

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Extra-Philosophical Concerns

I noticed when writing the last editorial about progress in philosophy that philosophy is a battleground between different points of view that have their motivations beyond the particular philosophical problem. For example, those who don't like religion opt for a philosophy that aims at eliminating metaphysics in all its forms, together with the concepts of 'good', 'beautiful', 'truth' and 'meaning'. On the other hand, those who are religiously motivated will not only insist on these values but try their best to undermine the philosophy of science and analytical philosophy generally. But to be fair to the latter group, they criticise the attempt by the first group to suggest that the aims and methods of philosophy should follow those of science. Normally, this comes with a force and a confidence from the first group and apology and desperate defence from the latter.

Nietzsche once wrote that philosophy is the confession of the philosopher. What seems on the face of it a purely logical and calm exposition may hide deep psychological factors and experiences, normally motivated by conventional morality and religion or prejudices against religion and religious establishments. Nietzsche wrote in his book *Beyond Good and Evil* that: 'Gradually, it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary memoir...' That is because 'by far the greater part of conscious thinking must still be included among instinctive activities and that goes even for philosophical thinking.' He dedicated the first part of that book to this matter under the title 'On the Prejudices of Philosophers' which deserves deeper contemplation on another occasion.

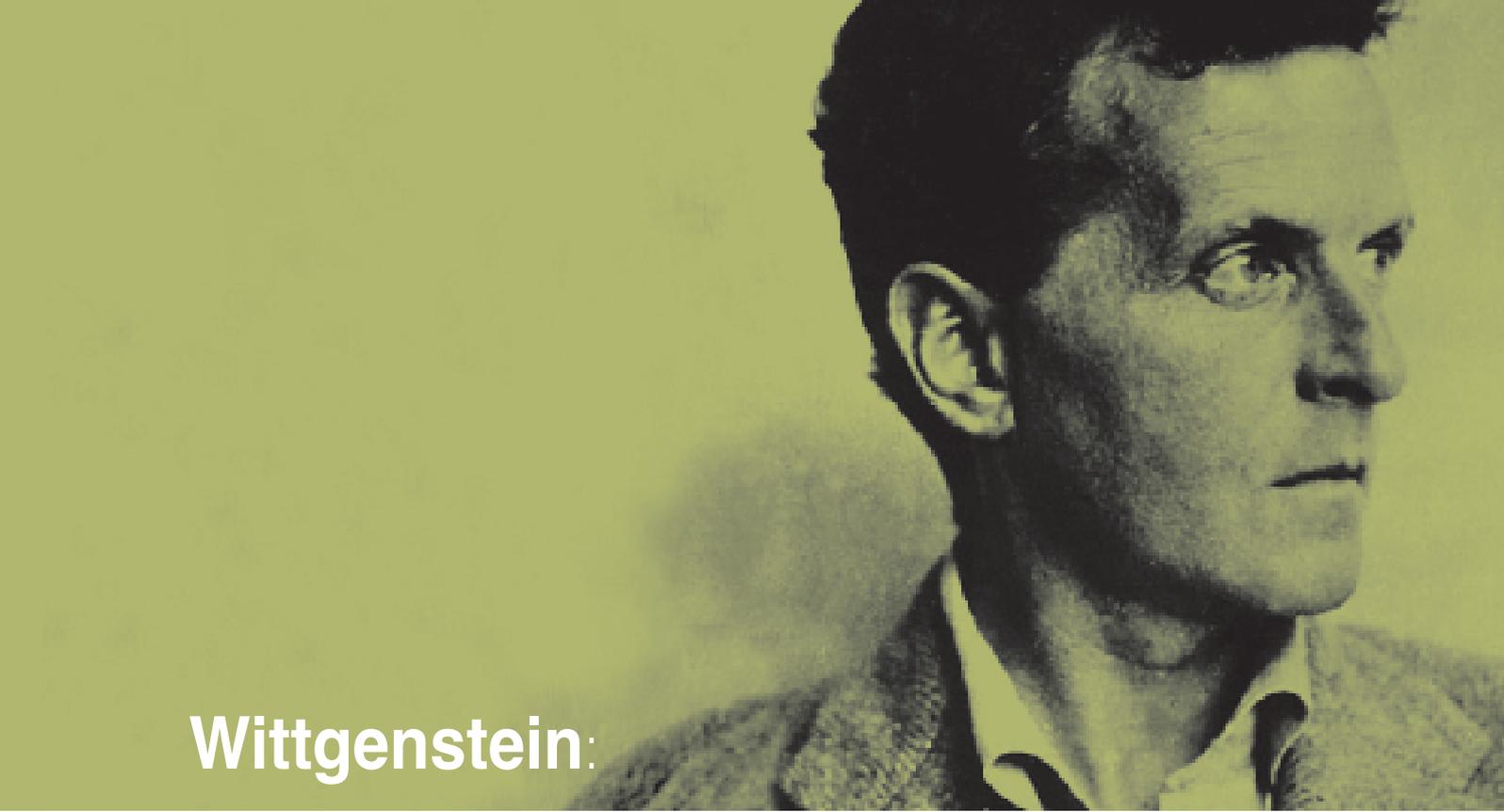
Thinking about this issue, I remembered what a student friend said to me when I was doing my undergraduate studies in philosophy (mainly analytical philosophy).

