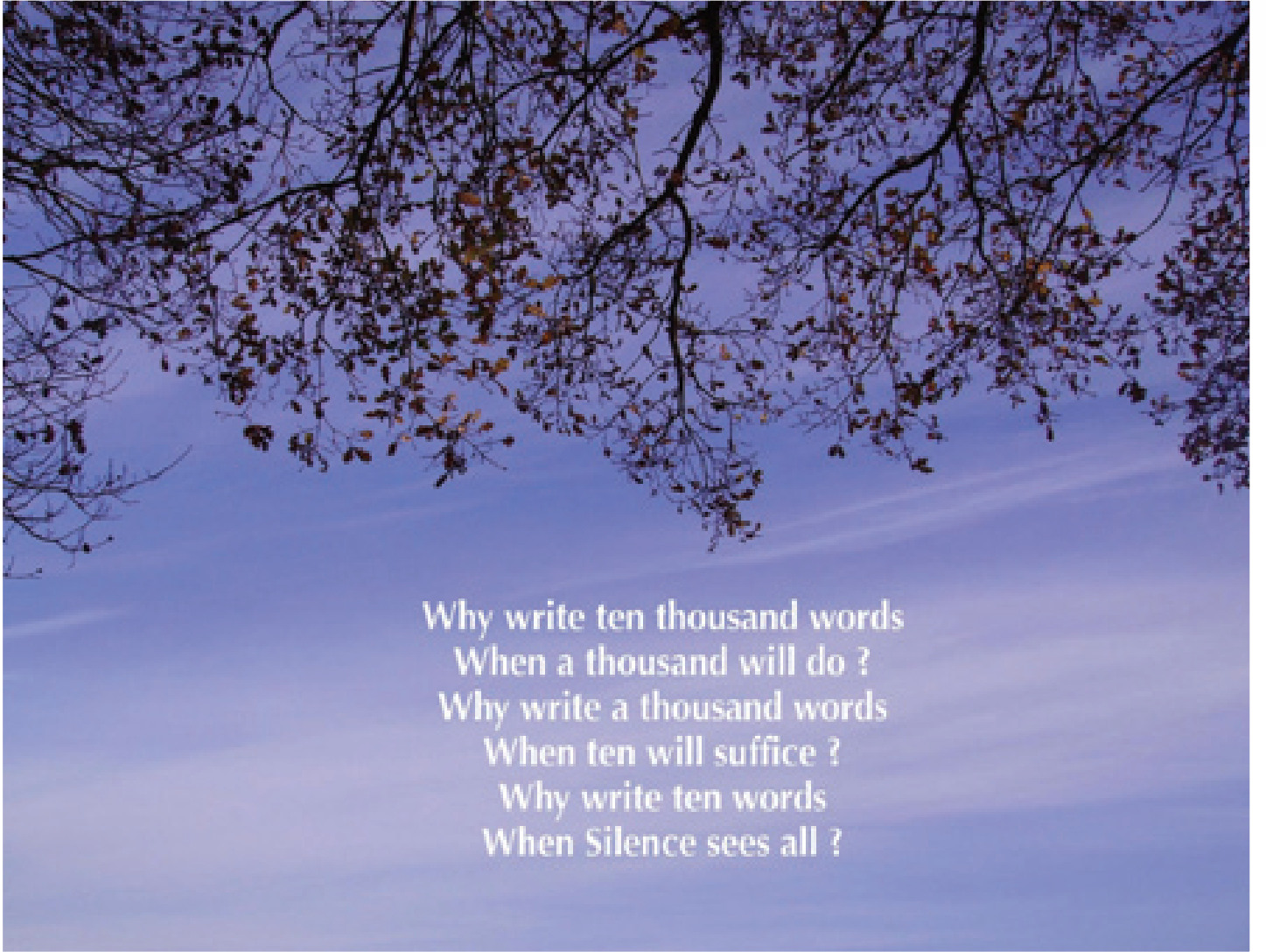
There will always be the dogmatic type who has closed the door to any reasoned argument. Here it is a question of helping them to open the door and, rather than condemning them, showing by example how reasoned belief can help to mend boats rather than sink them.

My proposition is that belief and reason are interactive elements of our cognitive process. I have looked at three manifestations to illustrate this point. In any situation, we should aim for the ideal of reasonable belief.

