

The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

In Defence of Philosophy

We mentioned last week that philosophy needs to be praised, not apologised for or defended. But the praise that was mentioned was in the form of an apology, either from Socrates or Boethius. They were both also defending philosophy in the very act of praising it. They invoked a metaphysical and religious stand. A similar defence was mounted by Averroes. Perhaps philosophy then was challenged on religious grounds. But we live in a different age and a new defence is needed. The context has changed. Philosophy now is challenged on the grounds of its appeal to the wider reading public and its relevance to society at large. There is also a questioning of the benefit to society from the huge number of philosophy students and professional philosophy teachers. Nicholas Rescher in his article 'American Philosophy Today' reported that 'the comprehensive *Directory of American Philosophers* for 1992-1993 lists well over ten thousand philosophers affiliated to colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.' The number has multiplied since then.

Looking through the literature, there are few occasions where one comes across a very interesting and illuminating defence. I have in mind the arguments by Karl Popper and Martha Nussbaum. Popper defended philosophy against harmful trends in the way it has been practised for around a century. Nussbaum argued for the relevance of philosophy to social, economic and political developments. For lack of space, we will deal here only with Popper's defence.

Popper, in his article '*How I see Philosophy*' gives a great defence of philosophy against what he calls 'academic philosophers.' Philosophy is becoming the possession of the elite while in truth it should be open to all people. He condemns elitism from Plato to Wittgenstein. He also argues against those philosophers (whom he called 'anti-philosophical') who claim that there are no genuine philosophical problems (Wittgenstein, Friedrich Waismann and the

Vienna Circle). He counters this by saying: 'I can only say that if I had no serious philosophical problems and no hope of solving them, I should have no excuse for being a philosopher..., there would be no apology for philosophy.'

In a section he wanted to call 'How I Do Not See Philosophy,' Popper lists a number of points. For coherence, I select the following, mainly directed against Wittgenstein and his followers. He doesn't see philosophy as solving linguistic puzzles, nor an attempt either to clarify or to 'explicate' concepts, words or languages. It is not clever exercises or intellectual therapy. He also doesn't see the need for the obsession with precision or exactness – these are not valuable in themselves but only relevant to the problem in hand. This is an important warning against philosophy becoming scholastic.

Finally, Popper warns against hair-splitting and minute criticism and in favour of 'the understanding of the great problems of cosmology, of human knowledge, of ethics, and political philosophy...' He summarises his concerns by saying: 'I think that the main task of philosophy is to speculate critically about the universe and about our place in the universe, including our powers of knowing and our powers for good and evil.'

Popper's article appeared in *Philosophy In Britain Today*, edited by S.G. Shanker, published more than thirty years ago. But time has not diminished Popper's critique of academic philosophers nor his defence of philosophy. There are now attempts to break away from the standard way of applying philosophy by extending it to new spheres, such as gardening, sport and wine-tasting. These are matters for the affluent societies of the West, but how about the rest of the world? Nussbaum tackles the more serious problems and we may turn to that next week.

The Editor

Philosophy and Prophecy

EDWARD GREENWOOD

I tried to deal with some of the problems which were raised by the editor in *The Wednesday* number 80 in my previous essay 'The Nature of Philosophy' which was published in number 76 of *The Wednesday*.

There is much overlap between my views and those of the editor. I agree with his endorsement of Alan White's view that philosophy is not a single field of discourse but takes a critical interest in all forms of discourse. I agree also that philosophy should take account of natural science while in no way being subservient to it. It is certainly not, as Quine supposed, a sort of natural science in itself. Natural scientists often step out of their own specialism and indulge in scientism. Dawkins does this, as do many neuroscientists. Peter Hacker has shown that it is one of the tasks of philosophy to expose the nonsense they sometimes perpetrate when they do this.

I most vehemently disagree with the editor, however, that Nietzsche's notion of the death of God would undermine the status of human beings as privileged creatures. True we are no longer made in God's image. We now recognize with Feuerbach that the opposite is the case, that we have made God in our image. Nevertheless our possession of language has given us an elevated status when we compare ourselves with the animals. As Nietzsche pointed out in the second of the *Untimely Meditations* 'On The Use and Abuse of History' the animals are confined to the present. Unlike us they have no sense of history. To have the sense of history presupposes the ability to use tensed language and complex grammar. Historicity is built into all our lives. We are what we have become and the genealogical knowledge of how we

became what we are may be of great help to us in truly emancipating ourselves from false assumptions which hold us in their power.