He said that we may have been brain-washed into believing all the philosophy we had been taught. I am not advocating here a conspiracy theory in contemporary philosophy but am just pointing out what happens when you look at it from a stance that is beyond philosophy. You may also want to stop and start asking questions about what philosophy really means, or where it is going.

It also became clear that the views referred to above are so entrenched that, as John Gray wrote in one of his books, the religiously minded are more open to revising their beliefs than the secular intellectuals. Some philosophical views and problems border on a kind of scholastic philosophy. In its attempt to eliminate metaphysics, recent philosophy has tried to build a world-view that is completely free of metaphysics, but it is finding itself pushed ever further into a desperate position. But there is still enough optimism in this philosophy and the feeling that it has left behind 'folk' philosophy and is now well on its way to the scientific outlook which had made great progress. However, philosophy is a different discourse to that of science.

Perhaps, as human beings, we can't get rid of our pre-conceived ideas and motivations. But that shouldn't take the form of a philosophy which tries to push out all other points of view. To admit these motivations in a sort of self-criticism or a confession is to be more intellectually honest about one's practice. What we need is an open-mindedness and acceptance of a plurality of points of view and ways of doing philosophy. The point is not to be defensive but to adopt the right way of philosophising for oneself and others. What is needed is a charity of spirit so that the benefits of philosophy extend within philosophical circles and beyond.

The Editor



Wittgenstein:

Ethical Language and Nonsense

This article is intended to follow on from Chris Seddon's report in Issue 82 on the January weekend course on Wittgenstein, but with the main focus on what he covers fairly briefly in the final section – Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics*, and Stephen Mulhall's response to it.

BOB STONE

Right at the start, Wittgenstein proposes to include ethics in the general category of *aesthetics*; more specifically it could be described as an enquiry not only into 'what is good', but also 'what is valuable', or 'really important', or 'what makes life worth living'. That view of the subject becomes crucially important, as we shall see later on.

Relative and Absolute Value

Wittgenstein insists on a hard and fast distinction between facts and values. Many of the apparent value statements we make are in fact of 'relative' value. So a claim that, say, the M40 is the 'right' way to Birmingham is not a claim of some absolute rightness, but is rather like Kant's hypothetical imperative: *if* getting to Birmingham quickly by road is our aim,

then the M40 is the appropriate road to take. Such claims are 'trivial' compared to those of absolute value, and are simple *matters of fact*. If someone challenged the claim, it would not be on ethical grounds but on the grounds that, at that moment, there was a 20-mile tailback on the M40 which was expected to last 10 hours. A giant volume that included every fact in the universe – past, present and future – would include all such relative values, as well as accounts of all the attitudes that people have to everything, but not a single piece of absolute ethics or evaluation.

Statements of *absolute* ethical value, such as that some action is just plain wrong, are impossible to make sense of. I suppose that, if someone started to justify the claim, by saying

‘it is wrong because . . .’, she would either be turning it into a relative statement, or at best deriving it from some more fundamental ethical value: e.g. ‘stealing that book is wrong’ might be derived from the general ethical statement ‘stealing is wrong, end of’. Somewhere along the line there is the absolute ethical value, which cannot be justified and so is in that sense, according to Wittgenstein, ‘nonsense’.

One might claim that *all* ethical statements are factual statements, according to some analysis such as Chris has suggested elsewhere: ‘ethical statements such as ‘Lying (or human sacrifice) is wrong’, are factual statements roughly equivalent to ‘Lying (or human sacrifice) [is] not likely to achieve in practice what we (the intended audience) really want to achieve’ (Friday evening group online discussion). In that case I think Wittgenstein would accept that they would have a place in his imagined book of all the facts in the history of the universe. They would all be, in his words, ‘judgments of relative value’, and, like other such expressions, ‘don’t present any difficult or deep problems’.

Yet this is not the kind of ‘ethics’ of which he is talking. He would argue, as would I, that in at least some circumstances people use ethical claims in a way that is certainly *not* related to some factual principle (such as what is in accordance with people’s desires). When someone says ‘lying is wrong’, she is often claiming that lying is wrong *absolutely*. To use Wittgenstein’s own example, “the absolutely right road” – as opposed to the right road if you want to get to Oxford – is ‘the road which everybody on seeing it would, with logical necessity, have to go, or be ashamed for not going’. And a state of affairs that could be called the ‘absolute good’ would be ‘one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would necessarily bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about’. When people make these claims, they do not

see themselves as making factual statements about what might lead to what – as with judgments of relative value – but as making claims of absolute value.