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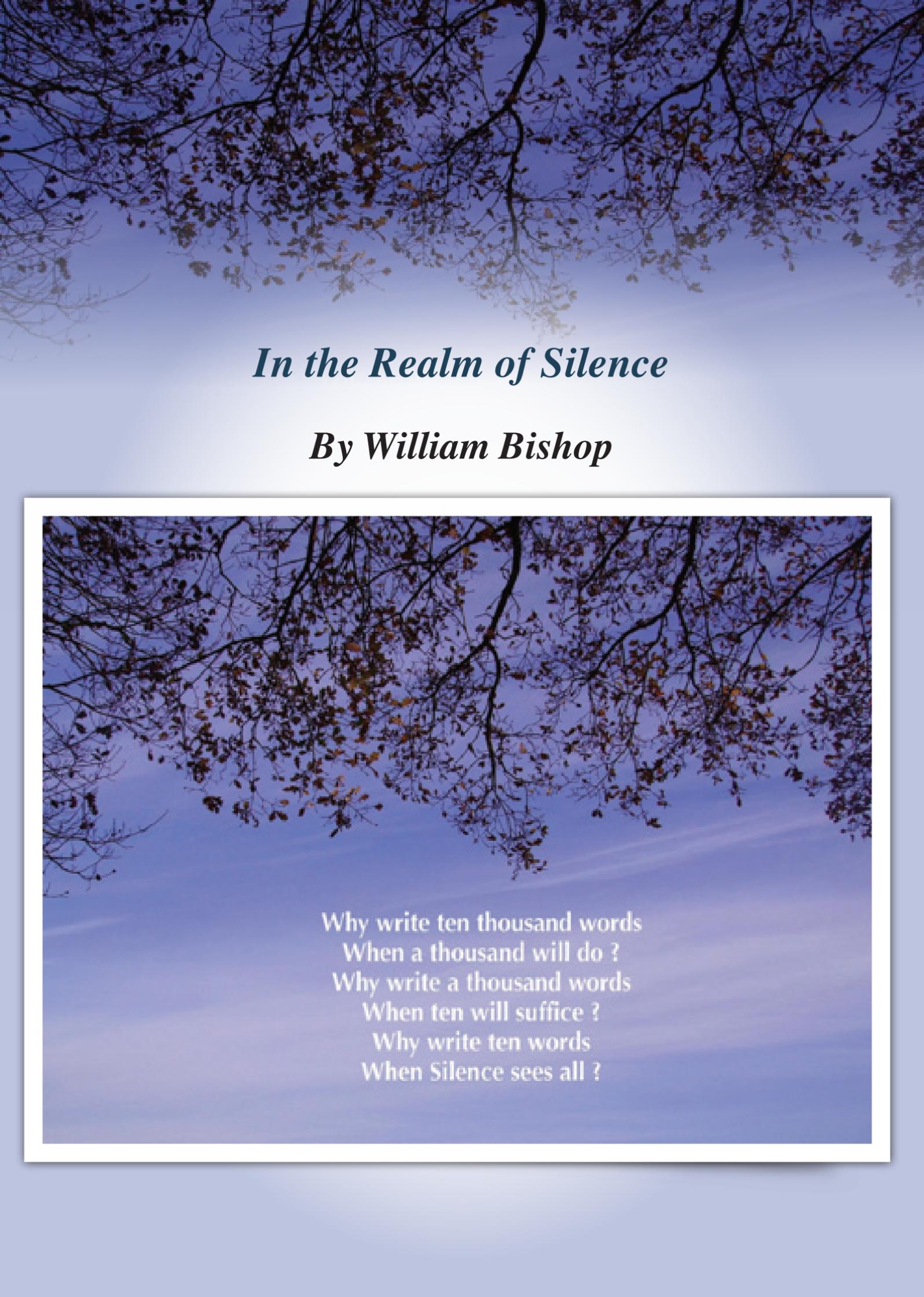
In the Realm of Silence

By William Bishop

Why write ten thousand words
When a thousand will do ?
Why write a thousand words
When ten will suffice ?
Why write ten words
When Silence sees all ?

The Need for a System

Notes on the Wednesday Meetings Held on 12th of December 2018

PAUL **COCKBURN**

We discussed systems theory and systematicity, the latter being the ability to approach problems in a disciplined and orderly way. A number of questions arise:

Does philosophy need a system? Is a system a thing of the past? Has continental philosophy moved away from the idea of a system? Is analytical philosophy a system or a method? Is there a need for systematicity? Are systems part of the history of philosophy or can they teach recent philosophy something useful?