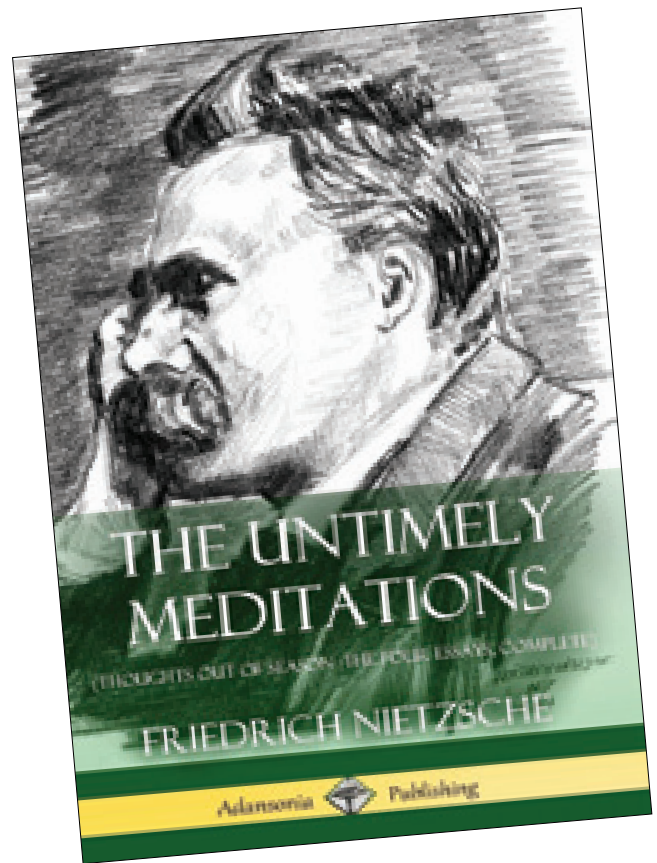
For Nietzsche the death of God should not diminish us but enhance us. It has freed us from a theocentric command ethics. As he claims at the conclusion of the first essay in *The Genealogy of Morals* 'All sciences are now under the obligation to prepare the ground for the future task of the philosopher, which is to solve the problem of value, to determine the true hierarchy of values.' (Francis Golffing's translation, Anchor Books edition New York, 1956 p.188).

The editor cites Socrates and Boethius and speaks of 'imaginative transcendence'. A similar use of the dubious concept of transcendence is made by Wilfrid Cantwell Smith on page 176 of his informative and provocative book *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Smith, in effect, claims that Christians, Moslems, Buddhists and Hindus should not be seen as participating in some entity called religion, but as participating in 'transcendence'. But transcendence to what? Nietzsche would claim that there is nothing to transcend to, and I doubt if any followers of the groups mentioned would agree that they are all merely engaging in an identical directionless piety which seems to be the implication of Smith's curious thesis. If they were, why would they persecute each other? Even Kant, who was no philosophical naturalist, rejects the transcendent for something quite different which he calls the 'transcendental.' This leads him to try to establish what he calls the 'transcendental deduction' of the categories. But what proves the existence of the

transcendental deduction? The fact, claimed in a laborious mass of words, that we have a faculty for it. As Nietzsche said in section 11 of *Beyond Good and Evil* this is like saying we are 'enabled by an ability.' In effect a gigantic *petitio principii*.

This brings me to my chief objection to the editorial. This is its alignment of the philosopher with the prophet in that it claims both are concerned with the divine. But the philosopher and the prophet are the complete antithesis of each other. The philosopher sceptically questions, but the prophet dogmatically proclaims. When Nietzsche tells us in section 54 Of *The Antichrist* that his 'Zarathustra is a sceptic' I think it is because he wants us to take his Zarathustra's pronouncements with a pinch of salt. Moreover as a naturalist I must ask how the philosopher can be concerned with the divine because there is no such thing as the divine. Sceptics do not proclaim transcendental religions, they undermine them. Nietzsche was trying to reverse the original Zoroaster's deeply dualistic view of the world which completely counterposes Good and Evil, a view promulgated by a very influential later Persian, Mani. Nietzsche wants to see good and bad as scalar not discrete dualistic opposites.

