

The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Possibility of Re-enchantment

There is a strong sense amongst philosophers, spiritual people and artists that the world we live in is no longer felt as a wonder and a mystery. The scientific world-view has taken over and has divested nature and the subject (internally, in thoughts and feelings) of any romantic feeling. Facts have replaced the creative power of nature and the imagination. It is no wonder that there are now calls for reconceiving the world in ways that preserve its enchantment. But is re-enchantment possible or desirable? Is it an individual attitude or a matter of policy?

Exeter University is going to have a workshop on 'Politics of Wonder: Difference and Dignity in Nature and Society' next September. Here is their synopsis: In her work on the ethics of non-human species, Martha Nussbaum has argued that an attitude of wonder should play a central role in our dealings with the world of living nature. For Nussbaum, wonder at a being's particular form of life enables us to recognize it as a subject of dignity, worthy of respect and consideration in various ways. This workshop will explore applications of this idea to human socio-political relations. If wonder at the diversity of life in general can open up our perception of the scope of dignity and respect, can wonder in the context of human difference enhance respect between people? What are the implications for our understanding of political judgement, the conditions of democratic politics, or positive trans-cultural relations?

The move from respect for nature to the social and political spheres is very interesting and original. Previous conferences and workshops on the topic were concerned with the scientific world-view. There were two such conferences at Antwerp University before the end of last year, one concerned with science, the other with aesthetic responses.

conference referred to the disenchantment of the world due to science and technology and suggested the possibility of re-enchantment within the prevailing scientific worldview. The claim is that the process of disenchantment can be reversed, within the confines of a scientifically explicable world, and even on the basis of a purely naturalistic epistemology. It focused on attempts at the re-enchantment of modern science in the context of process thought, with a special focus on its alternative understanding of experience and its revision of the dominant naturalistic epistemology of modern science.

The second conference/workshop was called *Varieties of Enchantment*. Here is a summary supplied by the organisers: Those who are calling for a re-enchantment through aesthetics tried to explain the specific role played by art and literature as sources of new meaning in the modern age. In the philosophy of religion, they presented a more complex and less linear interpretation of the history of secularization in the West, and argued for new forms of enchantment and religious understanding in defence of a more humane conception of philosophy. In meta-ethics, they sought to retrieve a world suffused with value by arguing that moral properties are fundamentally different from natural ones and/or that we need to adopt a broader, non-scientific type of naturalism to solve the question of their relation.

All these conferences and workshops create an awareness of alternatives to the dominant views in science, philosophy, art and politics and open the way for a new thinking for our time and the future. But a question remains: is re-enchantment to be confined to thought or is it to be experienced? Does it require an institutional (political) programme or is it an individualist project? Does it simply require a greater openness of heart and mind unconfined by theories?

The Two Kinds Of Truth

Truth is an important topic in philosophy. It is also now a highly disputed concept in the age of media and mass communications, together with popular politics. But keeping to the philosophical debate, truth is linked to new trends in philosophy that see the belief in truth as a relic of metaphysics and should be rejected.

The roots of the debate about truth go back to early modern philosophy and the division in philosophy between rationalists and empiricists. They talked about two kinds of truth: one of reason, the other of fact. Below is a summary and discussion of these views.

RANJINI GHOSH

Part 1

True statements, or truth, can be divided into two categories:

- (1) A statement may be true because of the facts and
- (2) it may be true because of reasoning.

Statements of the first kind may be like ‘man landed on the moon’. A statement of the second kind is two plus two equals four. A statement which is true because of the facts is called an *empirical truth*. It is true because experience tells us so. Because empirical truths can only be known by ascertaining the facts they refer to, they can be false also. For example, if we say that there are no trees in India, this could turn out to be false on actual verification. Such statements are called *contingent truths*. A statement which is true because of reason is called a *necessary truth*. Two plus two equals four is a necessary truth. There is no possibility that this statement can be false. Necessary truths are truths *a priori*. These are truths which we know even before we experience it.

It has often been held by Logical Positivists that metaphysical statements such as ‘God exists’ are meaningless because such a statement cannot be empirically verified or falsified. Statements can be true or false, but

the more important question is what kind of truth we would like to have.

Philosophers had argued that knowledge is justified true belief. It is necessary to justify our belief and truth is only one of the necessary conditions for knowledge. But it has also been shown by Edmund Gettier that even justified true belief may well fall short of knowledge. We often believe something to be true but actual evidence may turn out to be different. Suppose I see my friend John in a party dancing with a girl and I believe that he is John but it may turn out that he may be John’s twin brother. In this case I have a justified true belief but not knowledge. Attempts to justify philosophical beliefs have led to the famous debate between rationalists and empiricists.

RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

The rationalists have argued that it is through human reason that one can have true knowledge of reality. The most famous exponents of this school of thought have been Descartes, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel. Necessary truths can be found through the process of reasoning. Such reasoning may be in born in us (the innate theory) or such reasoning may be inspired by God or Plato’s conception of Ideas. Though experience may help us on the courses of



Descartes



Hume

reasoning, experience by itself cannot lead us to complete truth or knowledge. This is so because experience or sensory experience may be deceptive and so we may not arrive at correct knowledge.

The empiricists on the other hand insist that all knowledge is only gained through experience. The leading philosophers of this school have been John Locke, Berkeley and David Hume. They do not believe in the doctrine of innate ideas. Locke thought that the human mind was a blank slate on which experience imprints itself.

Much of the main debate between rationalists and empiricists has been around the question of whether we are born with certain innate ideas. Among contemporary philosophers, Noam Chomsky believes that we are born with an innate universal grammar, but contemporary empiricist Nelson Goodman does not believe so.

