

The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Beyond the Limits of Pure Reason

The mystics, such as Ibn Arabi, value knowledge which they have. They attribute this knowledge to a special way, which they call 'revelation'. But this knowledge, for the most part, can be analysed and discussed rationally. For example, Ibn Arabi gives us in symbolic sensory images what philosophers know by abstraction. His work has been compared to that of St. Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibnitz, and recently Derrida.

Three themes in Ibn Arabi's philosophy can be easily compared with known philosophical views. These are the limits of human reason, intuition and reason, and that everything in the universe is in a state of movement. We will discuss these ideas in this issue and the following issues. I will consider here his idea of the limits of human reason and the claim of the mystics that they have a source of knowledge that takes them beyond this limit.

In a remarkable chapter in his Magnus opus, *The Meccan Openings*, Ibn Arabi uses the literary device of Ascension (or spiritual journey) to project many of his theses about metaphysics, knowledge, ontology, cosmology, self and Being. The same journey he describes was taken up a century later by Dante in the third part of his *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*. It became the form of spiritual journey, as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and later in a secular form in the *Bildung* novels in Germany. Jonathan Rée suggested that we can read Descartes' *Discourse* or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the author's own ascensions. The easiest way to think of the ascension is to consider it as a thought experiment.

The ascension of Ibn Arabi, *The Alchemy of Human Happiness*, is now available in English, thanks to a good translation by Stephen Hirtenstein. Ibn Arabi describes a journey through the heavenly spheres

according to the Ptolemaic system. He goes through a process of losing his materiality and becomes a pure soul rising through the spheres. The spheres were populated, according to the Neo-Platonic system, with a physical body, a soul and an intellect. Ibn Arabi pictures these as heavenly spheres, angels and Prophets. He travels as a mystic and a follower of a Prophet. But he also takes with him a philosopher who relies on reason alone. At each sphere they stop, and they are received by an angel who takes the mystic to meet a Prophet but takes the philosopher to a lesser host who will receive him. Both travellers receive knowledge from their hosts, with the mystic receiving metaphysical knowledge of how things really are, while the philosopher is given causal or natural explanations of things.

At the final sphere of possible experience, the seventh sky, the philosopher is told that he can't progress further, but the mystic can. He has to go down and become a follower of a Prophet before he can go through the steps of the mystic. The mystic goes all the way beyond the limits of reason to enjoy encounters with Divine realities which are described in an imagistic way. The philosopher who becomes a believer, and is informed through belief and reason, will be allowed to see what his companion saw without doing the ascension again.

What this shows is that mystical experience and reason agree with each other, but reason is limited by the possibility of experience. This idea was also suggested by Kant who limited reason to the sphere of possible experience. Kant thought that those who allowed an *Intellectual Intuition* were moving towards mysticism. However, mysticism is not against reason but attempts to expand its reach beyond the limits imposed on it.

The Editor

Creative Nature: Schelling's Early Philosophy up to 1800

Schelling, in trying to overcome some problems created by Kant's philosophy, developed in his early period a system that tried to combine the Subject and Objective to aim at Absolute truth. The article gives an overview to of his *System of Transcendental Idealism*.

DAVID SOLOMON

Frederick Schelling wrote his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, one of the last works of his early period as a philosopher, in 1800. He was also at this time concerned with Nature Philosophy in his books *Ideas for the Philosophy of Nature* (1797), and *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* (1799-1800). Both

his Nature Philosophy and Transcendental Philosophy addressed similar issues but from different directions. The issues were legacies of Kant, who in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787) created a divide between Appearances of things, out of which we could construct knowledge of objects in the world, which meant



Schelling

that we were in effect constructing these objects from our perspective, and Things in Themselves, about which we could know nothing, since they did not by definition appear to us.

This created a number of problems: In the world of appearances, where everything was determined as part of chains of cause and effect, where was the Unconditioned, the Absolute first principle which started these causal chains without being itself caused? The Unconditioned could never itself be an appearance. Also, if human reason was in a position to judge nature (i.e. ascribe causes and effects to things), how could we do this if we were part of nature ourselves? Where did this freedom of ourselves to transcend nature come from? Most importantly, how does our human nature as part of nature as a whole with all its determinate laws square with our capacity as free agents to affect the world outside and to influence other free agents? In other words, how could we be determined and merely interpreters of a world that seems fixed for us, but at the same time be free sometimes to change this world? Kant's interpretation of these problems led him to divide the sensuous realm of nature (the Phenomenal) from the cognitive / ethical realm (the Noumenal), but from the point of view of his successors his dualism did not satisfactorily address the relationship between them. Kant did nevertheless start to address these problems in his later works such as the *Critique of Judgement*, where he recognised the possibility that nature was not just a series of causal chains but itself had Ends and Purposes.

