

The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Mysticism and Philosophy

We reported last week the debate we had at our weekly Wednesday meeting on religious experience and philosophy. We wanted to explore the idea that there is mistrust between philosophy and mysticism. The philosophers accuse mysticism of obfuscations and the mystics reject ordinary logic and rationality because they are alien to the nature of their experience. The religious experience is a wide-ranging term and extends from an ordinary belief to a mystical experience. The ordinary experience of faith is widely discussed in the philosophy of religion, but it is the mystical experience that I find more interesting and in need of closer connection with philosophy for a number of reasons.

One reason that interested some philosophers is the mystical experience as a phenomenon that goes beyond the particularity of belief. The philosopher Walter Stace looked for the common factors in mystical experience world-wide. He gave a detailed characterisation of the phenomenology of the mystical experience in his books *Mysticism and Philosophy*, *The Teachings of the Mystics* and *Time and Eternity*. Stace wrote a classic book on Hegel's Logic and cannot be dismissed easily as a lightweight philosopher. In fact, he thinks that the mystical experience itself is so deep and genuine that there is nothing misty, vague or occult about it.

For Stace, the mystical experience is non-sensual and non-intellectual. It is the search and feeling of unity with the One, either in an external fashion, by seeing all things as One, or an internal sense of the unity of the self with the One, or what I would call the reflection of the self on its ground. Both aspects had a great influence on philosophy, from the time of Plotinus to German Idealism. What Stace calls introvert and extrovert mystics may be closely identified with subjective and objective idealism.

Stace also saw the close connection between the

mystical and the aesthetic intuition. This idea had also been central to philosophers who talked about the Absolute. If the Absolute or the One is the unconditional, it is then not accessible to reason and concepts. It is the limit of reason. The mystical experience also tends to use paradoxical terms and language, and this has been attributed to the nature of the Absolute. We can understand this in two ways, one way is to say that in the Absolute all contradictions are reconciled. The other way is to say that the mystics use paradoxical language to loosen the hold of normal rationality. They think their experience is beyond the restrictions of reason. It is an intuition and not reason.

Russell in one of his essays, *Mysticism and Logic*, that he published in a book of the same title, disagreed with the idea of intuition although he recognised its value. He thought the philosophers needed the inspiration and vision of a gifted mystic and the mystics needed the rationality of a philosopher to understand and interpret their experience. Russell was responding to Bergson's *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Bergson was close to the spirit of idealism while Russell was writing in the empiricist tradition.

Perhaps certain ways of doing philosophy don't help much with the mystical experience. Not that they are not helpful at a certain, more academic level, say by applying theories of name and definite description to the names of God, but they don't capture the lived experience. In this respect, phenomenology seems to do better or to be more relevant and useful.

What we are calling for here is the need for bridges between the mystical experience and philosophy. We need an open-mindedness that doesn't limit the possibilities of thinking. There is a nice phrase 'thinking the unthinkable'. It applies literary here.

The Editor

God And The Philosophers

This is the second and final part of the article on the question of God's existence. We have already discussed a few views about this matter and will consider more views regarding belief in God and the question of evil and morality in relation to the concept of God.

RANJINI GHOSH

Part 2

We have discussed in part one of this article the views of Logical Positivism which rejected metaphysics and some responses to it. We discuss here one of the most famous arguments for the existence of God, known as the Ontological argument, and some other views and end up with morality, evil in the world and the existence of God.

Ontological Arguments

Brian Davis says that we can explain the significance of a word without supposing that anything corresponds to it in reality. For example, the word 'goblin' is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a mischievous and ugly demon'. The definition does not imply that there are really demons in the world which fit this description. Knowing what 'goblin' means does not involve knowing that they exist. Hence understanding what God means may not lead us to conclude that God exists. The meaning of God does not necessarily entail the existence of God.

Thomas Anselm gave an argument of this type where a proposition is true because if we deny it there will be a contradiction. He says that God is something than which nothing greater can be conceived. But if something is greater than God then it must exist not only in the mind but also in reality. If God is by definition supremely perfect and if existence is a form of perfection, then it follows that God exists.