Now perhaps, if people were more intelligent, they would realise that they were in fact making claims of *relative* value of the sort Chris claims they are, or perhaps, if they really are making claims of absolute value, they ought not to be. But the fact remains that people *do* make such claims, they are entitled to think of them as absolute claims, and it is not our place to contradict their view that that is what they are claiming. Wittgenstein believes that these claims are nonsensical, which I take to mean that they are not factual claims (empirically testable), they are not logical claims (derived from some premises), and they cannot be justified in any way at all. They are simply heartfelt assertions of value.

Examples of Feelings of Absolute Value

It is highly significant for Wittgenstein’s position that most of the examples he gives of statements of absolute value are not in fact in the area of ethics but are more general evaluative attitudes or experiences (in accordance with his view, noted earlier, that ethics is part of aesthetics, the general study of value). He imagines (a) someone feeling awe and wonder at the fact that anything at all exists, ‘seeing the world as a miracle’; then (b) there is the feeling that one is completely safe from any danger – not merely from being run over when inside a house, but from anything at all; finally – later on in the essay – he adds (c) the general experience of guilt that many have. None of these feelings is justifiable, or rational; all are nonsensical. People may try to justify them by some kind of theological simile, or – as we might say – metaphor. The feeling of wonder at existence becomes the idea that God created the world, the feeling of safety the idea that God is looking after me, the feeling of guilt the idea that God is disappointed at my wrongdoing. As he puts it, these are ‘similes’

that seem to make superficial sense, but the fact which each is a simile *for* is inexpressible – or at least its explanation is. “Their [i.e. these expressions] nonsensicality was their very essence.”

What is the status of such ‘nonsense’? Wittgenstein does not dismiss it as laughable, but professes his deep respect for this “tendency of the human mind”. That must be what leads some readers to elevate the more positive feelings – awe, security, even guilt – into something supernatural, ineffable, beyond our understanding. Stephen Mulhall, in his talk on this lecture, concluded that ethics is either nothing or supernatural, i.e. an attempt to express an ineffable truth. He then showed how a whole edifice of theology can be built on the foundations of nonsense: the argument seemed to me suspiciously like ‘If there were a divine explanation, it would be beyond our understanding; this is beyond our understanding, therefore it is divine’. Is there any justification whatever for the latter interpretation? Why could we not conclude that the ‘absolute’ feelings and value judgments are simply unjustifiable, and any attempt at justification is sheer nonsense? Why can we not say “Ethics is nothing, deal with it!”?

It would be interesting to ask how people might have reacted if Wittgenstein had mentioned other inexplicable feelings that are more difficult to fit into a theological framework. There are those who feel that the universe is against them – not because of any particular problems they have that others do not, but because of a probably diagnosable paranoia. Others, again, are seriously depressed, and nothing in the world has any meaning for them, either good or bad. Gone are the days when we thought it appropriate to explain to a depressed person that his problems are not that serious, that he should stop feeling sorry for himself and ‘snap out of it’; we now follow Wittgenstein’s example of showing

respect for the feeling. Those are conditions that affect people whether they like it or not, and no amount of insistence that they are not ‘justified’ in feeling in that way is likely to change the fact that they do.

There are also feelings normally associated with OCD (Obsessive Compulsion Disorder), such as (my own) insistence on placing my slippers on the floor beside my bed precisely in line with each other, in the vague fear that otherwise something awful might happen or one slipper might feel jealous of the other – clearly a totally irrational ‘justification’! In general, if someone says, ‘I hate being alive’, or ‘everybody is after me’, or ‘the world has no meaning for me’, these claims are (almost always) clearly not justifiable by any comprehensible argument; and that is true in just the same way that feelings of awe at the existence of things or complete safety from all danger are not justifiable by any comprehensible reason.

Justifications and Causes

In cases of negative attitudes we do not usually attribute them to an attempt to express an ineffable truth. We accept that people suffer from depression, paranoia, obsessions (and other ‘unjustifiable’ negative emotions), and look not for a *justification* but a *cause*. This may be buried somewhere in a person’s genes or past history, or be a neurological matter. It is hard to believe that there is no cause (though conceivably it may happen at random) and, if there is a cause, it must be purely factual – part of Wittgenstein’s huge volume that records all the facts in the world. There is no reason why we cannot do the same for positive feelings: something in my make-up or history causes me to feel happy to be alive rather than to have periodic bouts of life-hating depression. The details I leave to doctors and scientists, but it is a topic that can be approached by the usual methods of empirical research and clear thinking. Obviously there is little need to do



Chris Seddon

research into why many people feel reasonably happy, since nothing needs to be done about it! But the principle of identifying the cause is the same as for those who feel paranoid and depressed.

I can see no purpose, or possibility of success, in trying to explain the emotions we feel in terms of rational justification; in fact to do so is the real ‘nonsense’. There is plenty of sense to be discovered in the *causes* of our having whatever emotions we have. If people feel the need to make up a story to ‘justify’ what they experience, whether they have good or bad feelings, that is their prerogative. But a philosopher, or any observer, should see that as one more psychological phenomenon whose *cause* it would be interesting to study, not as a story to take seriously as a genuine ‘explanation’.

