ISSN 2516-2292 (Online)
ISSN 2516-2284 (Print)

Issue No. 88 27/03/2019

The Wednesday

Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Philosopher as a Comet

In his well-known book on Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze picks up the image of the comet to illustrate his, and Nietzsche's, favourite conception of the philosopher. He opposes it to the 'dogmatic' conception of philosophy and the philosopher. In the dogmatic conception, philosophy has a unique interest in truth, and the ideal philosopher is the sage. But this emphasis on truth denies philosophy its critical spirit and can generate the kinds of truths that are ineffectual. It can also become a ready-made truth for any use. The philosopher-sage becomes an icon or part of an encyclopaedia. Both the philosophers and their thought lose their creativity and the power to generate further creative thought in their readers

This is very relevant to the debate about the nature of philosophy and its future. There are those who argue that philosophy does not end up with a given set of truths that can be taught, but rather it is a diversity of views going in different directions. Compared with science, philosophy is not achieving much and does not solve problems but generates more problems for itself. Perhaps this is the motive behind the Wittgensteinian project of dissolving, rather than solving, philosophical problems. On the other hand, there are those who treat philosophy as a text book you should read and memorise. I once met someone who had an interest in philosophical views but only so that he could prepare a reply. His interests and motivation were not philosophical but ideological. Philosophical thoughts for him were a set of ideas that he thought he had refuted, and so there would be no need to be concerned with philosophy.

If the above is the bad fortune of philosophy, the image of the philosopher-sage is also not promising. Most of the philosophers, ancient and modern, are studied in the spirit of a text book and not creatively. Their books are considered foundational texts that you have to know if you are studying philosophy, but you do not have to engage with them creatively. However, this is not how philosophy started. Take, for example, Plato. He did engage creatively with the thought of his teacher, Socrates, and did not limit himself to the results of Socratic philosophy. He moved beyond Socrates when he suggested the idea of the Forms in his *Republic*. But even this thought was subjected by him to severe criticism in other dialogues, such as *Parmenides*. He did the same with the idea of knowledge which he started in *Meno* and then developed, under criticism, in *Theaetetus*.

More recently, Heidegger lectured on Nietzsche's thought and Holderlin's poetry. Deleuze himself wrote on Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche and Foucault. Derrida critically engaged with a number of philosophers. In all these examples, the engagement is beneficial to thought and philosophy generally, but also very useful to Heidegger, Deleuze and Derrida. They were entering into dialogues with the philosophers they lectured on or wrote about. Reading their engagements with other philosophers is quite different from reading the latter as text books. The fact that those who are doing these readings are philosophers with definite views and approaches to philosophy, which are unique, new, subversive and critical, makes them different from those who write as faithful disciples and followers.

But then, why the image of the comet? Is it because the comet is rare event? Is always moving? Leaves traces? Is the image taken as the opposite of the stars that appear every night with fixed locations, or nearly so? Halley's Comet was a major event thirty-three years ago. Perhaps it takes even longer for a philosopher-comet to appear and we are still waiting for this event.

The Editor

How I Understand Ethical Statements

Issue 64 of The Wednesday included a simple analysis of the concepts of instrumental value, personal value, and moral value. In issue 82 in my review of a weekend course on Wittgenstein, Religion and Nonsense, I briefly mentioned the possibility that statements which appear to express absolute values such as 'killing is wrong', might be better understood as statements relative to the objectives of an intended audience, such as 'killing will not achieve what we want'. In issue 85, Bob Stone kindly contributed further thoughts on this topic and my analysis was discussed again by the Wednesday group on 27th February. This article re-examines the analysis in the light of these contributions:

CHRIS SEDDON

Issue 64 of The *Wednesday* includes my original analysis:

'In the meeting of the Wednesday group of 15th August I suggested the following concepts were useful in this subject area:

That some *means* are of ***instrumental value*** with respect to some *objectives* means: that the *means* make the achievement of the *objectives* more likely.

That some *objectives* are of ***personal value*** for some *people* means: that the *people* want those *objectives* either intrinsically or because they are of instrumental value with respect to some other objectives of personal value.