Descartes said that existence cannot be separated from the essence of God, just like the essence of a triangle cannot be separated from the fact that the three angles of a triangle equal to two right angles. It is a contradiction to think of God as a supremely perfect being that lacks existence. It is like a mountain without a valley. Anselm is saying that God must exist because the concept of God has the property of necessary existence. A being without existence is a limited being.

Plantinga argues in a similar manner when he says that:

1. There is a possible World, W, in which there exists a being with maximal greatness
2. A being has maximal greatness in a world only if it exists in every world

So, in every world there is a being with maximal greatness, but it does not establish that God exists. It only establishes that there is some being that exists. He therefore further argues that the property of maximal greatness also entails the property of maximal excellence and maximal excellence entails omniscience, omnipotence and moral perfection. Now one can say that this being of maximal greatness and maximal excellence is God who exists.

The most famous critique of the ontological argument is attributed to Immanuel Kant. Kant has certain objections to the ontological



Thomas Aquinas

argument. He says that if in an identical proposition the predicate is rejected while retaining the subject then there will be a contradiction. The predicate necessarily belongs to the subject. But if we reject both the subject and the predicate then there will be no contradiction because nothing will be left. If we posit a triangle and reject its three angles, then it will be contradictory. But there will be no contradiction if we reject the triangle along with its angles. Similarly, in the concept of an absolute necessary being if existence is rejected then we reject the thing along with its predicates and there is no contradiction. What Kant is actually saying is that a statement like 'God does not exist' is not self-contradictory. He says that this could be true even if in fact it may be false.

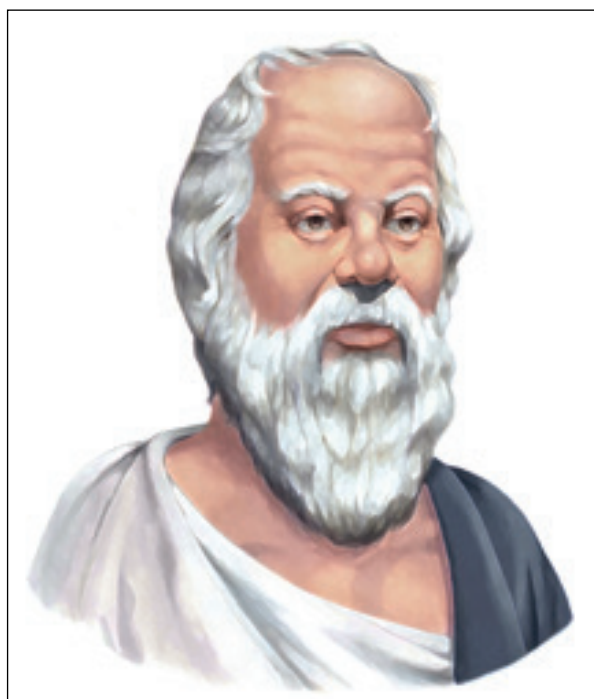
Descartes had argued that the concept of God

involves the perfection of existence. But it is not necessary that there be anything like God in existence. The attribute of perfection may be a necessary part of something but it does not follow that the thing actually exists. The definition of a thing does not guarantee any correspondence in reality. He says that ontological arguments take existence as a quality or attribute of God but when we say that something exists it is not a quality or attribute that we mean. This means that when we say that Ranjini Ghosh the author of this article exists then this existence is not a predicate that gives some information about Ranjini Ghosh. 'Ranjini Ghosh snores' tells us something about her. But Ranjini Ghosh exists does not tell us anything.

Roger Scruton says that when listing the properties of a thing I am fully entitled to



Al-Ghazali maybe the first to suggest the Ontological argument for the existence of God.



Socrates

list existence as one of them, but this idea misrepresents the logic of existence. If we say that a green cow exists, it does not add anything in thought to the concept. If two farmers were to list all the perfections that should be there in a cow then they might list health, stamina, milk, fertility and so on. If the lists of both the farmers coincide except that one farmer adds 'existence' to the list of perfections, then this does not add anything to the properties of a cow.