Kant introduced his Critical method (the conditions of the possibility of experience) to undermine the old metaphysics and to build a philosophy compatible with science. The very idea of science (as a systematic body of knowledge) became the obsession of his successors. They tried to systematize Kant's philosophy and develop his method. His questions were: What I can know? What should I do? What may I hope?

Kant restricted his metaphysics to a minimum, but the old metaphysics re-entered his system through the in-itself and teleological judgments. His successors tried to avoid the duality of his thought. They proposed a unified system but only by moving into Transcendental Idealism. All these attempts produced a comprehensible philosophy that has derived epistemology, ethics and aesthetics from one principle.

But modern philosophy, especially English-speaking philosophy, did away with this approach. It is no longer a system but a method. But a method pre-supposes a certain ontology and metaphysics. For example, Descartes took the world to be mathematically constructed. Mathematics became the ideal for his philosophy and science. Modern philosophy followed science and nature and tried to replace teleological explanations with mechanical explanations and metaphysics with naturalism. Has recent philosophy solidified into a rigid system of its own? Has the method become a system? Is this desirable or regrettable?

We also talked about systems engineering, which is applied to manufacturing processes in industry. It looks in detail at the parts of a system, but also the totality, studying the relationships between the parts in terms of feedback loops, and cause and effect. Applying this to economics, models were made of the totality of a business (including sales forecasts, financial factors etc.). In one extraordinary case in the 1970s, a running model of the whole economy of Chile was used by Stafford Beer to control the economy in 'real-time'. To do this the system had to of course include material **and** human factors. Econometric models of the economy include soft social factors as well as harder facts.

Mechanistic models of say water flowing in a pipe are scientific and accurate, but social factors are more difficult to model, control and measure.

So how can systems theory be applied to philosophy? One question is what sort of system is nature? Schelling saw nature as a developing system of opposing forces, such as magnetism, these forces then leading to electricity, irritability and sensation (in terms of our senses), then understanding and reason. We, at the (current) end of this process can use our reason to understand how nature works. Put in another way, it is reason, which is objectively in nature, coming to understand itself. A system of philosophy can be either deduced a priori from an idealistic point of view or worked out empirically. But in the latter, you have to take nature as more than its product, nature as a living whole, active and rational.

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From The Wednesday magazine's Christmas dinner

First Principles

In philosophy, history seems to show that significant philosophers often want to start from some underlying principle and deduce everything from that. We want to organize knowledge in some way, but we also need a first principle. However, the first principle is later on shown to be inadequate. The first principle for Descartes was 'I think therefore I am'. This idea was dominant in philosophy for a long time but then came under criticism.

The same has happened to Fichte's 'I', the active self, encountering the 'not-I'. It developed into existentialism, with a powerful concept of freedom, which Marxists, materialists and structuralists then tried to overturn.

We also discussed the decline of the 'inner self'. In Fichte and Nietzsche there is no submission, no weakness or darkness of the subconscious to weaken the self. This is not true in our current culture.

There is not much discussion now of the nature of our inner desires. We tend to emphasise performativity and expressiveness more, and are concerned with factors such as protecting the rights of people which should not be infringed.

Philosophy in Japan

We were privileged to have with us our guest speaker from Japan, Mao Naka. She gave a talk on motherhood a few weeks ago. We discussed with her how Western culture and Western people often seem to be separated from nature. In Japanese culture, in practices such as Jui-jitsu, Taekwondo, and Zen religion, there is the idea of a direct access to Qi, the energy of nature. Here you align yourself with the energy flow in nature, which is not binary in the sense of consisting of binary opposed processes. One aim is not to block the energy flow around us and in our bodies. People try to incorporate nature into themselves, in what seems to be a mystical way, but involves 'every-day' practices such as yoga, breathing and achieving good posture.

In the West we seem to experience big egos squabbling, and perhaps out of this conflictual process comes invention, but it is also disruptive to society. Eastern societies can produce things very efficiently but perhaps they do not innovate and invent so much. Japanese and other Eastern societies want to engender harmony, so they ensure for example that there is greater social justice, that workers are on the boards of firms, and that working in teams is the natural way to work.

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Four Sestinas After Kafka

CHRIS **NORRIS**

'A Report to an Academy'

And so I learned things, gentlemen. Ah, one learns when one has to; one learns when one needs a way out; one learns at all costs. My ape nature fled out of me, head over heels and away, so that my first teacher was almost himself turned into an ape by it, had soon to give up teaching . .