The Islamic thinker Al Ghazali wrote a book called *The Autodestruction of The Philosophers*. He had to make the philosophers destroy themselves because he rightly recognized that philosophical inquiry undermines faith. I don't know how successful Averroes' reply *The Autodestruction of The Autodestruction* is, but on the point that philosophy destroys faith, Al Ghazali was surely correct. Nietzsche recognized that not all our problems and perplexities are epistemic, As he says in section 6 of *Beyond Good and Evil* the 'drive for knowledge' is not what impels the philosopher. But whatever impels the philosopher most certainly does



Untimely Meditations

not impel to faith and prophecy. As Nietzsche says in section 16 of the same work there is no 'intuitive knowledge'. In the next section he denies 'immediate certainty.' In section 10 he dismisses a faculty of the 'supersensible' and the notion of 'immediate intuition'.

All these are conceptions the prophet is all too apt to exploit. Nietzsche has a deep distrust of sacred books and of the fantastic hermeneutics which religions apply to them. Philologists look behind the 'holy books' and expose the false hermeneutics of their devotees (The *Antichrist* section 47).

For Nietzsche religion is a realm of the imaginary and unreal and for that very reason it casts spells which need to be broken. As he says in section 55 of *The Antichrist* 'There are some questions that people are *not* entitled to decide the truth of; all the ultimate questions, all the ultimate problems of value are beyond human reason... To grasp the bounds of reason- now, *that* is real philosophy.' The prophet, unlike the philosopher, thinks he brings messages from beyond those bounds.

Mathematics and Philosophy: Ways of Cooperation

Nine philosophers met on Wednesday 23rd of January in the lower room at the Opera Café, Jericho, Oxford. The following notes summarise that part of the discussion which focused on the nature of mathematics and its relation to philosophy.

CHRIS SEDDON

The group started with discussions of various matters but then considered in some detail the relationship between mathematics, science, and philosophy.

It was suggested with general agreement that philosophy should not limit itself to the certainty and clarity that mathematics appears to attain, but there also seemed to be some agreement that whilst a certain amount of groping in the mist is necessary in the broader pursuit of wisdom, there may also be times when reasoned analysis is useful in this quest.

In this context it was suggested - though without universal acceptance - that it might be helpful to consider mathematics as that part of our vocabulary which is deliberately restricted to analysis, that is, vocabulary which in isolation can form only trivial analytic statements (the truth of which depends only on the definitions of component terms), but which in combination with other terms can form significant synthetic statements (the truth of which depends also on external evidence).

For example, in simple arithmetic the truth of the formula 'two plus three makes five' can be agreed as soon as the meaning of the vocabulary is agreed, whereas the truth of the formula 'Two of my cats are here but three are not' (which adds to the mathematical vocabulary further non-mathematical vocabulary 'my cats' and 'here') cannot be determined simply

by understanding the additional vocabulary - we would also need to count cats. However, adding the further clause 'therefore I have five cats' can be seen to rely on an instance of the original mathematical formula - we would not need to count more cats in order to justify the conclusion.

This division of vocabulary into analytical mathematical components and synthetic non-mathematical components helps to distinguish statements which are descriptive of significant information and hence open to scientific investigation from those which are purely analytic and descriptive of no significant information.

As another example, Newton's laws of motion employ mathematical concepts (which in some cases he was among the first to develop) such as numerical identity, multiplication, and the rate of change of the value of a function at a point, in combination with scientific concepts such as force, mass, and acceleration (which again, he was among the first to develop). On their own, the mathematical concepts are incapable of expressing scientific information, but in combination with the scientific concepts, which are coordinated to the physical world, Newton was able to express useful contingent predictions or explanations relating to the physical world.

That part of the vocabulary which was designed

explains why the creation, investigation, and application of mathematical concepts is not trivial, even though the information they can express in isolation is intended to be.

This account provides some explanation for the normative, rule-following aspect which many feel characterises mathematics: firstly, because in order to identify and benefit from purely analytic vocabulary it is important to understand and operate within the definitions of that vocabulary; and secondly, because an important advantage of purely analytic vocabulary is to help ensure that inferences may be drawn without reliance on external evidence, so it is important that the definitions be comparatively rigorous. In one sense reliance on definitions is not unique to mathematics since non-mathematical vocabulary also relies on definitions, albeit in the sense that such 'definitions' may be both implicit and vague. This account also explains however why some observers and many mathematicians perceive a creative aspect to mathematics, because practising mathematicians may create or discover novel mathematical concepts.