Simon Blackburn in his book *Think* (1999) argues that defining a concept is one thing but whether anything answers to the concept in reality is another thing. He gives the example of an advertisement in a dating column that defines a partner with certain characteristics that one is looking for. But defining what one is looking for does not mean that a person who meets all the criteria of the definition actually exists in the world. In other words, we can decide what we want to put into a description,

but the world decides whether we can actually meet someone of this description. The terms in the description have a *sense* but no *reference*. There might not be anybody in the world to answer to that description. Philosophers express this by saying that 'existence is not a predicate' meaning that adding 'and exists' does not mean that it actually exists in the world. We are in charge of sense because we can add anything in our description, but the world is in charge of reference. The world decides whether anything exists meeting those conditions.

Anselm defines God as a being 'than which nothing greater can be conceived'. It is an a priori concept. It tries to prove God's existence simply by considering the definition of God. His argument is in two stages: the concept of God is understood, so God exists in the understanding; but if God exists only in understanding and not in reality that means a greater being than God can be conceived which



Descartes popularized the Ontological argument



Blaise Pascal

exists in reality. But God is defined as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. So, no greater being can be conceived. There is a contradiction. So, our original supposition was false.

The monk Gaunilo criticized Anselm's argument. He said that this kind of argument can prove all sorts of conclusions. It can also prove the existence of the devil, defined as that than which nothing worse can be conceived. Simon Blackburn says that the crucial problem with this kind of an argument lies in the comparison of reality and conception.

Descartes' Ladder

Descartes gave two arguments for the existence of God. They are as follows:

1. I am an imperfect being because I often fall prey to doubt and error. But I have the idea of the most perfect being. But where did this idea come to me from? It did not come

to me from myself because the principle of causal adequacy says that there must be as much perfection in the cause as in the effect. Therefore, the idea of a perfect being must have come from a perfect cause which is God.

2. The ontological argument says that I have an idea of a supreme perfect being and that I can clearly and distinctly perceive that such a being must contain all perfections. This idea contains existence and it is God's essence to exist.

Descartes says that there is a supreme being who has all knowledge and this supreme being is God. He is not a deceiver like the demon. Those faculties which God has given us when we use them according to their true God-given nature will yield the truth and not error. The existence of God guarantees that I can have true knowledge. I can transcend my subjective point of view and have real knowledge of the world.

Pascal's Wager

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal gave an argument which is like a betting situation. Either we believe in God or we do not. If we believe in God and God exists, then we will be eternally rewarded. If we believe in God but God does not exist, then the only thing we have missed out on are a few sinful pleasures. On the other hand, if we do not believe in God but actually God exists then we may face eternal damnation. Lastly if we do not believe in God and God also does not exist then there is nothing lost.

Morality And Religion

Does morality presume the existence of God? The proponents of the emotive theory of ethics inspired by David Hume hold that statements like X is a morally bad man, or that it is your duty to do such and such a thing express only the likes and dislikes of the speaker. Moral judgements are neither true nor false and they have no religious implications.

Immanuel Kant said that belief in God is rationally necessary for anyone to be a morally good person. What is required is a moral proof for God's existence and not a scientific proof. It is a necessary adjunct of our moral outlook. In order that virtue is rewarded, and vice is punished there has to be an all-powerful judge who will decide and make justice prevail. Our belief in such a powerful God is faith. Kant said that without a belief in God our sense of morality will not have any foundation. In order to strive for moral perfection a belief in God is necessary. Morality requires us to aim for the highest good. Only moral goodness can ensure happiness. Though we are rational human beings and we can attain the highest good, we are not omnipotent. We have to postulate the existence of God to ensure that our adherence to moral law is properly rewarded. It becomes morally necessary to assume the existence of God. Therefore, it is rationally and morally necessary to attain the perfect good because

happiness arises out of virtue. But it must be possible for us to attain this so there must be an overarching moral order to ensure that the goal of perfect good is achievable. Moral order is possible only if we postulate God as the source.

Some philosophers have argued that the concept of morality is an autonomous concept. It does not need any support from outside. The philosopher H.A. Prichard in his famous article 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?' said that there is no reason for being moral other than the fact that we *should be*.