In his Nature Philosophy, Schelling took this extension of the idea of nature further. Nature was not just a sum of objects mechanistically affecting each other. Nature could more basically be considered a productive force. In this, Schelling was reflecting the influence of Spinoza, whose reputation at this time was increasing in Germany: Spinoza distinguished between nature as product ('natura naturata'), and nature as productive force ('natura naturans'). For Schelling, nature had a goal, a

purpose and a flow, and the gulf between nature and humanity was to that extent reduced if not entirely bridged. Schelling saw nature as a flow of productive energy like a flow or current of water radiating out from a source. Every so often, the flow got caught up in a whirlpool. The material, the water, passed through the whirlpool, but the contours of the whirlpool remained. A form of life or a species was like a particular whirlpool. As the flow of water flowed forwards, other whirlpools followed, leading to the creation of other species. Schelling imagined an evolutionary process of inorganic and organic systems, smaller systems within larger, each relating to each other in a series, to form one gigantic overall system: the universe itself or 'the world soul'. But a key moment in the evolution of life forms was the evolution of human beings. Human beings are key because for the first time they are able to understand the whole process itself. So, the whole point of the evolution of nature is that it becomes conscious of itself by means of human reason: this is the Point, the End and goal of nature. So, humans in understanding what nature is, transcend nature, but that transcendence does not leave nature behind: it is part of nature itself.

In the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling set out on a parallel but not unrelated track. In this work he did not start from nature and its productive forces and then describe the different kinds of natural products (magnetism, electricity, light etc.). Instead he followed the transcendental method pioneered by Kant, in trying to establish the grounds ('the deduction') of the particular forms of our knowledge: objects, our sense of self, anything we call the world or truth. Since for Kant we cannot know things in themselves we construct objects out of the way they appear, by combining the forms in which appearances are necessarily manifested to us (time and space) with the categories of understanding (such as substance, accident, cause, effect etc.) which are applied by us prior to their existing in these representations, according to rational rules. In this way we in effect build up

Philosophy

objects for ourselves. Schelling did not accept the idea of Things in Themselves (he was more radical than Kant in that he thought that these were themselves a projection of consciousness), but he adopted the transcendental method in order to show the way in which we progressively build up more and more complex objects in our own consciousness. We develop a greater and greater understanding of the processes by which we do this, that is, we develop increasing insight into our own rationality, and the rationality of other individuals whom we affect and who affect us.

In Schelling's system, the series of transcendental deductions move step by step towards an Absolute truth. The Absolute is the point in which our knowledge of the universe coincides with the universe itself, the Subject becoming identical with the Object. The progress and evolution of nature tracks the progress of our consciousness and self-consciousness until they converge and become one. This is an infinite process in which we are moving towards a goal that will never be reached in finite time

The author's chief motive for devoting particular care to the depiction of this coherence, which is really a graduated sequence of intuitions, whereby the self raises itself to the highest power of consciousness, was the parallelism of nature with intelligence; to this he has long since been led, and to depict it completely, neither transcendental philosophy nor philosophy of nature is adequate by itself; both sciences together are alone able to do it, though on that very account the two must forever be opposed to one another, and can never merge into one. The conclusive proof of the perfectly equal reality of the two sciences from a theoretical standpoint, which the author has hitherto merely asserted, is thus to be sought in transcendental philosophy, and especially in that presentation of it which is contained in the present work; and the latter must therefore be



Kant

considered as a necessary counterpart to his writings on the philosophy of nature. (System of Transcendental Idealism, Foreword, PP 2-3).