That some *objectives* are of ***moral value*** for some *people* means: that the *objectives* are of personal value for those *people*, with the additional connotation that the value is great and the people numerous.

I do not offer this as a moral framework alongside other theories of morality, from which one is invited to make a personal choice, but as an analysis of concepts about morality that are (a) more useful than those provided by alternative theories, (b) fit more accurately how people actually think about and act out morality (as opposed to how they think they think about it), and (c) more coherent than some alternatives.'

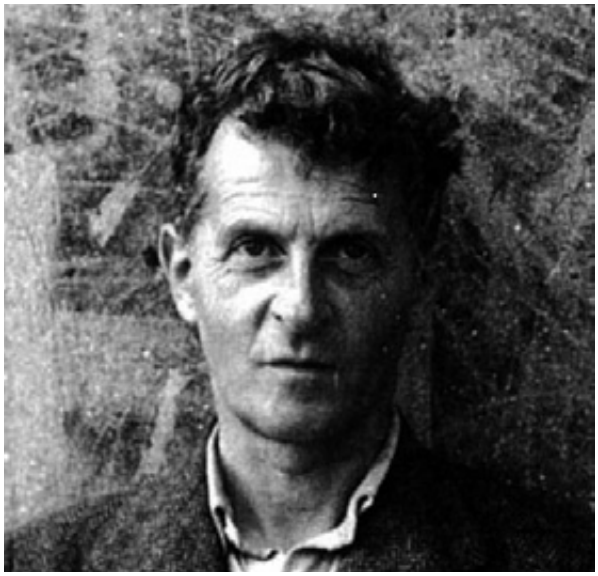
Do statements of absolute value express feelings?

I am very grateful for Bob's suggestion in issue 85 of The *Wednesday* that statements of absolute value might express feelings. That seems to fit my experience, and indeed it is consistent with my analysis (Bob also suggested that we are not entitled to tell people what they really mean, but this does not fit my experience, because I and others often seem unclear as to what we really mean, and other people have often helped me arrive at a clearer idea of it, especially in philosophical debate).

With respect to Bob's first suggestion, I am thinking of two senses of the word 'feelings.' In the first sense, one can *feel that something is the case*, in the second, one can *feel an emotion*.
In the sense that we *feel that something is the case*, it seems relevant to ask: *what* do we feel is the case? My analysis suggests that if the apparently absolute statement 'killing is wrong' expresses a feeling that something is the case, then it expresses the feeling that 'killing will not achieve what *we* really want' (whoever *we* are in this context).

In the sense that one can *feel an emotion*, it seems to me that we often appreciate poetry and music, for example, because we relate to the emotions

Bob Stone



Ludwig Wittgenstein

they express, and not because we attribute those emotions to the poet, composer, or performer (although we might). In this way the composition is like a predicate without a subject. In order to understand the emotion being expressed however, I need to understand what it would be like to apply that predicate - for someone to have that emotion. So, if the apparently absolute statement 'killing is wrong' were to express a certain emotion without attributing it to any particular group's objectives - as if the speaker were trying to express it without owning it - I would still need to understand what it would be like for someone to have that emotion, that is, what it would be like for a group to feel that 'killing does not meet what *we* want.' However, I cannot actually think of a single example of anyone making an apparently absolute statement of value without it becoming clear that they mean to apply it both to themselves and enough other people to make their statement relevant to the audience.

Therefore I agree with Bob that statements of moral value often express feelings, but whether this is interpreted as expressing the feeling that something is the case (without being certain) or as expressing an emotion (without saying whether or not it is *our* emotion), my analysis still applies: that apparently absolute statements of moral value are really statements of moral value relative to the unspoken objectives of the audience implied by the context.

How do you reconcile your own admitted moral uncertainties with your analysis that moral statements are statements of fact?

In this context I am not using the expression 'statement of fact' in the sense of a statement which I know to be true, but rather in the sense of a statement which is understood to the extent that we know what conditions would make it true.