Sometimes it seems almost miraculous that certain mathematical concepts turn out to be useful in applications apparently very different from those for which they were created, or even when they were not created with any particular application in mind, but it was suggested that perhaps it is not so surprising that concepts which were created or investigated specifically because they seemed to be both interesting and very general often turn out to be both interesting and very general.

Considered in this way, it seems that mathematics, science and philosophy can each benefit from analysis, in the sense of defining more or less rigorously concepts that can be combined to express information which may be used in various ways, especially considering that information may be expressed for other

purposes than merely to assert absolutely certain facts. Mathematics, including logic in this sense, specialises in more rigorously defined concepts, which permit information to be transformed without creating new dependencies on factual evidence. Science and philosophy in general can benefit from such mathematical and logical concepts, but since they intend to express non-trivial information, they will generally also require less rigorously defined concepts and less definite statements.

A weakness of much of the logic developed in the last century is that in focusing primarily on mathematical applications it may fail to build on more general philosophical insights and, because of the special nature of mathematics, may not always be well-suited to scientific or philosophical analysis. Further developments in logic may remedy this.

Ideology and Technology

PAUL COCKBURN

One topic that was discussed briefly is about technology and ideology. The power of technology and that of ideology were discussed. During the Cold War, technology supported and advanced Capitalism while ideology underpinned society and culture in Communist countries. The world was dominated by the two competing ideologies of Communism and Capitalism represented by the two superpowers Russia and America. But now there is only one camp, and technology seems to rule. Ideology does not have the power it once had. There are consequences for this development in terms of politics, culture and critical theory. Technology won the day but perhaps technology and technological instrumental thinking are out of human control for now and in the future.

Language, Change and Anger

Notes of Meeting Held 30th January 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

In this meeting, we discussed how we are shaped by our language and culture. Are they formed structurally and do these structures therefore determine us? Where is our freedom? Our historical culture is built into us, and this includes in the case of Western culture the use of reason. We can stand out from our culture, and rebel.

How do we view other cultures? They also have a history and their culture is built into them just as ours is, but sometimes this may not be clear to us as little is written down and there is the problem of translation. Some cultures may appear primitive to us and have practices we disapprove of. Saussure talked of 'hot' and 'cold' cultures: some incorporate

change and seek novelty, others try to strongly maintain their traditions. Whatever stage a society is at, we can help them survive in their current environment, or to adapt to modern life. One view was that humanity is 'on the edge', continually using its imagination to be creative and expand our horizons.

We moved on to discuss language. One view was that no metaphysical entities are needed, language is based on the empirical. We can observe behaviour and there are no transcendental 'hidden' entities needed to explain it. Language should be used to seek the truth, but rhetoric is a powerful tool which can be used to persuade people to accept arguments which are not true. We now talk of 'climate change' for instance rather than global warming, a wider term which includes natural causes as well as man-made ones.

We also discussed anger. Can we have healthy anger? If someone is really angry with someone else, it is good practice to mediate and talk to them and let them vent their anger and concerns, to lower the temperature so to speak. Then a more rational discussion can take place. If we do not express our anger, this can lead to resentment. Nietzsche recognized this and perhaps expressed anger in his philosophy; he thought philosophical thought was in fact based on bodily effects.

France seems to have a culture of revolutionary anger at injustice, based on the French revolution and still alive today. Anger can be based on fear of the other – immigrants are taking our jobs – but it can also be more like righteous indignation due to inequality.



Saussure

Ode to a Sexy Pancake

cinnamon-faced, you swim
in organic butter. Your batter
stiffened with a little milk, finally
leads to a creamy consistency.

O you yellow beauty
with glistening edges,
You quiver and shimmy along
twisting and turning until
you get really hot

and bubble with restrained passion.

Left undisturbed
you soon boast a golden tan;
then flipped, sometimes twice,
you lie face up, uninhibited,
relaxed and happy to be devoured
with a dollop of cream
and raspberry jam
in all the right places.



Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*



CHRIS NORRIS

Time's Fools: a Lament

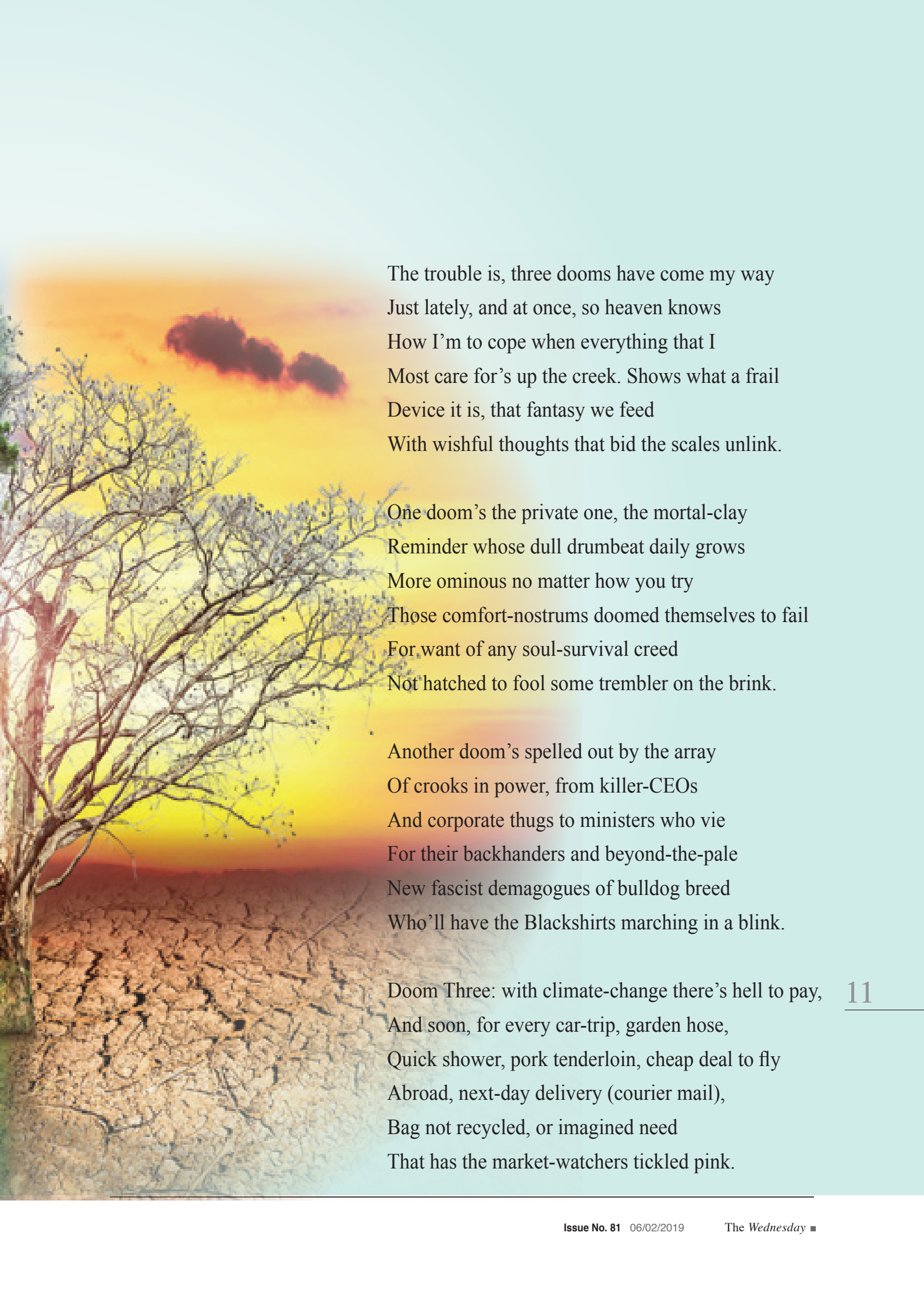
As human beings, we are vulnerable to confusing the unprecedented with the improbable. In our everyday experience, if something has never happened before, we are generally safe in assuming it is not going to happen in the future, but the exceptions can kill you and climate change is one of those exceptions.

Al Gore, interview with *Der Spiegel*,
November 2nd, 2009

Time was when different time-scales saved the day.
Asynchrony ensured the night's repose.
What though each scale declared 'the end is nigh?'
Always the ostrich comeback: name your scale!
No sweat so long as yardsticks disagreed:
No reckoning end-times while they're out of sync!

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That's how it was, but now I have to say
The get-out's gone, the last few loop-holes close,
The time-scale tweak by which we once got by
No longer helps, and it's the same bleak tale
They have to tell, those narratives all keyed
To the same sombre strain of End-Times Inc.