Do moral truths derive from God? We need to refer to the famous Euthyphro dilemma. Socrates asked whether what is holy is so because the Gods approve it or do they approve it because it is holy. It is like asking if something is morally good because God wills it or God wills it because it is morally good. Soren Kierkegaard reflects on the story of Abraham's sacrificing his son because Abraham thought he was commanded by God to do so. Kierkegaard says that there can be no question of ethics in the sense of morality. Duty is simply the expression of the will of God. Kierkegaard said that there was a 'teleological suspension of the ethical'. The religious concept of duty cannot be understood if it is treated as a moral concept. A believer has a duty and acts in accordance with the will of God. Sometimes the ethical is an obstacle to duty.

Aquinas insisted that God is supremely good because God always conforms to moral standards. In response to the Euthyphro dilemma Aquinas would say that God, as good, always wills the good. God is willing that we should act in accordance with the standards he has established. James Rachels holds that to be a moral agent one has to be autonomous and this is contrary to any belief in God. A belief in God requires total commitment to obey God's

demands and this would require that one has to abandon one's role as an autonomous moral agent. Any reason to act morally must be on its own basis and not on the will of God. Bertrand Russell also argued that religious beliefs have often led people to act in morally unacceptable ways. Religious beliefs have caused war, opposed science and have spread hatred. Simon Blackburn says that Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament refused to help non-Jewish women from Canaan. He says that the demise of a belief in God is not a threat to ethics. It is a necessary clearing ground on the way to revealing ethics.

The Problem Of Evil

J.L. Mackie in his famous article 'Evil and Omnipotence' argues that there is an inconsistency in the reality of evil and the reality of God. God is omnipotent, is wholly good and yet evil exists. The contradiction is that if any two of these three are true then the third is false. But the theologian holds that all three are essential parts. The contradiction arises because we suppose a good omnipotent Being should eliminate evil completely. Evil is strong evidence against God's existence. It has been argued by many philosophers that human and animal suffering are clear instances of evil and that an omnipotent and omniscient God could have prevented it.

In response to such criticisms the believers have argued that evil does not by itself render God's existence impossible. They suggest that evil is permitted by God with a good end in view. This is called the Free Will Defense. This view says that much evil is the result of what people freely choose to do. Such evil is only an outcome of God's goodwill to give choice to human beings. According to Thomas Aquinas evil is only an absence or privation of good. Suffering or wickedness is bad because it lacks something. Evil or badness are not independently existing entities rather it is the gap between what actually should have been



Alvin Plantinga

and what is not there. Evil is an absence of a good. When we say there is evil, we do not mean that there is any real individual or a positive quality. It is the lack of goodness in an individual or a negative quality. God does not cause evil. It is not something created but something which is missing.

There are others who hold the view that like Hamlet there are more things in heaven and earth than we can dream of. In seeing evil in the world, we may not be seeing the complete picture - there may be some other divine reason for this. Some philosophers have argued it cannot be said of God that He is morally good. Goodness is an attribute that can be predicated of human beings only. We cannot judge God in human terms. Morality cannot be attributed to God because morality presupposes a moral community of beings with a common language and similar desires and interests. Aristotle said that we cannot attribute moral virtues to divinity. God cannot be part of a political or moral community.

These winds blow destiny

These winds blow destiny! Oh, do accept
this urging, blind and unknown feeling
that leaves hearts glowing and wind-swept.
Keep quiet! Don't move! Winds are revealing
your fate by carrying it on the wings of spring –

From somewhere brought these winds an urgent call.
Oh if they did! We felt at home at last!
The skies in us would heave and fall –

But with these winds fate only grows and blows
above us seeking its own name and ways.
We are still looking, guessing where it flows,
when winds hurl it away to outer space...



Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Outbranching:

The latest poetry collection by *Scharlie Meeuws*

WENDY HASSAN

Outbranching is the latest poetry collection of Scharlie Meeuws. It was released just before Christmas and was published by Cerasus Poetry, London.