In this sense, a statement of fact is a statement that something is the case, but determining whether it is indeed the case may be and often is problematic. For example, moral statements can fail to be true for several reasons, including:

- Pragmatic inaccuracy - the implied audience may indeed share those objectives, but the action may not be likely to achieve them;
- Social inaccuracy - the action may be likely to achieve some objectives, but the implied audience may not actually share them;
- Psychological inaccuracy - we may think we have those objectives but really we only want them because we believe wrongly that they are the only way of achieving our real objectives;
- Bad faith - we may only be pretending or fooling ourselves that we have those objectives;
- Conflicting objectives - the action may achieve some of our objectives but only at the expense of other objectives which we value more; etc

The accuracy of the analysis is confirmed by the

observation that the points of factual uncertainty which it predicts tend to occur in actual moral discourse.

Do you mean that in some sense the Nazis were right?
In some sense, perhaps, but not, I think, in any *relevant* sense. In the context of the Second World War I might understand the statement 'Nazi policy was right' in the sense that 'Nazi policy was likely to achieve what the people of the countries involved really wanted.' With the implied audience understood in this way the statement is clearly false because the objectives were not shared by the audience, many of whom actively opposed them. I am not an historian, but I am sure it would be false for the same reason even if the implied audience were restricted to the German people. Even if the audience were further restricted to active supporters of Nazi policy, I think it would still be false for a combination of the other reasons given above - pragmatic inaccuracy, psychological inaccuracy, bad faith, conflicting objectives, etc.

One can imagine an extreme case, in which an individual or even a group have objectives which conflict irreconcilably with some other group's objectives. Perhaps for example someone is so constituted, despite the evolutionary pressures of survival in a social animal, genuinely to want to hurt other people for no other reason than that they want it. More likely, someone may prioritise objectives which others would regard as relatively trivial, such as material gain, over human suffering. Even this type of example confirms the accuracy of the analysis, which predicts that in such a case, while the person still has those objectives, moral debate will not help. Those of us with the intrinsic objective of preventing unnecessary suffering in our species which the evolution of a social animal predicts may well want to use force to restrain psychopaths - or at least we may introduce the threat of force to leverage through moral debate some greater objective of self-preservation which an anti-social person may have.

In explaining moral values, you talk of some objectives being more valued than others. Isn't this circular?
It is certainly a deficiency of the simple analysis above that it does not explain what is meant by the connotation that the value is great. A more definite analysis could refine without circularity the concept of an objective being of greater moral value than a lesser objective for some people in terms of it being of greater personal value for each of them in terms of it being of greater instrumental value in terms of being more likely to achieve objectives which are of greater intrinsic value to them, however that is beyond the scope of this article: the above simple analysis was suggested simply to illustrate an alternative to Wittgenstein's suggestion that statements of absolute value are nonsense, to Kant's suggestion that they are justified by pure reason, and to the common idea that they refer somehow to a different realm than mere facts.

Surely we don't engage in this type of analysis every time we make a moral decision?
This analysis suggests what moral statements might mean, but we do not normally examine in such detail what we mean - much of the time we act instinctively, or follow certain convenient rules-of-thumb. And according to this analysis, the ultimate reason for our actions is a combination of objectives which we have for no other reason than because that is the type of creature we are.

Aren't there some absolute values, such as the need to prevent human suffering?
My analysis suggests that the objective of preventing human suffering is an understandable consequence of being human, and of only engaging in moral discussion with other humans. Environmental destruction may provide the motivation to expand this anthropocentric perspective even in those who genuinely want the objective more than any other.

Are humans inherently good, or inherently bad?
No. We are confused much of the time, but we have some shared and some conflicting objectives.

How does your analysis apply to Kant's moral imperative?
My analysis contradicts Kant's suggestion that moral statements can be deduced by pure reason and I believe that his examples of absolute value, both moral and aesthetic, merely reflect

United Nation: A Universal Government

conventional views of his time and culture which he unconsciously smuggled in under a cloak of logical inference.

How does a body like the United Nations work?
By looking for common objectives and ways of achieving them, and in the last resort, by creating them through the threat of force.

Isn't the attempt to analyse moral statements inconsistent with the existence of moral ambiguity?
I might be relatively definite about a concept, but applying it can still yield relatively vague results, because vagueness can be introduced by the other concepts with which it is combined in any given instance, as well as the concepts in terms of which I defined it.