Conclusion

None of this means that we should abandon trying to work out a sensible ethical system. What Wittgenstein is talking about in his

lecture is not really philosophical ethics, but – as his chosen examples show – an ordinary person’s experiences of *value*, whether ethical (this is absolutely the right road) or aesthetic (how wonderful that the world exists). He picks positive feelings, but he might equally well have chosen negative feelings of the kind I mentioned above. What they share in common is that they are not justifiable by evidence or logic, they are simply felt. Those who look for opportunities in a great philosopher’s work to justify religious belief may pounce on the positive feelings, or a particularly suitable negative feeling like guilt, as evidence of some intuitive attempt to express an ineffable, divine truth; the very nonsensicality of this attempt is seen as a sign of the divine provenance of the experiences. Much more difficult is to fit the *negative* feelings and obsessions into a divine framework. And there is absolutely no need. Judgments of absolute value are *feelings*, not justifiable or unjustifiable beliefs. The proper field in which they should be investigated is not theology but psychology.

Poetry

Truth, Love and Mathematics: A Verse Colloquy



CHRIS NORRIS

The appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand nor deserve. We should be grateful for it and hope that it will remain valid in future research.

Eugene Wigner, 'The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences'

Being true is different from being taken as true... I understand by 'laws of logic' not psychological laws of takings-to-be-true, but laws of truth. The laws of truth are boundary stones set in an eternal foundation.

Gottlob Frege, The Foundations of Arithmetic

The fullest constructional beauty is the introspective beauty of mathematics, where the basic intuition is left to free unfolding. This unfolding is not bound to the exterior world, and thereby to finiteness and responsibility; consequently, its introspective harmonies can attain any degree of richness and clearness.

L.E.J. Brouwer, 'Consciousness, Philosophy and Mathematics'

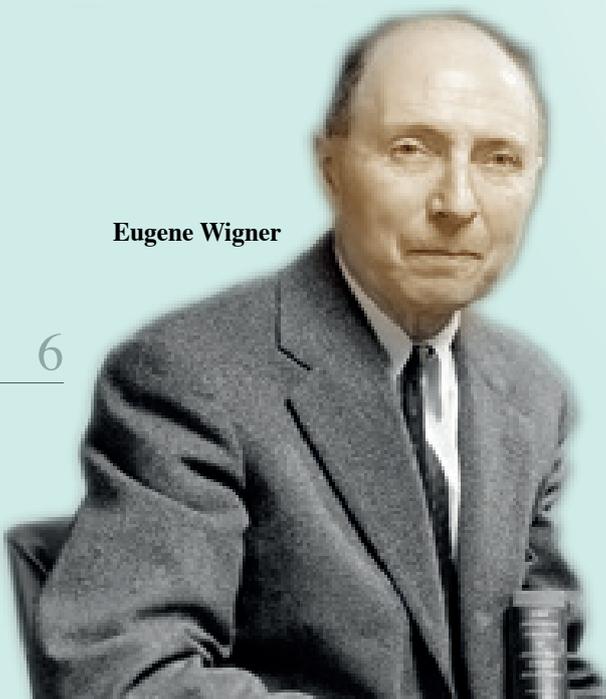
Numbers are not objects at all, because in giving the properties of numbers you merely characterize an abstract structure.

Paul Benacerraf, 'What Numbers Could Not Be'

Desperate, lonely, cut off from the human community which in many cases has ceased to exist, under the sentence of violent death, wracked by desires for intimacy they do not know how to fulfil, at the same time tormented by the presence of women, men turn to logic.

Andrea Nye, Words of Power: a feminist reading of the history of logic

Eugene Wigner



1 Wigner's Dilemma

It works, but why it works we can't explain.
A mystery: ask any physicist.
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.

How think it's newfound physics-truths they gain
With all the math-based axioms they enlist?
It works, but why it works we can't explain.

Math-Platonists, at home on high terrain,
Still find the Forms do little to assist.
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.

That's the real problem: doctrines too arcane,
Like that, can yield the physics-mill no grist.
It works, but why it works we can't explain.

Some say: keep maths empirical, abstain
From suchlike talk; but it's the crux they've missed!
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.

A flat dilemma, the logician's bane:
'Objective truth or knowledge?', that's the gist.
It works, but why it works we can't explain.

No wonder theorists find the thing a strain,
Whether empiricist or rationalist:
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.

Small hope that we might reconcile the twain
Where each try warns the trier: please desist!
It works, but why it works we can't explain.

Cease hoping, and you'll go against the grain
Of all that tells us: try another twist!
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.

Perhaps it's where the mind transcends the brain,
This point at which such statements co-exist:
It works, though why it works we can't explain;
We seek an answer, but we seek in vain.



II One Option (Empiricism, J.S. Mill)

Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.
No lift from wings that beat in empty space;
No problem measurement can't take in stride.

Count, add, subtract, then multiply, divide:
The sums work out, they tell us what's the case.
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.

The physics pay-off proves they're bona-fide,
Though it comes down to simple stuff at base:
No problem measurement can't take in stride.

Those bother-heads need Plato to provide
A shadow-realm of Forms that they can chase.
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.