Scharlie is a very sensitive and thoughtful poet. She was born in Germany, but Oxfordshire has been a home to her for nearly sixty years. She is a poet in four languages: English, German, Spanish and French. She is also a digital artist and many of her poems and artwork have been published in The *Wednesday* magazine.

There is a deep wish running through all her poems which is to communicate her thoughts and feelings to people who are like-minded and to do so with sensitivity. She dedicated her new collection to her unknown readers:

I fill my poems with words:
a message in a bottle,
sent out in the hope that someone, somewhere,
finds it washed up
on heartland.

I set my poems afloat
to maybe reach a heart
- someone's, somewhere -
that reads between the lines
and knows and knows...

Scharlie believes that: 'When a poem is a true expression of feeling, it can be liberating. The pace and timing of words reveal a full and surprising range of meanings, which I believe is best expressed through the use of simple language. While I like to depict the scale of events, scenery and emotions, I prefer to do so almost invisibly... In this collection, poems drift

in and out of inner space, explore loss and death, love and feelings, forever interwoven with a thicket of branches, enlivened by an occasional cluster of colourful blooms'.

Scharlie Meeuws started writing poems at a very young age. After her studies in Spain and France, she also wrote poems in Spanish and French, before she moved to England, where she and her Dutch husband owned Thornton's Bookshop, the oldest bookshop in Oxford, which later moved to Faringdon. As a digital artist Scharlie is a member of Faringdon's Art Society, where her digital art can be viewed in a public gallery online and also at local art exhibitions.

Her publications of poetry in German and English include: *Einfach nur das Fühlen von Zwischenräumen* (2004), *In Search of the Other* (2005), *Drafting Drift wood* (2007), *On change - Poetry & digital art* (2010), *Merely the feeling for spaces* (2011), *Minimalistics* (2011), *Das was die Blumen blühend macht* (poetry and digital art) (2014) and *Haiku, Listen into the silence - poetry and digital art* (2017).

Scharlie Meeuws has a wonderful ability to present raw emotion without sentimentality; she clearly is at one with nature and expresses herself using natural scenes to capture the spirit of the situation she is describing. Each poem is just the right length to portray the point without unnecessary embellishment which would detract from the succinctness of her wordcraft.

Outbranching, her new collection, takes the reader through a roller-coaster ride of emotions. Each of the four sections leaves the reader with a deep sense of the power of life's various phases.

It starts with 'of men, memories and dreams', then 'of love, betrayal and loneliness', 'of darkness, death and light', to finally 'of nature, wisdom and healing'.

Her poem, 'For We Love Dragonflies', captures the translucent movement of these beautiful insects on a sun-drenched day and reflects upon this in our memories; it also paints the lovely image of Moroccan hot sands and the souks, delightfully agile images just like the dragonflies.

'The Sculptor' is a sensual poem that creates a visual image of the sculptor at work transforming a lump of clay into a very detailed head all beautifully measured to give the perfect perspective, deftly manipulating the face to have character, building momentum into the finished product and then the final twisting of self-doubt when the craftsman reflects upon his efforts, leaving the reader exhausted by the concentration that this descriptive piece has sculpted.

'Loneliness is a Language' cuts deep to the quick to make the reader understand that whilst nature can soften the feelings it is a raw emotion that everyone must learn to cope with:

LONELINESS IS A LANGUAGE

What could I say or do?

*Would pain smooth out
under my perfect words?*

Would it even listen?