Even in a more definite form, my analysis would predict moral ambiguity as well as moral uncertainty. I have mentioned above some points of factual uncertainty, but there are also points of ambiguity, such as who the implicit audience is, what the stated objective is, and what it means in this context for the members of the audience to have personal values (more than other personal values).

There is a tradition of treating all analysis as if it had to attain the precision of mathematical analysis, but this is not always necessary or desirable.

Is your analysis culturally conditioned?
My analysis predicts that specific moral statements are likely to be culturally conditioned, based both on the selection and prioritising of objectives and the different conditions which affect how they might best be achieved (as well as the different perceptions of these facts), however I believe this simple analysis is itself applicable to any situation in which agents have shared objectives and the ability to communicate ways of meeting them.

Didn't Jesus push moral debate to a higher level?
In my view Jesus continually challenged within the culture of his time any conventional reliance on unexamined moral principles and promoted the acknowledgement of shared objectives applied lovingly to specific situations for the broadest possible audience. The use of theistic language to justify moral absolutism is not in my view consistent with the teachings of Jesus.

Radical Feminism: Kristeva and Irigaray

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 13th March 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

Paul Cockburn gave a talk on feminism in this meeting, based on the work of the French philosophers Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

Julia Kristeva follows on from the work started by Saussure examining language. He wrote about the signifiers, the speech sounds we make, and the signified, what our speech means. Roland Barthes extended Saussurean semiology to gestures, images, sounds, and made it a critique of culture.

Kristeva (who studied under Barthes) is a psychoanalyst and wants to return to the origins of signs and meanings, how the signifying process emerges from the experience of the child. She thinks that classical semiotics does not deal with desires, play, and transgressions of the social code. The source of what Kristeva calls the semiotic is in such things as a baby's baby-talk and gestures, and also the child's primordial relationship with the mother, particularly the mother's body. This early semiotic experience based on dependence develops into symbolic language as subject and object are separated, and is then repressed. The semiotic provides the energy for speech, and is the realm of the mother, while the symbolic is the realm of the Oedipal father. The journey to the symbolic involves the development of self-identity and involves Lacan's mirror stage, castration and the Oedipal crisis.

Kristeva introduces the negative concept of the 'abject', a sort of horror, which threatens a person's identity. In early childhood impurities such as foods, waste products and sexual difference attack the boundaries of the self. We have to exclude the mother to create our identity. There is a demand to be strong, the self must be decisive and invulnerable, not weak. This leads us to repress inner diversity and the feminine semiotic leading to the symbolic law which is masculine. Kristeva believes that both the semiotic and the symbolic, the feminine and the masculine, are within each person, and she wants the feminine to be less repressed. Femininity and masculinity are mirror images of each other: caring/assertive, multiple/singular, diffuse/centred.

The first wave of feminism demanded equal rights for men and women, but the second wave of feminism starting in the 1970s demanded women's radical difference from men to be recognized. Kristeva believes women's sense of time is different from men's linear time. Masculine time is seen as teleological, project-led, using language in a sequence of words and sentences.

Luce Irigaray is more of an angry feminist than Kristeva. She thinks women are exploited, that culture is based upon the exchange of women. (This idea of exchange may be based on Levi-Strauss's theory of myths and primitive tribal marriage customs). Culture is 'phallocratic', created by the 'Law of the father' as Lacan says, and women are commodities. They are complementary to men, suppressed. There is no point in women becoming equal to men by becoming men, taking on masculine characteristics, as the feminine then vanishes completely.

She studied the difference between the way men and women use language, and found that women are more likely to engage in dialogue than men, and are less abstract than men. She came to the conclusion that there could be a different non-masculine discourse, and a distinct feminine cultural identity.

She thinks women are oppressed and collaborate in their own repression. Masculine terms dominate feminine ones: reason/passion, culture/nature, intellect/sensibility, and mind/body. Irigaray thinks the feminine is wildly ecstatic, associated with 'excessive' mysticism. Mystics want to merge with the universe, and in this experience there is no

Irigaray

Kristeva

subject/object split, but rather a union of subject and object.Western culture is founded on the sacrifice of the mother, and the patriarchal culture denies the dependency and vulnerability of the maternal. Mothers seek to care for their children, but not to dominate them. She believes there is a distinctively feminine way of offering love, which nurtures and energises others, rather than possessing or dominating them.