The rule holds good for maths pure and applied:
Look hard, you'll find a maths/world interface.
No problem measurement can't take in stride.

That's why you've physics breakthroughs alongside
The maths discoveries: it's a relay race!
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.

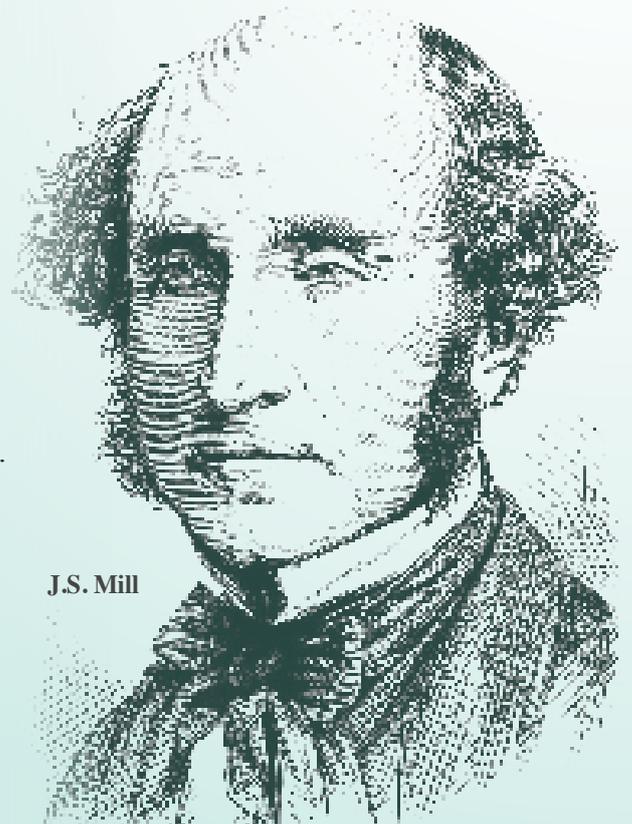
It's also why the mystery-mongers slide
From Plato's to the sceptic's tight embrace.
No problem measurement can't take in stride.

A simple point: if abstract qualms collide
With what we know then knowledge holds the ace:
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.

'Where things add up': please tell the swivel-eyed
Math-sceptics that's where knowledge has its place.
No problem measurement can't take in stride.

Why think our mortal reckonings serve to hide
Platonic forms of which sense finds no trace?
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.

It's here below that numbers must reside
With fractions, multiples, or lengths you pace.
No problem measurement can't take in stride;
Stay earthbound, make geometry your guide.



J.S. Mill

III Another Option (Platonism, Frege)

No truths unless objective and ideal.
By formal proofs alone we know what's true.
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

Why trust empiricists like Mill whose zeal
For Ockham's Razor sends their thoughts askew?
No truths unless objective and ideal.

Then those there are, like Brouwer, who say 'feel,
Intuit, live your proofs!' – a motley crew!
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

I say: unless truth set its timeless seal
On all our thoughts we've not the faintest clue:
No truths unless objective and ideal.

Empiricists make sense their biggest deal,
'Facts of experience', but it just won't do.
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

It's why they always reinvent the wheel,
Shun formal proofs, tout common-sense in lieu.
No truths unless objective and ideal.

Myself, I've long since silenced that appeal
To any sense-reports that might leak through:
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

You tell me not to make a mystic meal
Of my Platonic doctrine: I'll tell you
'No truths unless objective and ideal'.

Those sceptics: all their sophistries reveal
Is just how deep in their own juice they stew.
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

Grant them their sceptic premises, and we'll
Soon come to share that same benighted view.
No truths unless objective and ideal.



Frege

That's why we Platonists need nerves of steel
To pay objective truth the homage due.
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

For else those ersatz creeds would rush to heal
The truth-shaped rift in all we thought we knew.
No truths unless objective and ideal;
Let sense withdraw, let thought display the real.

IV A Gentle Riposte (Intuitionism, Brouwer)

Why opt for truth when proof's the most you'll get?
Drop truth, let intuition show the way.
No point just piling up an unpaid debt.

Objectivists have goals that can't be met;
They pitch the stakes sky-high but it can't pay.
Why opt for truth when proof's the most you'll get?

The trouble is, they place an outsize bet
With naught to lose whatever odds you lay.
No point just piling up an unpaid debt.

Our option makes those truth-believers fret:
'Alright, dump truth, see how you're led astray!
Truth may elude the subtlest proof you'll get.'

That's their big counter-thesis: once you let
Truth go the logic falls out as it may.
No end to piling up that unpaid debt.

So what? say intuitionists: no sweat!
Let your best hunch decide the state of play.
Why opt for truth when proof's the most you'll get?

Besides, how else make room for those as yet
Unproven theorems in your dossier?
No point just piling up an unpaid debt.

Those Fregeans think our methods pose a threat
To logic with its outright yea-or-nay:
Why opt for truth when proof's the most you'll get?

10

We think your bivalence too coarse a net
To catch the nuances our proofs convey.
No end to piling up an unpaid debt.