Franz Kafka, 'A Report to an Academy'

Dear gentlemen, I speak of a 'way out',
And not 'escape', your favoured story line.
Phrasing the matter thus would have me ape
(Forgive my little jest) the pirate-talk
And 'Boys' Own' yarns I heard from that good man,
My captor-friend, who taught me how to drink.

My worst and best of moments, when the drink
They thrust on me first signalled my way out.
I thought: here starts my journey ape-to-man,
This brain-assault my kick across the line
That severs creature-noise from human talk,
Or brutish hominid from civil ape.

That bottle-full it was that let me ape
Their ways of speech through joint effect of drink
And long exposure to the shipmate talk
They used with me. They'd shout things like 'Way out,
That talking ape!', and I'd think: it's a line
They've yet to cross, the checkpoint ape-to-man.

Not that I've got some bone to pick with man,
The species as a whole or even ape-
Hunters and fanciers with a nifty line
In getting captive simians to drink,
Then clown it up, then think how their way out
Might just be to go homo sap and talk.

So, gentlemen, you'll see why any talk
Of my 'escaping' from that state of man-
Captivity struck me as no way out
But as a foolish tendency to ape
The sorts of tale those sailors told when drink
And dreaming blurred the fact-from-fiction line.

It turned out pretty well, my chosen line
As ape who'd somehow got the brains to talk
Without quite being human. It's the drink
That works both ways, transforms your drunken man
To nonsense-spouter, but your canny ape
To guest-academician: my way out.

It's not a line I'd try except with man.
Try monkey-talk back home and they'd go ape.
The drink gave this caged ape-man a way out.

Sestina: 'Investigations of a Dog'

When I think back and recall the time when I was still a member of the canine community, sharing in all its preoccupations, a dog among dogs, I find on closer examination that from the very beginning I sensed some discrepancy, some little maladjustment . . . .

So long as you have food in your mouth, you have solved all questions for the time being.

Franz Kafka, 'Investigations of a Dog'
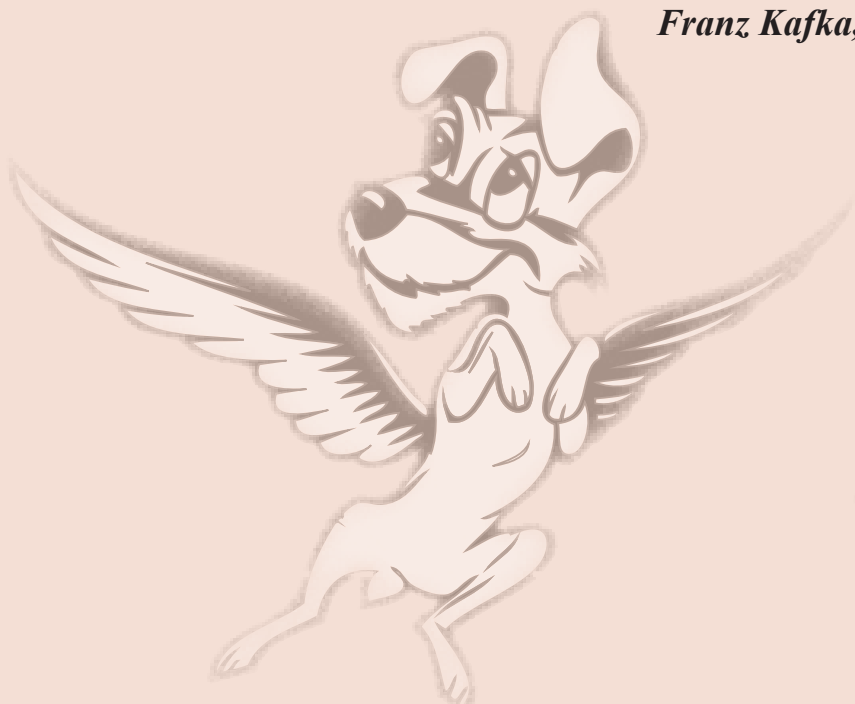
The rumours speak of dreamy dogs that fly.
How credit such a breach of natural kind?
My task: investigate these strange reports,
Maintain an open mind, and look around.
Not that we earthbound dogs have much to fear;
More evidence is what the sceptics need.

First sighting: knocked me sideways, but no need.
In time we'll find the thought of dogs that fly
No greater cause for puzzlement or fear
Than black swans in Australia. It's the kind
Of thing you see when once you look around
And lend an ear to all the field-reports.