Schelling's starting point in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* is neither the objective (nature) nor the subjective (mind, consciousness). It is pure activity or what he calls Being. Original being splits into object and subject. Schelling here uses an idea expressed by his friend the poet Friedrich Hölderlin but uses the language of his contemporary and teacher Johann Gottlieb Fichte when the latter describes the self-positing original activity of the 'I'. The formula $I = I$ indicates the way in which the self establishes itself objectively by reflecting on its own activity. (The I as object equals or is created by the I as activity). This moment Schelling calls Intellectual Intuition. It is not the sensory intuition of an object that is already there but the intuition of something that is created by the act of understanding itself. At this point objectivity itself is created. Henceforward both the subject and the object work forward in their own ways but bearing the marks of the original separation. Nature produces forms that are more and more



Spinoza



Holderlin

complex – inorganic and organic – but at the same time more refined, more abstract, less dependent on matter and more expressive of its intrinsic rationality:

Hence it is, that the more lawfulness emerges in nature itself, the more the husk disappears, the phenomena themselves become more mental, and at length vanish entirely. The phenomena of optics are nothing but a geometry whose lines are drawn by light, and this light itself is already of doubtful materiality. In the phenomena of magnetism all material traces are already disappearing, and in those of gravitation, which even scientists have thought it possible to conceive of merely as an immediate spiritual influence, nothing remains but its law, whose large-scale execution is the mechanism of the heavenly motions. – the completed theory of nature would be that whereby the whole of nature was resolved into an intelligence. (Ibid., P6).

On the other hand, from an opposite direction, what he calls ‘the transcendental mode of

apprehension’ consists in making all the subjective modes of experience explicit. The successive intuitions of objects by consciousness are productions of consciousness and bear the marks of the original intellectual intuition. The task of transcendental philosophy is to make all these modes objective.

The nature of the transcendental mode of apprehension must therefore consist essentially in this, that even that which in all other thinking, knowing, or acting escapes consciousness and is absolutely non-objective, is therein brought to consciousness and becomes objective; it consists, in short, of a constant objectifying-to-itself of the subjective. (Ibid., P 9).

Absolute knowledge or Truth consists of the coincidence of these two strands:

If all knowledge rests upon the coincidence of these two, then the problem of explaining this coincidence is undoubtedly the supreme problem for all knowledge; and if, as is generally admitted, philosophy is the highest

and foremost of all sciences we have here undoubtedly the main problem of philosophy. (Ibid, P 6).

Schelling describes the progress of consciousness in terms of a number of stages, or what he calls Epochs. Each Epoch repeats the original split between the subjective and objective, and the existence of this split is a tension that drives its activity. Each Epoch is also more restricted and more specific than its predecessor. The first epoch is as I have described the creation of the self as an object. The second Epoch consists of the creation of a series of objects, each one more and more developed. This process he calls 'productive intuition'. The third epoch is the stage at which consciousness realises that its perceptions result from its being an organism with organs and senses such as sight. Consciousness is now able to reflect on its own action in bringing about objects in the world. At this stage theoretical philosophy is exhausted and can go no further, and practical philosophy, the realm of freedom comes into play. Freedom, the ability to affect objects in the world (not just to bring them into consciousness through passively intuiting them) comes into our awareness by means of encounters with other consciousnesses. As a result of being restricted in our actions by other beings who are equal to us, we realise the areas in which we can after all freely act. We come to a recognition of other consciousnesses and in this mutual recognition our own and others' rights are established. We enter the realm of ethics, law and ultimately history.