Rather it's our intuitive mind-set
That has, here as in love, the final say.
Why opt for truth when proof's the most you'll get?
No point just piling up an unpaid debt.

L.E.J. Brouwer

V Platonism (Frege): some problems

Let no emotion cloud the skies of thought!
Thus Frege, staunch for truth though, truth to tell,
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

How think aright without some life-support,
Some other rule than this on which to dwell:
'Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought'?

Some feminists say there's another court,
A higher one, where gentler laws compel.
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

What price clear thought, they ask, when all he taught
Was how dead life could conjure living hell?
'Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought',

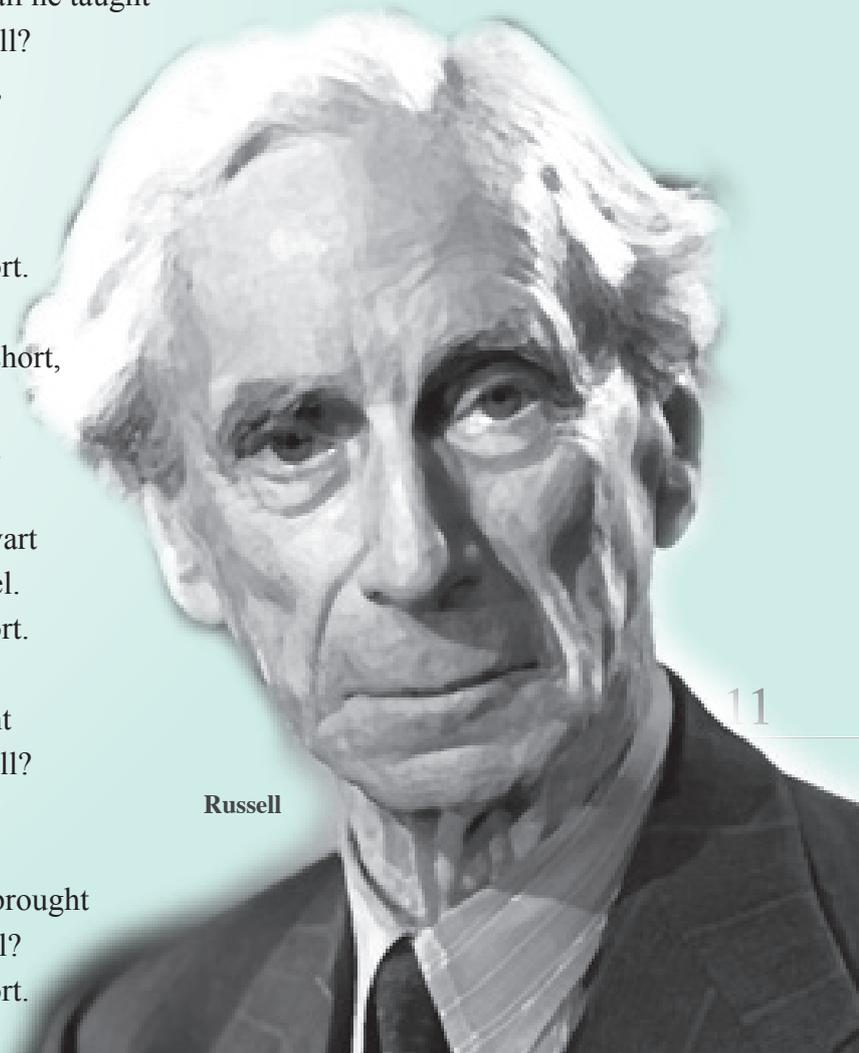
He said, yet suffered feelings of a sort
That neither clarity nor love could quell:
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

'A thought just like a hammer': that's, in short,
The form it took, his affect-crushing spell,
'Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought'.