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Let's not deny it: there were some reports
So outré that belief in them would need,
For sure, more proof than wandering around
And getting some hypothesis to fly
On mere sense-evidence. That's one more kind
Of cano-centric prejudice, I fear.

Yet maybe part of it's the creature-fear
Of what it means for us if those reports
Prove true, not any scruple of the kind
That good investigators always need
To keep them straight. Add to the dogs that fly
Those music dogs, the ones who stand around

All day and pass their hocket-notes around
In tone-rows fit to please the canine ear,
And then you'll maybe see why others fly
Such soul-bewitchment. Add, too, those reports
Now spreading fast about the food we need
And always thought pertained to canine kind

By natural right or owing to the kind
Intent of Dog Almighty. Strewn around
For us it is each mealtime, so what need
To stir again our conjoint love and fear
Of mythic food-providers? Yet reports
Pile up till doubters have no place to fly.

Twice-flown Milena: kind of tale I fear
Goes ways around to hide how it reports
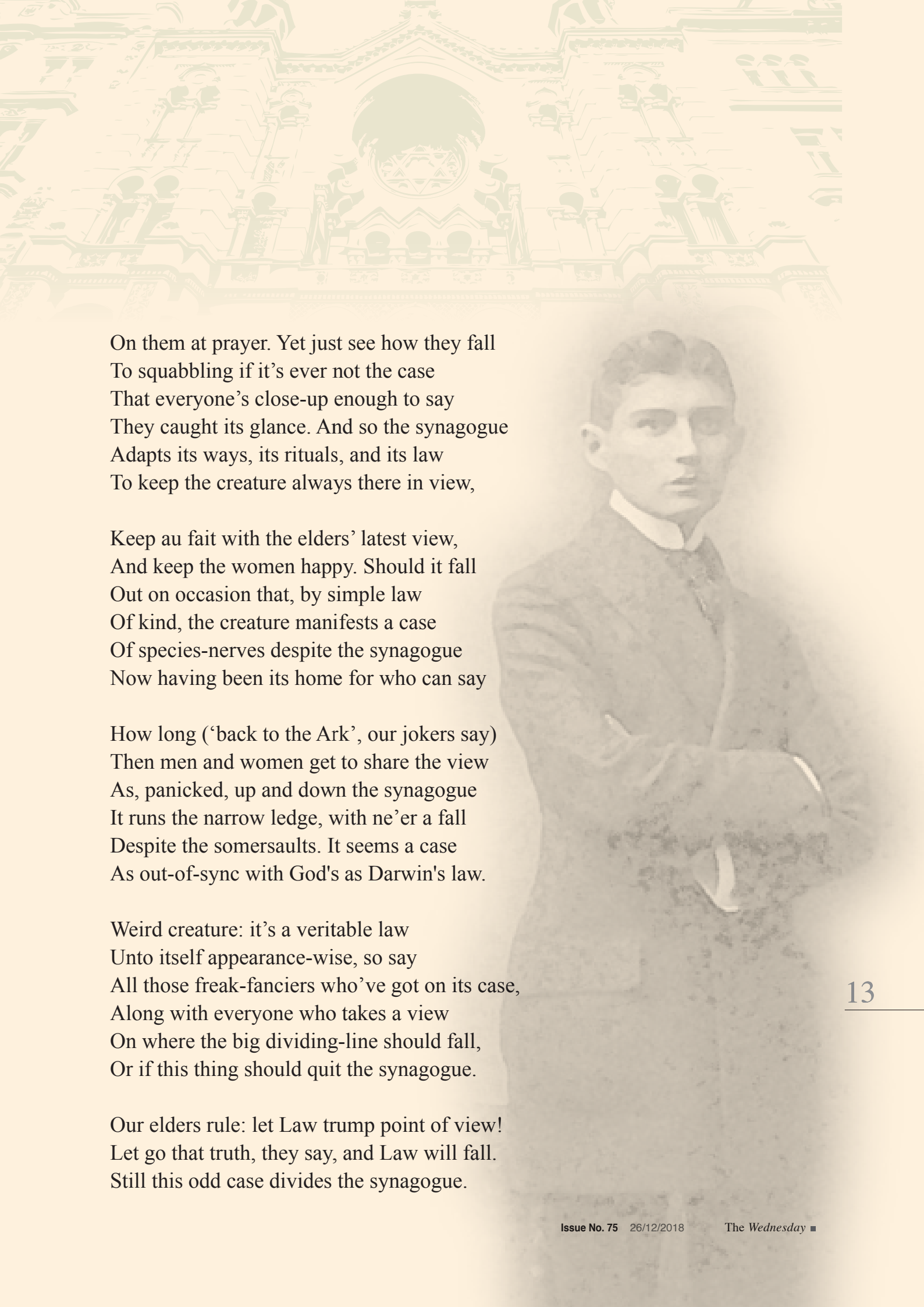Such need in me as you'll do well to fly.