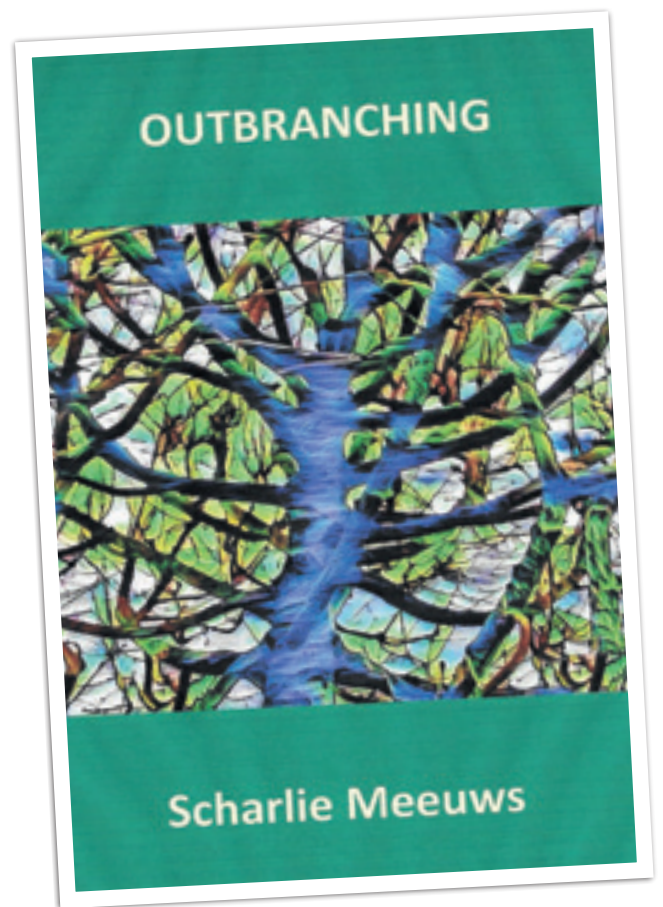
Winds soothe and refresh.

*Green shades in the landscape please the eye
and sitting by the water lulls the senses.*

The shrieking call of a bird brings it all to an end.

*The old pain is alive, rips the blue sky,
claws the heart.*

*Loneliness is a language
you will have to learn to speak,
decode its words by and by,
pore over lost translations.*



'Stillborn' is such a simple but immensely powerful poem which captures brilliantly the sense of last hope in the scan room when the mother undoubtedly knows the reality of what she is about to have confirmed, and then the total sense of loss and utter hopelessness of the situation which is so expressive and leaves the reader feeling truly bereft.

The reader can see the eye of the artist working through the poem, the fine details, the integration of the elements, the weaving of human feelings with scenes from nature. You can also discern a mystical vision of the unity of being, the outside and the inside, the dead and the alive, or at a deeper level, there is no death or life but the continuous creation and interpenetration of both. The nightly vision is always present where sounds, moonlight, nocturnal birds and darkness are all mixed with human anxiety and existential worries. Deep existential anxiety pervades the whole collection but also love and hope. A truly remarkable achievement and an immensely stimulating read.

Adorno: Invitation to the Dance



CHRIS NORRIS

Schiller's dictum that 'Life's good, in spite of it all', *papier-mâché* from the start, has become idiocy now that it is blown into the same trumpet as omnipresent advertising, with psycho-analysis, despite its better possibilities, adding its fuel to the flames.

Adorno, 'Invitation to the Dance', in *Minima Moralia*

(Note: This is one of several attempts to translate some cryptic and dialectically wiredrawn passages from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* into something more like Bertolt Brecht's tough-minded, down-to-earth didactic style.)



Friedrich Schiller

'Life's good, in spite of all', so Schiller said,
An idiotic slogan, just what you'd
Expect from one who touted dreams long shed
By stronger minds in his idealist brood.

It's like the ersatz Freudian stuff they spread,
Those US shrinks, among the host of screwed-
Up types who crave mere happiness instead
Of irksome truths to further blight their mood.

Just ask me, 'where's that foolish fancy bred,
That soothing Ego-trip that Freud eschewed?',
And I'll say: 'there, within the addled head
Of every dupe, promiscuous or prude'.

No wonder they're so grievously misled,
The witless, Disney-dreaming multitude
Who think that if things just work out in bed
Then they can quit the drink and comfort-food.

In truth, it's Freud's enlightenment they dread,
His knowledge of that old, unceasing feud
Between the life- and death-drives whose dark thread
He traced through all the lives it snagged and skewed.

The shrinks say: 'just cheer up, your demon's fled,
It's all those inhibitions you've accrued:
Hang loose, take Schiller's joyful creed as read,
And let Id's death-reminders not intrude'.