6

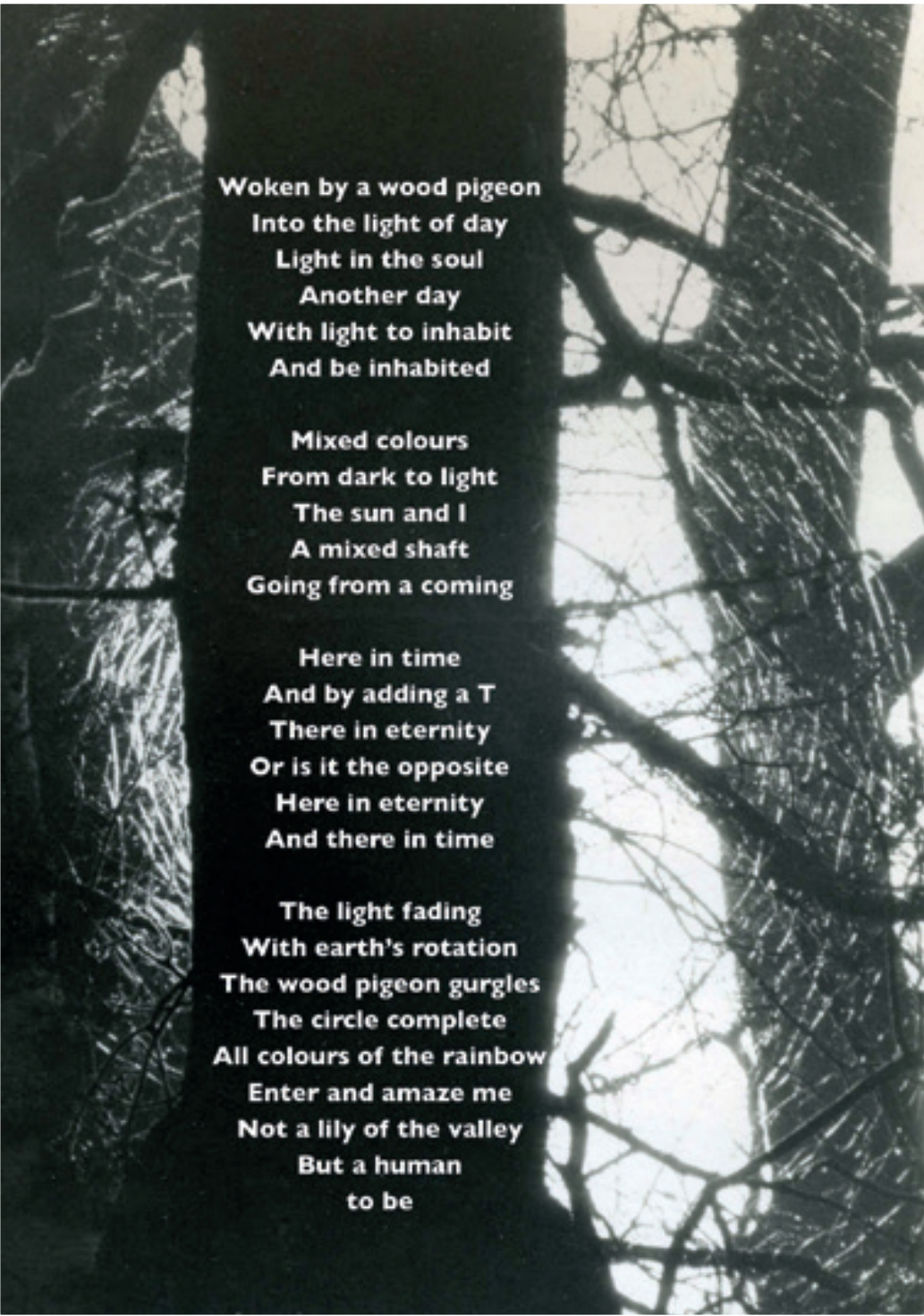
As a result of this journey, consciousness comes to realise what it is, its freedom and self-determination both in relation to the apparently objective physical world (that it now realises it has itself set up), and in the world of practical social activity. The Self becomes what Schelling calls an Intelligence where everything about its knowledge and activity becomes explicit and conscious.

Can the Absolute ever come about? Schelling thinks that as far as the progress of knowledge in history is concerned, we can never attain the Absolute, we move closer and closer to it without reaching it, like an asymptotic line. The Absolute can never appear through description or concepts because it is never itself objective. The intuition of the Absolute is intellectual and internal. If it can be expressed at all it is only expressible through artistic creation and the aesthetic sense.

The preceding is replaced in the author's copy by: The whole of philosophy starts, and must start, from a principle which, as the absolute principle, is also at the same time the absolutely identical. An absolutely simple and identical cannot be grasped or communicated through description, nor through concepts at all. It can only be intuited. Such an intuition is the organ of all philosophy. – But this intuition, which is an intellectual rather than a sensory one, and has as its object neither the objective nor the subjective, but the absolutely identical, in itself neither subjective nor objective, is itself merely an internal one, which cannot in turn become objective for itself: it can become objective only through a second intuition. This second intuition is the aesthetic. (See the footnote on P 229 of the same book above).

Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* in his description of the movement of consciousness towards the Absolute, although it marks only a stage in his early philosophy, foreshadows Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Furthermore, in his description of consciousness as not being aware of itself and its own origins in its preliminary stages, points to an idea of the unconscious which resonated throughout the nineteenth century in the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud.