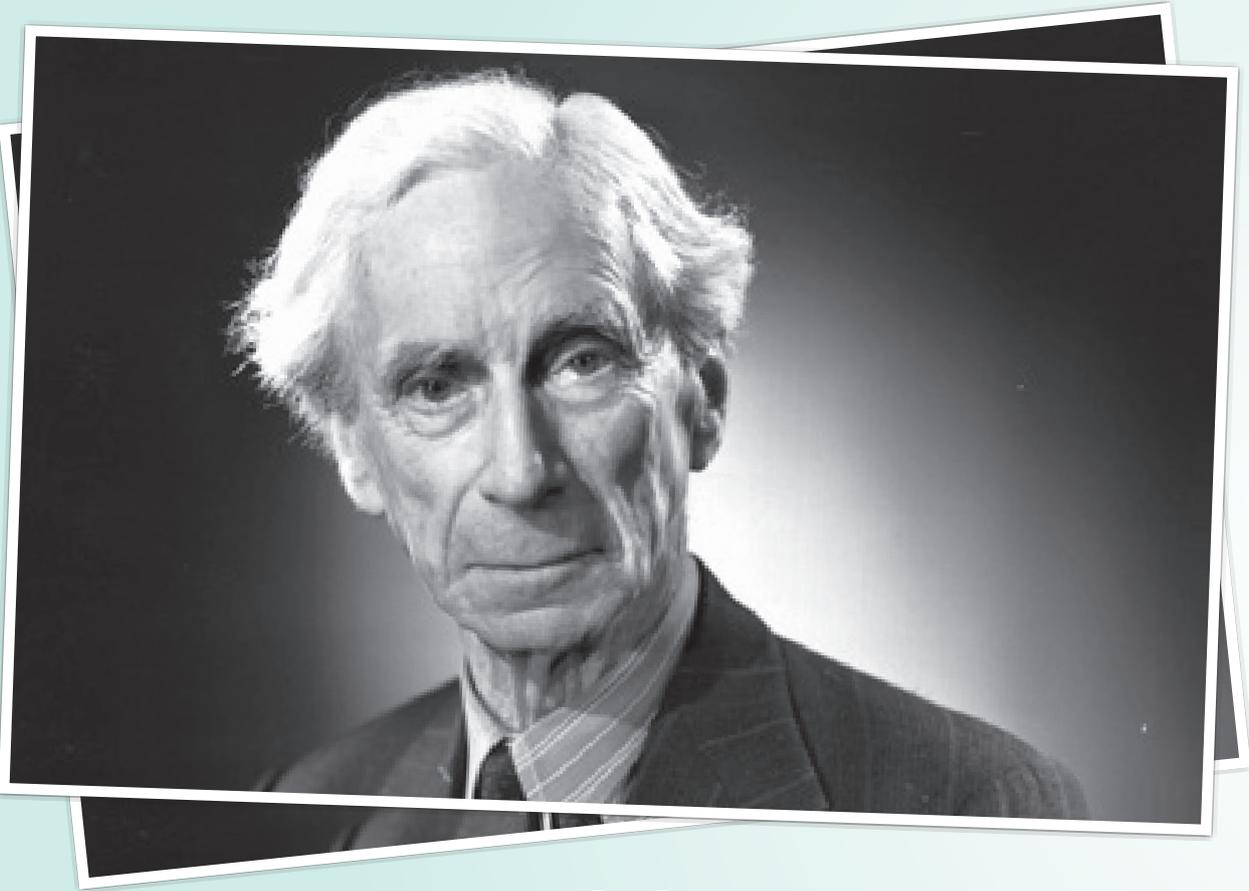
Yet think what counter-affects went to thwart
All feelings, hammered hard lest they rebel.
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

For who's to say an inner life's less fraught
For trapping psyche in thought's logic-shell?
'Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought.'

But then, who knows what inner peace it brought
To feel ensconced in thought's high citadel?
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.



Russell



Russell

And when his best endeavours came to naught
Through Russell's paradox, he took it well,
Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought.

Yet those calm intervals were dearly bought
With sentiments that struck a darker knell:
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

That's why the Frege specialists report
Those diaries and their proto-fascist smell.
'Let no emotion cloud the sky of thought';
It's thoughts as much as feelings that distort.

VI 'Where Love Comes Into It'

Where love comes into it's the question here.
Love-objects range across the widest scale.
Most holdings-true involve some holding-dear.

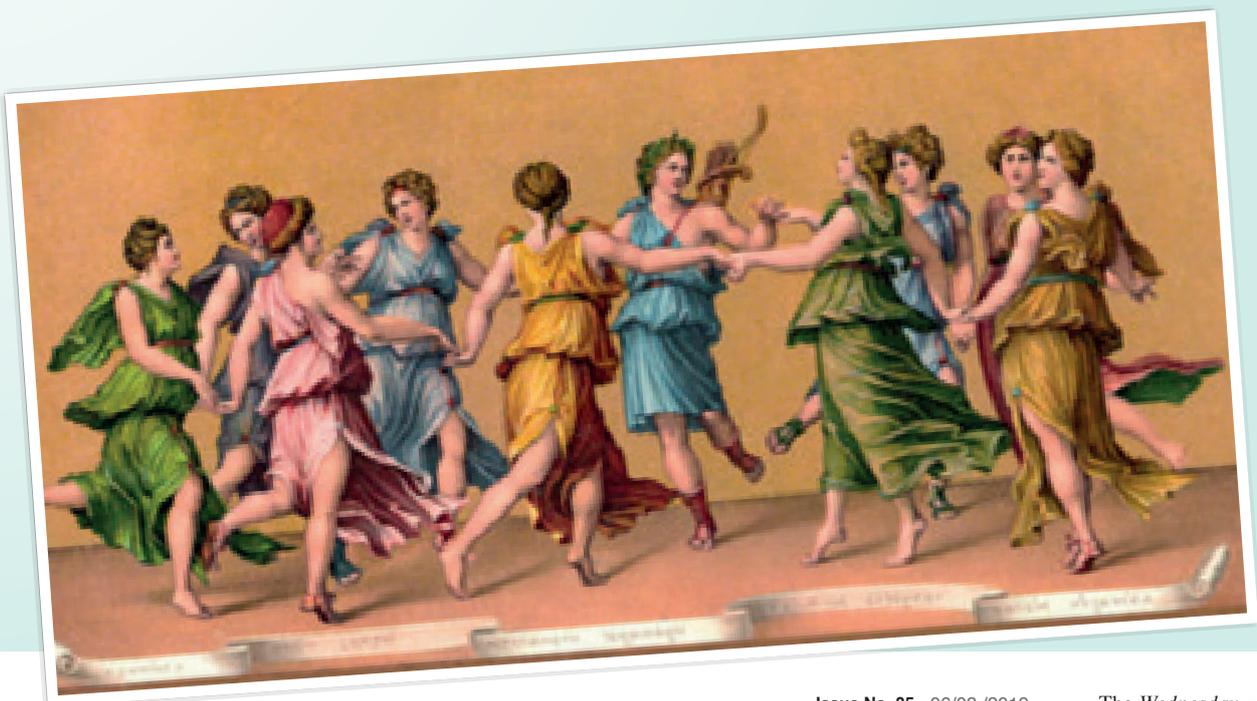
It's love of truth that makes the truths show clear,
Though sometimes love's best ministry may fail.
Where love comes into it's the question here.