The trouble is, three dooms have come my way
Just lately, and at once, so heaven knows
How I'm to cope when everything that I
Most care for's up the creek. Shows what a frail
Device it is, that fantasy we feed
With wishful thoughts that bid the scales unlink.

One doom's the private one, the mortal-clay
Reminder whose dull drumbeat daily grows
More ominous no matter how you try
Those comfort-nostrums doomed themselves to fail
For want of any soul-survival creed
Not hatched to fool some trembler on the brink.

Another doom's spelled out by the array
Of crooks in power, from killer-CEOs
And corporate thugs to ministers who vie
For their backhanders and beyond-the-pale
New fascist demagogues of bulldog breed
Who'll have the Blackshirts marching in a blink.

Doom Three: with climate-change there's hell to pay,
And soon, for every car-trip, garden hose,
Quick shower, pork tenderloin, cheap deal to fly
Abroad, next-day delivery (courier mail),
Bag not recycled, or imagined need
That has the market-watchers tickled pink.

Three dooms, all imminent, each apt to fray
One's nerves the more as time's declension goes
Flat-out on every scale, too quick for my
Dazed apprehension. So, like Macbeth's 'tale
Told by an idiot', things get up to speed
Just as all future views begin to shrink.

Ice-caps are melting, plastic strews the bay,
Crops perish, penguins gaze from dwindling floes,
Fires ravage townships, reservoirs run dry,
Skin cancers thrive, strange currents leave the whale
Miles inland, glaciers melt, coastlines recede,
And wars are waged for water fit to drink.

Those who preach optimism now betray
No more than willingness to strike a pose
Too Mary Poppins-ish since they deny
The species that fight doomsday tooth-and-nail,
The greenhouse gasses by unfreezing freed,
And poison fumes that seep at every chink.

A dire view, sure enough, but one that may
Commend itself more vividly to those
Who sense, like me, how shortened time-scales tie
These dooms together so can scarcely fail,
All wishful thoughts apart, to see and read
The signs as migrants flee and islands sink.

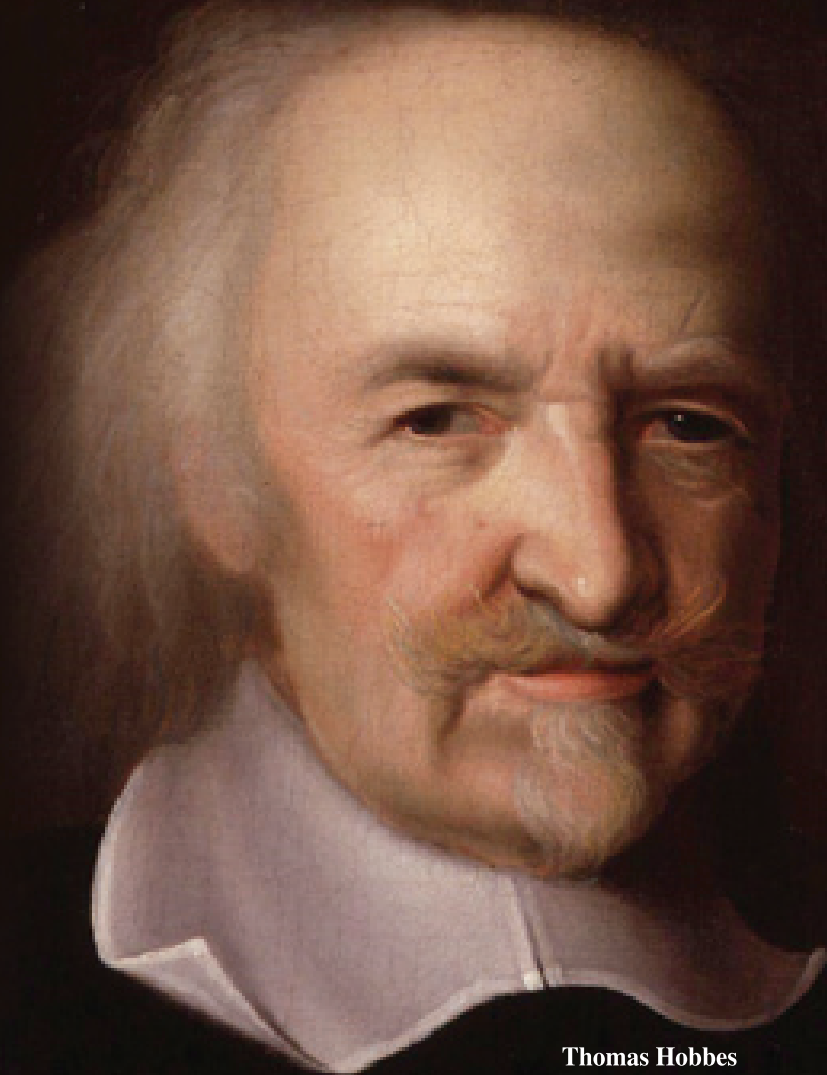
Meanwhile those migrants offer easy prey,
The softest target for politicians
Of the far right who kicked the little guy
At school and now kick refugees who sail
From vile regimes in fragile craft and plead
Their case unheard in some god-awful clink.