Reflections
By William Bishop



Woken by a wood pigeon
Into the light of day
Light in the soul
Another day
With light to inhabit
And be inhabited

Mixed colours
From dark to light
The sun and I
A mixed shaft
Going from a coming

Here in time
And by adding a T
There in eternity
Or is it the opposite
Here in eternity
And there in time

The light fading
With earth's rotation
The wood pigeon gurgles
The circle complete
All colours of the rainbow
Enter and amaze me
Not a lily of the valley
But a human
to be

Freeze

In the coldest winter for years
heaps of snow in hours,
white glittering crowns crouch
over trees, fence posts.
A diamante headgear
decorates the Buddha in my garden
and still no sign of you.

The streets became white,
ponds froze and rivers flowed faster.
Each time I think about you,
memories flicker and soar,
spring walks in Paris, warm nights in Spain,
I am shaking like the erratic snowfalls
and still no sign of you.

I cannot eat, I cannot work, my breath
is laboured, my world iced-up.
At night I hear the howling
of winter storms and watch
how space diminishes around me.
The moon hangs in the dark, a poker face,
and still no sign of you.



The cold sleeps in every artery,
freezes and thickens, clumps my brain,
always in the shadows.
You have to light a fire
defrost and thaw me,
so very carefully and gently,
when you return.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Metaphysics and Certainty

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 8th May 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

David Burrige introduced a discussion on metaphysics. He thought the human desire for certainty led us to invent metaphysical entities, we want to explain everything 'once and for all'. Aristotle faced with a complex physical world wanted to impose a certainty on all he perceived. But David thought that today with all our scientific advances this approach does not work. It is fine to posit an idea, but we must test it, whether we are talking about physical science or human behaviour.

One reply to this was that if there was uncertainty then this assumes there is also understanding. We are on a journey; we do not know all the answers. It is certainly true that philosophers such as Hume, Heidegger and Wittgenstein rejected metaphysical thinking. Wittgenstein did not like generalizations being made into over-riding concepts.

Another problem is that you cannot test everything, and much of philosophy deals with what is not testable. Knowledge is not restricted to the scientific method of rationality and experiment. Intuitive, social and emotional knowledge is also possible and is a key part of our lives. We can also speculate and use our imagination and creativity. These latter types of knowledge can be critiqued, but critique can go too far as Bruno Latour recognized. (See Notes of Wednesday Meeting held on Wednesday 9th January 2019 in *The Wednesday* No .79 page14).

Aristotle in his book on Metaphysics wrote about causality, logic, and nature. He looks at many metaphysical concepts - being, actuality

and potentiality, unity and difference, forms and matter, teleology. He and his teacher Plato both sought totality. Temperamentally Plato's Ideal Forms probably reflected his introverted character. He perhaps tended to withdraw from the world, and found unity in the internal nature of man. Aristotle found unity more in the external world and criticized Plato's Forms. But both their philosophies involve a spiritual aspiration aiming for the perfection of the soul and society.

Kant examined our human experience and came up with structured mental categories in our minds which he thought were needed for us to experience the world and our own inner nature. But you can't test these structures in a strict scientific way. He also postulated the 'thing in itself' which clearly cannot be tested. But it is tied into his theory of perception and his justification that there is an external world.

The apps controlling us

We moved on to talk about technology and the dangers of 'apps' on phones and computers. Apps are now measuring us in physiological and psychological terms and these apps can be used to control our behavior. They can measure us in terms of numbers - how many times we click on specific sites, and also monitor how many physical steps we take, how many hours we sleep, how much exercise we take etc. Are we just creatures of habit? Self-reflection may become a thing of the past, and there are social dangers in the use of these apps. We need a new phenomenology of how we interact with this new technology, and we also need to recognize the power structures behind it.

The Rights We Give

Notes of Wednesday meeting Held on 15th May 2019

CHRIS SEDDON

In 1661 the European members of the Barbados legislature formally decided that African slaves did not have the same rights as themselves. European Quakers debated whether slaves had rights, but only agreed it in Britain and America in 1727 and 1774. Only in 1799, 1807 and 1833 did members of the UK Parliament decide first to restrict trade in slaves, then abolish it, and finally to give slaves the same rights as themselves.

In 1832 and 1866 the male members of the UK Parliament received petitions from a woman land-owner named Mary Smith and the philosopher John Stuart Mill. Only after the First World War did they give women the same rights as themselves.