Irigaray disagrees with Freud who in *Totem and Taboo* describes the murder of the father as the foundation of society; she thinks it is the murder and suppression of the mother. In terms of female development, Freud emphasizes penis-envy as having the key role, and that this lack defines women. Irigary again disagrees strongly with this, and believes psychoanalysis is blind to its own assumptions, and she rejects the theories of both Freud and Lacan because of what she sees as their masculine bias.

In our discussion, the view was expressed that things have changed since Kristeva and Irigaray wrote. Freud's theories are questionable now. In modern culture in the West there is no need for the sexual stereotyping that particularly Irigaray sees. So, fathers can share equally in the care of children. Social conditions have changed so that mothers can work outside the home and fathers can look after children more than they did in the past. But can there be a completely new world where the care of children is divided equally between parents? Are there biological factors which have to be taken into account? And in our primitive tribal past, there may have been a functional split in the role of the sexes so that the tribe survived in that the women looked after children, the future of the tribe, while the men fought the enemies of the tribe. How much of this experience remains in our unconscious and influences our current behaviour?

However, the recent scandals dealing with the problems of unwanted sexual attention women have suffered seem to point to the feminine still being oppressed by masculinity, or at least by some males. Generally, we thought that Kristeva's approach was more acceptable than Irigaray's, in that a more unified psyche was available: all persons have a mixture of the feminine and masculine in them.

One view was that philosophy should not deal with such psychological issues, philosophy has other fish to fry so to speak. The other view is that discussion of the role of parents in caring for their children is important to philosophy as it highlights fundamental aspects of human nature, such as our experience of love. We are born into relationships, and into dependence on others. We have to cope with our vulnerability and waiting for our needs to be satisfied, and we can react as children to this in an unhealthy way by being aggressive or withdrawn as we grow up. Psychoanalysis is important as it deals with these areas which affect our morals and the way we behave in society when we are adults.

Underwater

I watch you softly gliding down, drained words
escape your mouth, rising mother-of-pearl
bubbles, I watch as behind glass, noting how
they are magnified in close-ups,
your hair floating, spun out like silk, woven
into fins and gills of past rushing fish,
your skin rippled loose around your breasts,
as if you were trying to shrug it off, shed it
dragonfly-like, ready to stretch and lift
into new shimmering layers. No more
a tearful lover, entangling arms and legs
with mine, no more struggling to escape,
now perfectly at ease underwater.
Sunlight blinks messages around you,
perhaps, that in order to find peace,
we must learn how to stop breathing.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

‘Tabula Rasa’: Locke Goes Painting

The *Wednesday*

‘Tabula Rasa,’ the phrase created by Locke, has come alive in Mike England’s new exhibition. Locke thought that the mind is a clean slate and our ideas come through the senses. These ideas could be visually formed lines and colours as shown in the paintings. The exhibition was well attended for the private viewing on Saturday the 9th March in the evening at the Cornerstone Gallery in Didcot. Mike is an active member of the Wednesday Group and several members of the group turned up to support the event.

The gallery provided an ideal space to allow the paintings to be shown to their full potential, displaying brightly coloured works between the more neutrally toned, enhancing the pieces and giving fluidity to the exhibition.

Mike’s work is predominately in oils. He has a wonderful flair for colour that is mesmerising, drawing you in so that you can see the intricate detail hidden below the initial abstract image. There were a couple of works in ink. Again the initial impression is very striking but on closer inspection the intricate details in one of these shows a princess and prince looking out into the galaxy.

Whilst each piece is named, Mike prefers his audience to draw their own conclusion on the meaning behind his works. His own free spirit is evident in his style and he has a great empathy and appreciation of the power of colour and shades of colour which is not normally achieved in oil. His works have a predominant shape but they also have a unique, almost layered effect which gives rise different ideas as you view the paintings. The overall effect is wonderful, and certainly not a blank canvas.