That's the *promesse de bonheur* they're drip-fed,
The dream that has those movie-goers wooed
By showing just the Ego-edited
Director's cut, all deathly thoughts tabooed.

Yet, screen it as you may, you'll end up dead,
A scene that haunts remembrance though unviewed
In all your Hollywood romances wed
To happy endings dutifully cued.

Far less, not more of them you need to shed,
Those inhibitions properly construed
As lingering markers of a truth long sped
Beyond the bounds of fake beatitude.

It's by the pleasure-sniffing nose you're led,
You blissed-out fools and Ego-ticklers who'd
Prefer that even Freud's harsh truths not shred
Distortion's veil but see the lie renewed.

Adorno

Adorno: Magic Flute



CHRIS NORRIS

Contemplation, as a residue of fetishist worship, is at the same time a stage in overcoming it. As radiant things give up their magic claims, renounce the power with which the subject invested them and hoped with their help himself to wield, they become transformed into images of gentleness, promises of a happiness cured of domination over nature.

Adorno, 'Magic Flute', in *Minima Moralia*

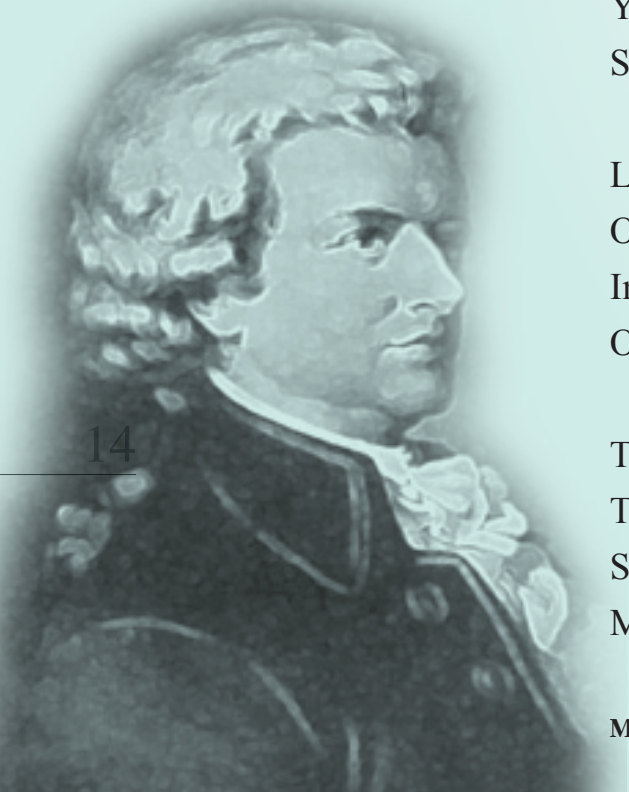
They held you spellbound once, the jewels you sought
And coveted, then hoarded till the sight
That held you captive threatened to distort
Your every sense-modality, to blight

Your life-world by their radiance, and so thwart,
Like scenes long censored but now dragged to light,
Your wish to have them not so dearly bought
Since touched by music's gift to put things right.

Listening to Mozart, we have little thought
Of what primeval scenes are taking flight
In those beguiling melodies, what sort
Of dimly conjured horrors may affright

The ear and mind imperfectly self-taught
To filter out raw overtones that might
Subdue our weak defences. They exhort:
Make no mistake, it's his Queen of the Night

Mozart



Who has our ear in that infernal court
Of last appeal where rival parties fight
It out between them in the savage sport
Now waged anew on art's delusive height.

My point in brief: it took *peine dure et fort*,
The torturer's technique, to tame those bright
Jewel-treasures whose gleam might else abort
Whatever signs of progress we could cite

Against the evidence of lives cut short
By avarice, or man's dark appetite
For every fetish-object finely wrought
To conjure blood-lust in its acolyte.

How then appease the jewel-clad juggernaut
If not by art's veiled promise to requite
The ancient cravings of a creature caught,
Like Lucifer, in dark-bedazzled plight.

Adorno



The Wednesday

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Website: Currently unavailable

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

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The *Wednesday* books:**

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The Second Year

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