On the 15th of May the human members of the Wednesday Philosophy discussion group debated whether other species had the same rights as themselves.

Putative differences from the human species were examined: do other animals feel pain, or do their bodies just automatically strive to avoid injury and emit sounds which only appear to be screams of pain? do other animals have memories, or are their

responses to stimuli only accidentally correlated with previous similar stimuli? do they really mourn when bereaved, suffer fear when threatened, practice determination when thwarted, faithfulness when challenged, and think when confronted with alternatives, or do they merely appear to act that way? These and similar questions were given the attention they deserved.

Different rights were considered: do other animals have the right to life when required by humans for eating? or when merely desired for eating? or for their fur to keep humans warm? or their teeth for art? or for sacrifice? or entertainment? or for experiments to prolong human life? or for experiments to enhance human cosmetics? Do they have the right to nurture their young? to live in their natural environment? to freedom from human control?

The applicability of historical moral frameworks was considered: is Kant's moral imperative so categorical that it also applies to animals as well as South Sea Islanders? is utility given to animals relevant to a utilitarian account? Is man simply and unconditionally sovereign over animals in a Nietzschean sense? Do animal rights exist in yet another ontological sphere, or one of those already

constructed? Do these moral frameworks help in this debate any more than they do in others?

It was suggested that the truly moral question is not so much 'what rights do animals have?' as 'what rights are we going to give them?'



Chris Seddon (left)
and Paul Cockburn (right)

Adorno: Little Hans



CHRIS NORRIS

‘Little Hans went out into the wide world’

(German song, cited by Adorno)

Whatever the intellectual does is wrong. He experiences drastically and vitally the ignominious choice that late capitalism secretly presents to all its dependents: to become one more grown-up, or to remain a child.

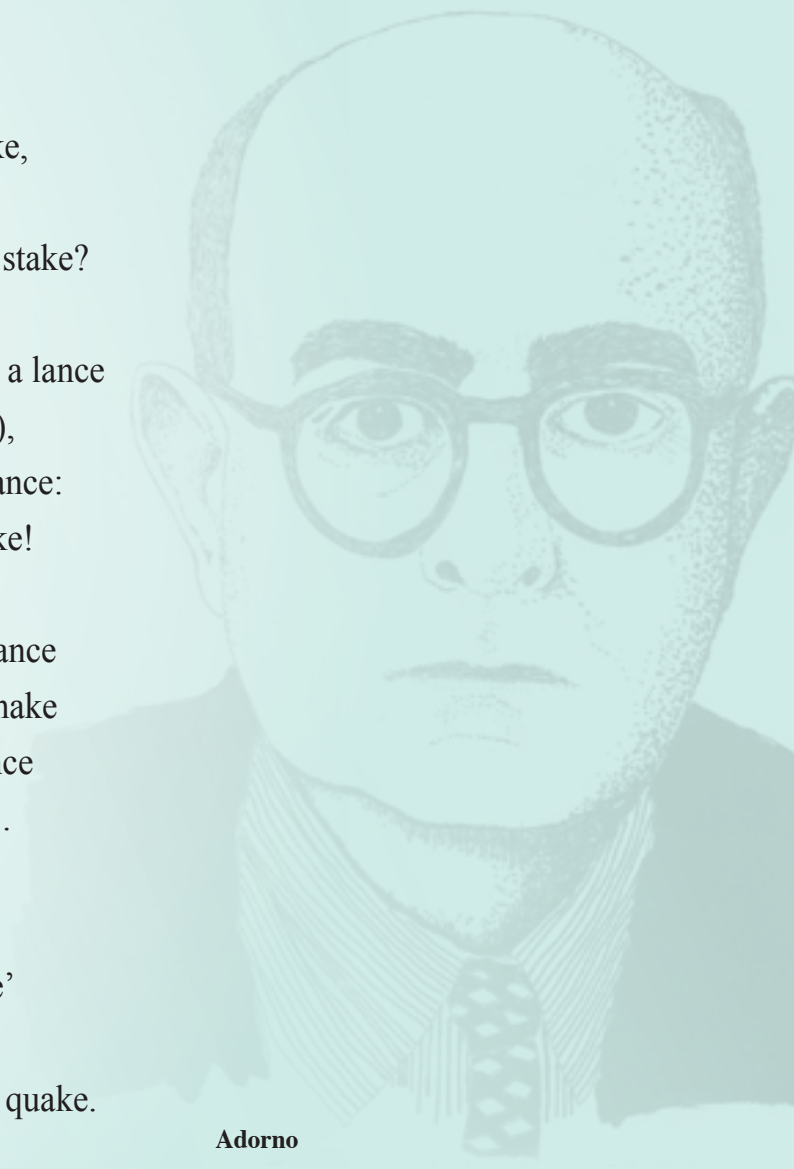
Adorno, ‘Little Hans’, in *Minima Moralia*