Mike England

Chris Seddon (left) and David Clough, the Tabula Rasa at the background

Freedom

Mike England dedicated the exhibition to his friend and poet, the late ***Heathcote Williams.*** The exhibition is on display until the 31st March.

Alterity: Three Villanelles

CHRIS **NORRIS**

What is ultimately attested to is selfhood, at once in its difference with respect to sameness and in its dialectical relation to otherness.

Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*

Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking.

Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*

Opening the discourse of philosophy to an Other that is no longer simply *its* Other is an accomplishment that marks not the end but the structural limits of philosophy's autonomy and autarchy.

Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*

I

What place in Ego's world for worlds apart?
Id knows the truth: its story goes that we're
Self-sundered, Id-divided from the start.

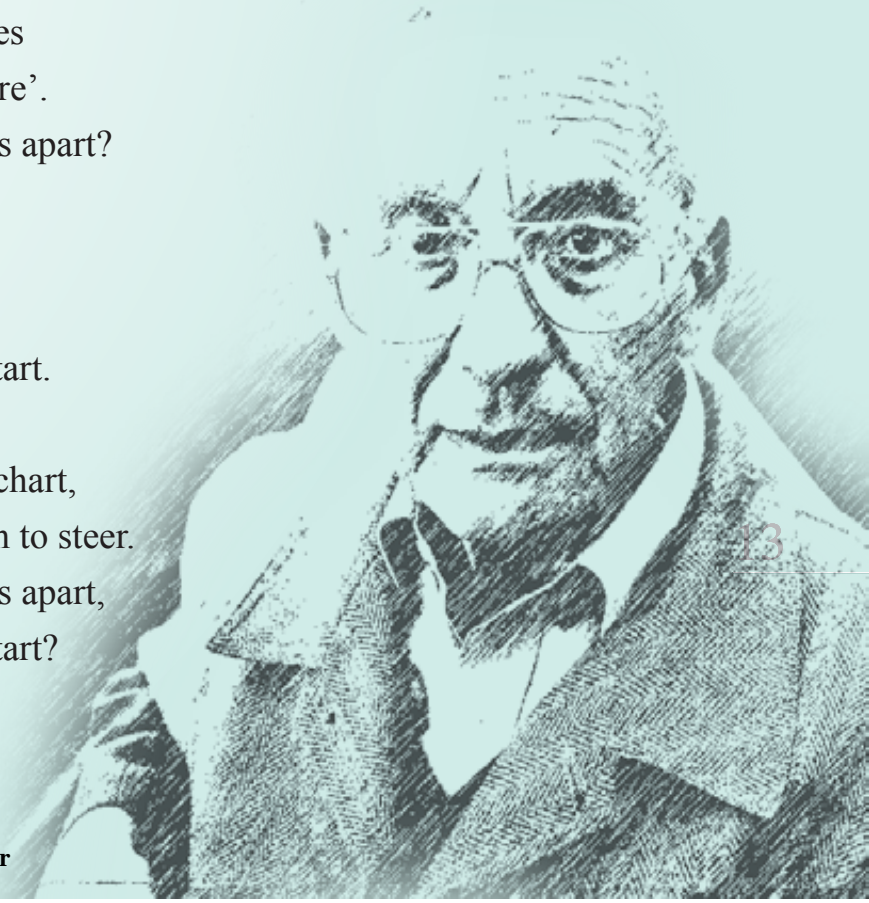
No Ego-healing for the fractured heart.
Alterity requires Id interfere.
What place in Ego's world for worlds apart?

No chance its daylight tactics might outsmart
Id's booby-trapping of the psycho-sphere,
Self-sundered, Id-divided from the start.

Id's votaries say blame it on Descartes
For telling Cogito 'the buck stops here'.
What place in Ego's world for worlds apart?

Let Id show Cogito the poet's art
As signifiers slide and rifts appear:
Self-sundered, Id-divided from the start.

One further jolt may send us off the chart,
Remove all compass-points by which to steer.
What place in Ego's world for worlds apart,
Self-sundered, Id-divided from the start?



Paul Ricoeur

II

Though Ego totters, still there's grounds for hope.
What harm should 'think' and 'am' not coincide?
It's Id that gives alterity its scope.