'In Our Synagogue'

The curtain of the Ark is held by a gleaming brass rail that seems to tempt the animal; often it has been seen creeping toward it, but then it always sits there quietly. Even when it's sitting just behind the Ark, you couldn't say it was being disruptive, with its shiny, always open, possibly lidless eyes that seem to gaze at the congregation, without regarding anyone in particular, just looking in the direction of the dangers from which it may feel threatened.

Franz Kafka, 'In Our Synagogue'

No animals within the synagogue.
Keep them beyond its precincts: thus the Law.
Should this our visitant be deemed to fall
Beneath the ban? Our elders cannot say
For sure, so tend to the agnostic view:
Time out of mind it's been our problem-case.

Meanwhile it crouches on that ledge in case
Some altered practice at the synagogue
Disrupt our fragile truce. Its favoured view
Takes in the women only, those whom Law
Decrees must have a room apart. They say
The creature's gaze is scary, should it fall

On them at prayer. Yet just see how they fall
To squabbling if it's ever not the case
That everyone's close-up enough to say
They caught its glance. And so the synagogue
Adapts its ways, its rituals, and its law
To keep the creature always there in view,

Keep au fait with the elders' latest view,
And keep the women happy. Should it fall
Out on occasion that, by simple law
Of kind, the creature manifests a case
Of species-nerves despite the synagogue
Now having been its home for who can say

How long ('back to the Ark', our jokers say)
Then men and women get to share the view
As, panicked, up and down the synagogue
It runs the narrow ledge, with ne'er a fall
Despite the somersaults. It seems a case
As out-of-sync with God's as Darwin's law.

Weird creature: it's a veritable law
Unto itself appearance-wise, so say
All those freak-fanciers who've got on its case,
Along with everyone who takes a view
On where the big dividing-line should fall,
Or if this thing should quit the synagogue.

Our elders rule: let Law trump point of view!
Let go that truth, they say, and Law will fall.
Still this odd case divides the synagogue.

Sestina: 'Cares of a Family Man'

Naturally he [the family man] is too urbane to wish death upon a being who does harm to nobody, who is in his own way complete; but his urbanity doesn't prevent the existence of such a being from causing him pain. Respectable in every regard, the family man is the unacknowledged partisan of destruction.

Roberto Schwarz

We family men must shoulder many cares.
Mine is a wooden spool with bits of thread
That trail behind; it answers to the name
Of Odradek. Shaped roughly like a star
With transverse spoke, each time it comes or leaves
I find less reason to deny it life.

Yet think: how might such creatures vex the life
We lead, us family-men? You say 'who cares
About these things?' but I say, by your leaves,
That we're entangled with that skein of thread
And looped each to his own unlucky star,
His spool-shaped double, Odradek by name.

The linguists muse at length about that name -
Mixed German and Slavonic? - while the life
It gains, or simulates, comes from us star-
Crossed householders whose post-anthropic cares
Accrue till our routines hang by a thread
And mechanism's all the life it leaves.

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Young Kafka with family

Sometimes it laughs: the sound is like dry leaves
That shiver in the wind, just as its name,
Repeated, starts unraveling the thread
That, by a fibre, links whatever life
Remains to us with those domestic cares,
Those homely woes where only humans star.

Quite likely Odradek's picked up the star-
Role in some twin-earth docu-soap that leaves
Its fellow-spools enraptured since their cares
May soon be shifted us-ward in the name
Of life-chance justice redefined so 'life'
Undoes the helix and its double thread.

So says the spool: 'I double-cross that thread,
Your living braid linked to a dying star.
I, Odradek, shall colonise your life
So totally that my dominion leaves
No room for conjuring some magic name,
Like "life", that linchpin of your hopes and cares'

I trace its thread, a pattern in the leaves,
A pantograph: that star with occult name.
No sign of life, no hand that draws and cares.

The *Wednesday* Magazine

Wishes all its readers a very *Merry Christmas* and a *Happy New Year*

'therefore all·seasons shall·be sweet to thee'

Words from 'Frost at Midnight', S.T. Coleridge, 1798
Calligraphy by Barbara Vellacott