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

Go out into the wide world, little Hans,
And you'll be screwed whichever path you take,
Whether it's intellect that grabs its chance
Or thought that takes back seat for action's sake.

Play worldly-wise, adopt a cynic stance,
And everyone will guess you're on the make,
Suspect your hidden motives at a glance,
And ask: Why push that idea? What's your stake?

Play man of thought, proclaim you'll break a lance
For intellect (should you have one to break),
And they'll conclude you're in a state of trance:
A few hard knocks and you'd be wide awake!

Then should you bring about some big advance
In thinking, some real breakthrough fit to shake
Their certitudes, they'll say 'that old romance
Needs busting once again: a piece of cake!'.


You're stuck: let practicality enhance
Your hitting-power and have the label 'fake'
Affixed to your ideas, or look askance
At action-man and feel your thought-world quake.

You'll say: that world's no place for high finance,
For crude ideas that let the bankers rake
Their profits in; but ask how its slam-dance
Can wrong-foot theirs and thinking goes opaque.

Adorno

Poetry

A sad yet salutary truth: the fate
Of thought is always intricately tied
To economic factors such as rate
Of interest, unemployment, credit-side

And debt-side figures, this year's estimate
Of next year's borrowing, a sudden slide
In market share, or unexpected spate
Of firms gone bust with impact system-wide.

O Little Hans, sincerely though you hate
These crass considerations when applied
In intellect's domain, still you'll negate
Thought's very point and purpose if you hide

Its real conditions and the shifting freight
Of concrete circumstance that, specified
More plainly, might just trip you as you skate
So blithely where the wise adjust their stride.

Yet swing too far that way and you'll prostrate
Yourself before big business, take as guide
The FT Index, and let them dictate
The terms on which you thinkers will abide

Their insult to the fiercely guarded state
Of intellectual purity you've tried
To hold in place. Poor Hans, how it must grate,
That voice of worldly wisdom long denied!



Tin Drum

Reflect a moment and you'll come to see
Your sad dilemma as the kind that's thrown
Up constantly when capital's the key
To figuring why your thoughts are not your own,

Why counter-thoughts reject your freedom-plea,
What unknown force sets limits on the known,
And how the rules are framed to check that we
Keep clear of capital's exclusion-zone.

Good sense says it's a matter of degree,
Thoughts not too worldly-wise, nor too high-flown,
While good sense mainly serves to guarantee
They don't become too revolution-prone

Or apt to strike the current powers-that-be
As cutting perilously near the bone
By showing there's no neutral referee
While capital's the power behind the throne.

Your choice, dear Hans: protracted infancy
For lack of business-bred testosterone,
Or giving in to their wise-up decree
That childishness be rapidly outgrown,

That every thought demand its proper fee,
That thinking seek out targets like a drone,
And adulthood reveal that nobody
Thinks well by strength of intellect alone.

The Wednesday

Editor: Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

Copyright © Rahim Hassan

Website: Currently unavailable

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

Editorial Board

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

**Correspondences & buying
The *Wednesday* books:**

c/o The Secretary,
12, Yarnells Hill,
Oxford, OX2 9BD

*To obtain your copy of the
cumulative volumes: one, two,
three or four, please send a
signed cheque with your name
and address on the back
£15 for each volume
inside the UK*

*or £18 for readers
outside the UK:*

*Please make your cheque out to
'The Wednesday Magazine'*

or pay Online

Account Number:
24042417

Sorting Code:
09-01-29

Considering



Of course light pours through windows.
A sudden fixing, of sense is needed.
But now layers need delving.
A winding landscape of containment;
deep pools, echoing tunnels - rubble blocked.
First thoughts are skinny until substance is found.
Pictures stacked in corners,
left there from earlier soundings.

David Burridge