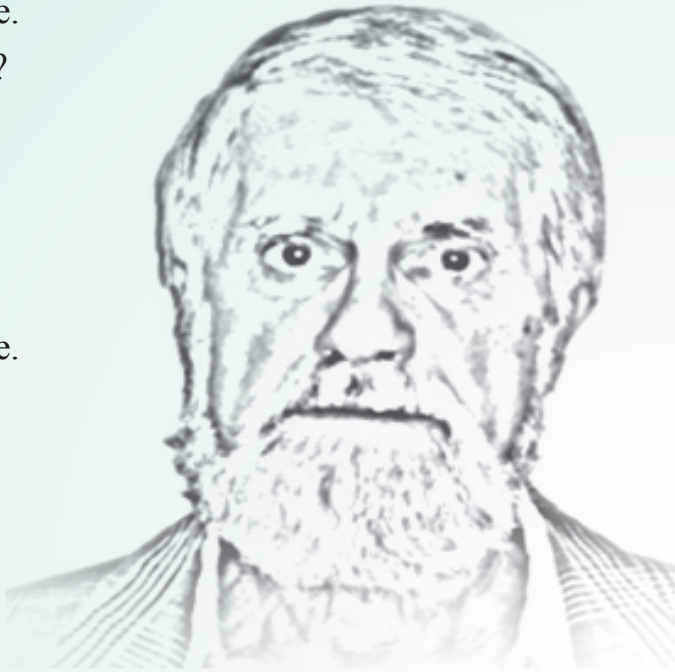
Where else but here, in Ego's envelope,
Should pockets of alterity reside?
Though Ego totters, still there's grounds for hope.

The alter ego, as self's isotope,
Keeps it with thoughts of otherness supplied.
It's Id that gives alterity its scope.

Maybe that's why Cartesians must grope
Step-wise across the other-self divide.
Though Ego totters, still there's grounds for hope.

Spurn Ego's call, 'give Id sufficient rope
And it will hang us both, Jekyll and Hyde';
It's Id that gives alterity its scope.

We're strangers to ourselves, and yet we cope,
We inner aliens, taking Id as guide.
Though Ego totters, still there's grounds for hope;
It's Id that gives alterity its scope.



Rodolphe Gasché

Jekyll and Hyde

III

No exit from the signifying chain.
Truth speaks in riddles: hence the talking cure.
Just listen out for Id's off-key refrain.

Hear Ego building up its dykes in vain
As errant senses yield to Id's allure:
No exit from the signifying chain.

They glance off its tight-cornered high chicane
Like comets on some wild galactic tour:
Just listen out for Id's off-key refrain.

Duped Ego thinks to ease the slippage-bane.
It says: 'may well-wrought senses long endure'.
No exit from the signifying chain.

More Id-attuned the non-dupes who abstain
From such self-doomed attempts to self-assure:
Just listen out for Id's off-key refrain.

Let its alterity spell out again
The truth that Ego labors to obscure:
No exit from the signifying chain.

Why humor Ego in that failed campaign
To keep the springs of selfhood clean and pure?
Just listen out for Id's off-key refrain.

No point your polishing the mirror's tain
If its lackluster backing foils the viewer.
No exit from the signifying chain.

Think not of loss; think rather what they gain
For whom this marks the Other's overture.
Just listen out for Id's off-key refrain;
No exit from the signifying chain.

The Wednesday

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Published by:
The Wednesday Press, Oxford

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12, Yarnells Hill,
Oxford, OX2 9BD

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IVY

(My take on Gilles Deleuze's delusion on RHIZOMES (IVY). Structures that branch in multiple, unexpected directions, creating complex lattice connections.)

Twist and bind; year-in, year-out.
Cloaking the wall with a tight knit,
wrapping the stone into a green catacomb.
Dark-meshed bones form hallways to cold nests.
Thicket squalor, insect slum, all through the dead of winter.
Then in the open throat of Spring, a thousand
urgent needs bind and twist and fill the hall with song.

David Burridge

The *Wednesday* – Magazine of the Wednesday group.
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