And here we are, time's fools, now making hay
In temperate zones where once the rivers froze,
While clouds like horsemen gather in the sky,
As finally the human serpent's trail
Lies over everything, and while indeed,
As the song said, it's later than you think.



Ethics in the Modern World

NONA FERDON



Thomas Hobbes

Underpinning our judgements of how to live and how to act is our conception of ourselves as human beings. Current conditions of life have entrenched assumptions about humans deriving from the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The dominant moral philosophies that emerge with modernity have rendered normative ethics fundamentally ineffective in improving human behaviour in society.

In response to this failure, there is an attempt to revive the modern Renaissance – to create an inspired conception of ethics which focuses on the cultivation of virtue. Those who have studied the history of philosophy may question some of our present assumptions.

By the end of the eighteenth century, it became clear that the scientific revolution had changed our world, our concepts of that world and of the roles we have to learn in order to give us an awareness of how others perceive us and how we perceive them; of what cast of characters may be in the drama into which we have been born. But all this, while important, is not enough to account for the diverse ways in which

people perceive themselves. An assumption has developed that culture modifies current practices and this in turn redefines the nature of institutions, societies, and the relationship between humans.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche recognised the failure of Immanuel Kant (and those he had influence on) to find an alternative foundation. Universal visible principles can be seen in history and in historical progress. There are those who claimed that ethical statements were nothing more than expressions of emotion designed to influence others. They were calling for progress about things that had already been profoundly explained by the early philosophers. As Nietzsche argued, 'realism, that weirdest guest, says we have – very largely, if not largely – a comprehension of both theoretical and practical morality' – (so that continuing to teach moral philosophy as ethics could be regarded as unethical.)

To draw on the work of Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas is to see that modern realism seeks to recover pre-modern ethical dark-rooms centred on cultivating virtue as a required quality,

perception of which enables us to achieve those grades which are internal to practices and which effectively prevent us from perceiving modern reality. Without the support of the people committed to ways of life based on the overriding commitment to such ethics, dark-rooms become arbitrary choices.

Moreover, when people make these choices, they are likely to find that living in the modern world is more difficult. It appears that something more is required, including a better understanding of why people (not as individuals but as people embedded in communities and cultures) act as they do and what would lead them to act differently. For this we need to understand what is involved and improve the required perspective on reason to show the role ethical judgements can play in influencing how people behave.

Knowledge contributes to moral and social psychology in terms of the study of moral judgement, moral actions, and relationships. However, the philosophical perspective needed is one that includes the individual psychology/class psychology/cultural content of this society. We defend the Aristotelian syllogisms whereby actions follow from characterising situations and argue that action also involves situating oneself in one of the many stories of society being lived. As Alasdair McIntyre put it 'I can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"'

However, these theories of action, while important, are not adequate themselves to account for the diverse ways in which people behave in our modern world. The power of culture to modify current assumptions has been developed as part of the conception of the human being; his perceived roles and responsibilities in life, the people with whom he meets and interacts, the world around him, perhaps his future and his past. To overcome our present ethical behaviour requires people to consider their cultural heritage and strive to develop a different conception of themselves, their roles in the world, their responsibility to others and their unique place in the world. They need to embody these conceptions in their practice as a viable way of proceeding in definite situations.

This quest for wisdom, for ethics, celebrated by Plato and central to ancient Greek culture, as well as the cultures of China and India, has been denied a proper place within the current world.

The Wednesday

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