Trust intuition and you'll likely veer
Too far off logic's course to glimpse the grail:
Most findings-true resist some holding-dear.

Take truth ideal and absolute to steer
By and you'll point a cautionary tale.
Where love comes into it's the question here.

For love long held in check at truth's frontier
May prove a dead-end to the logic-trail.
Most holdings-true involve some holding-dear,

Though Frege's case should tell us just how near
To flat-out paranoia this can sail.
Where love comes into it's the question here.





Still let's not treat his case as one of mere
Psychic disorder in the threatened male.
Most findings-true resist some holding-dear.

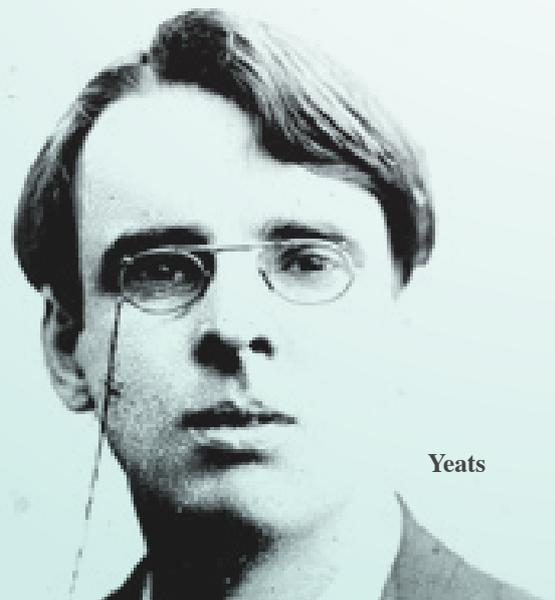
For there's no room in truth's exalted sphere
For feelings he decreed beyond the pale.
Where love comes into it's the question here;

Also the tricky question whether we're
Well placed to say where logic's wheels derail:
Most holdings-true involve some holding-dear.

Let's face it: no self-judgment more severe
Than Frege's fixed decree that truth prevail.
Where love comes into it's the question here;
Most findings-true resist some holding-dear.

VII Love and Truth Revisited

Make truth your guide in love, says Plato's shade.
'Perfection of the life or work', Yeats said.
Yet should love die, what truths shall make the grade?



Yeats

It's numbers, sets, and measures all arrayed
In due proportion that should fill your head:
Make love your guide to truth, says Plato's shade.

Yet though that math-fixation surely played
A leading role, so too did love purebred:
If love should die what truths shall make the grade?

By shared participation it's conveyed,
That highest Form of Good to which we're led
By love as guide to truth, says Plato's shade.

Yet Frege's case suggests that we've mislaid
The code-word somewhere, lost the vital thread:
If love should die what truths shall make the grade?

That zeal for truth, in him, at last forbade
All thoughts by human-kindlier passions fed.
Make truth your guide in truth, says Plato's shade.

The intuitionist replies: be swayed
By inklings, hunches, feeling-cues instead;
If love should die what truths shall make the grade?

Bring love's fine touch to mathematics' aid,
Spare no regret for old illusions shed.
'Yet what of truth, love's guide?', says Plato's shade.

'Let feeling judge and all the Forms must fade
To simulacra, like my painted bed,
Or images that no-wise make the grade?'

How keep them clear if love should serenade
Our thoughts until truth-content goes unread?
Make truth your guide to love, says Plato's shade,
Yet should love die what truths shall make the grade?

The Wednesday

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PRIVATE VIEW

Saturday 9th March 2019



MIKE ENGLAND

'Tabula Rasa' (Homage/Dedication to Heathcote Williams)

Visit the gallery to enjoy Mike England's world of visual enquiry, looking into abstraction, colour and texture in an inspiringly large scale.

Drawing on his experiences of travelling and living in vibrant and inspiring places such as the Andalusian hills in Spain and the realism of London's Shoreditch, Mike has developed a style of large scale and abstract works that challenge a way of seeing and prompt the viewer to respond emotionally before needing to know the what, when and where.

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