Since empiricists reject the theory of innate ideas, they believe that all our ideas and knowledge can only be derived from experience. But all of our knowledge does not consist of individual perceptions alone. Knowledge is also based on universal

statements like 'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction'. The problem is how do we move from individual perceptions and our limited experience to universal claims? The rationalists would say that it is only through innate ideas or intuition. Most necessary truths about the world, particularly mathematics, are not based on experience but on innate ideas. Socrates asked a slave boy to describe a triangle and although the boy had no education, he was able to describe it correctly. This was because of innate ideas.

SKEPTICISM

It has often been taken as an assumption that there are two realms of reality, the outer physical world and the inner world of our experience. The physical world would continue even if we were not there to experience it. Both rationalists and empiricists agree that our knowledge of the external world is purely subjective. It is our own sensations or reason that are the basis for our ideas. We assume that the ideas we form in our mind have a correspondence with reality outside.

John Locke said that it is through our sensory perceptions that we have experience of the world around us. The rationalists argue that mere sensory perceptions cannot form ideas in



Bishop Berkeley

our mind. The mind has to play an active role in categorizing these sensations into higher level of concepts of understanding which will form the basis for having knowledge. There have been great debates between philosophers on the nature of reality and our understanding of the it.

Bishop Berkeley said that it is only through our perceptions that we see objects around us. Objects exist because we perceive them to exist. But there is no double existence of such objects other than our perception of these objects. This view of Berkeley has been misinterpreted by many philosophers who have said that Berkeley was denying the existence of any matter. However, this is not so. He only denied a double existence of matter. We form our knowledge of the world through our own ideas and experiences. We cannot know whether such ideas in our mind correspond to the way the world really is outside. If something is to be true, then it can be true only with reference to the facts in the world or by the truth of reason.

Western philosophy since the time of Descartes has been preoccupied with the problem of our own mind and the external world. Necessary

truths or truths a priori may be true in terms of our thinking or our language but may not correspond to the reality of the world outside. This gives rise to doubts.

METHOD OF DOUBT

Descartes is best known in philosophy for his method of doubt. He believed as a first rule not to accept anything as true without careful examination. He wanted to arrive at proofs of beliefs so as to be able to say that they are true. His method was to doubt everything. He even doubted the existence of the external world. He argued that whatever we experience of the outer world is through our senses and our senses may deceive us. It is also possible that we may be dreaming. But Descartes believed that there is something which is beyond doubt or indubitable and that is the contents of our own mind. He said that the fact that I am thinking proves that I am thinking. This is his famous *cogito* argument.

Descartes also tried to prove the existence of God by saying that we have a clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being. This supreme being also necessarily exists since existence is an attribute of perfection. The supreme being exists on His own. The supreme perfect being i.e. God, is also perfectly good. And therefore, God does not allow us to be fooled. And because God guarantees this, I can have true knowledge of the world.

This is Descartes' method of reasoning and he says that it is only through reason that we can have true knowledge and we will not then be deceived by our senses. In order to explain that reason alone can be the basis for knowledge he gives the example of wax. The wax melts under the influence of heat and the color and shape of the wax changes. Our senses cannot tell us in this case if we are dealing with the same piece of wax at all. It is only through our intellect or reason that we can know it is *essentially* the same wax.

innocence

By Mohamed Mustafa Kamal



Events

Party Time: Second Anniversary of The Wednesday Magazine

We were very pleased to celebrate the Second Anniversary of *The Wednesday* magazine on the 6th July. The magazine has been in publication for two years. Issue 104th issue of magazine came out last week. It has become a tradition that we celebrate the end of a year of the life of the magazine with all contributors to the magazine.

We had a party in the flower-filled garden of Paul and Dianne Cockburn, decorated with gazebos and

bunting. Wonderful food was provided by Wendy Hassan. Music was provided by the wonderful combination of Chris Seddon (cello) and David Solomon (violin). We thoroughly enjoyed listening to Mozart and other classical music pieces. Lively and friendly discussions took place, as we were pleased to welcome many of our contributors to the magazine who made the journey to Oxford.

Chris and Val sang a lovely song about their hobby of control line-flying of model aeroplanes, and we



Chris and Val Norris singing one of Chris's poems



Scharlie Meeuws reading her latest poems



Rahim presented the poets



Alan Price gave a nice reading of his poems

listened to poems from Charlie Meeuws, Erica Warburton, and Alan Price. See photos below! Barbara Vellacott gave special thanks to Rahim Hassan, our editor, for all the hard work he puts in on behalf of *The Wednesday* magazine and organizing our meetings. His friendship holds our group together.

On Sunday afternoon at the Opera café in Oxford, we had a poetry reading from Chris and Val. Their poems covered eclectic and entertaining subjects! The first poem was on music, specifically the tritone interval. This interval was banned in the past as it was dissonant rather than harmonious, possibly it was evil., though composers such as Purcell and Sibelius have used it. Subsequent

poems were on Monet and colour, Ashina (a working washing machine as viewed by the Chris Norris's grandchild!), and Larkin's poem 'This be the verse'. Other poems contrasted pairs of philosophers: Bloch and Adorno on utopia, Habermas and Adorno on ideal communication, Rorty and Gadamer on relativism and hermeneutics. Other subjects covered were Gödel's mathematical logic, politics, Dylan Thomas, and many more. A scintillating feast of poetic and philosophical ideas and discussion! We look forward to seeing Chris and Val again in Oxford soon.

We look forward to another year of ideas, discussion, poetry, art and philosophy. And music!



Erica Warburton read very emotional poems



The musicians Chris (cello) and David (violin) gave an excellent performance



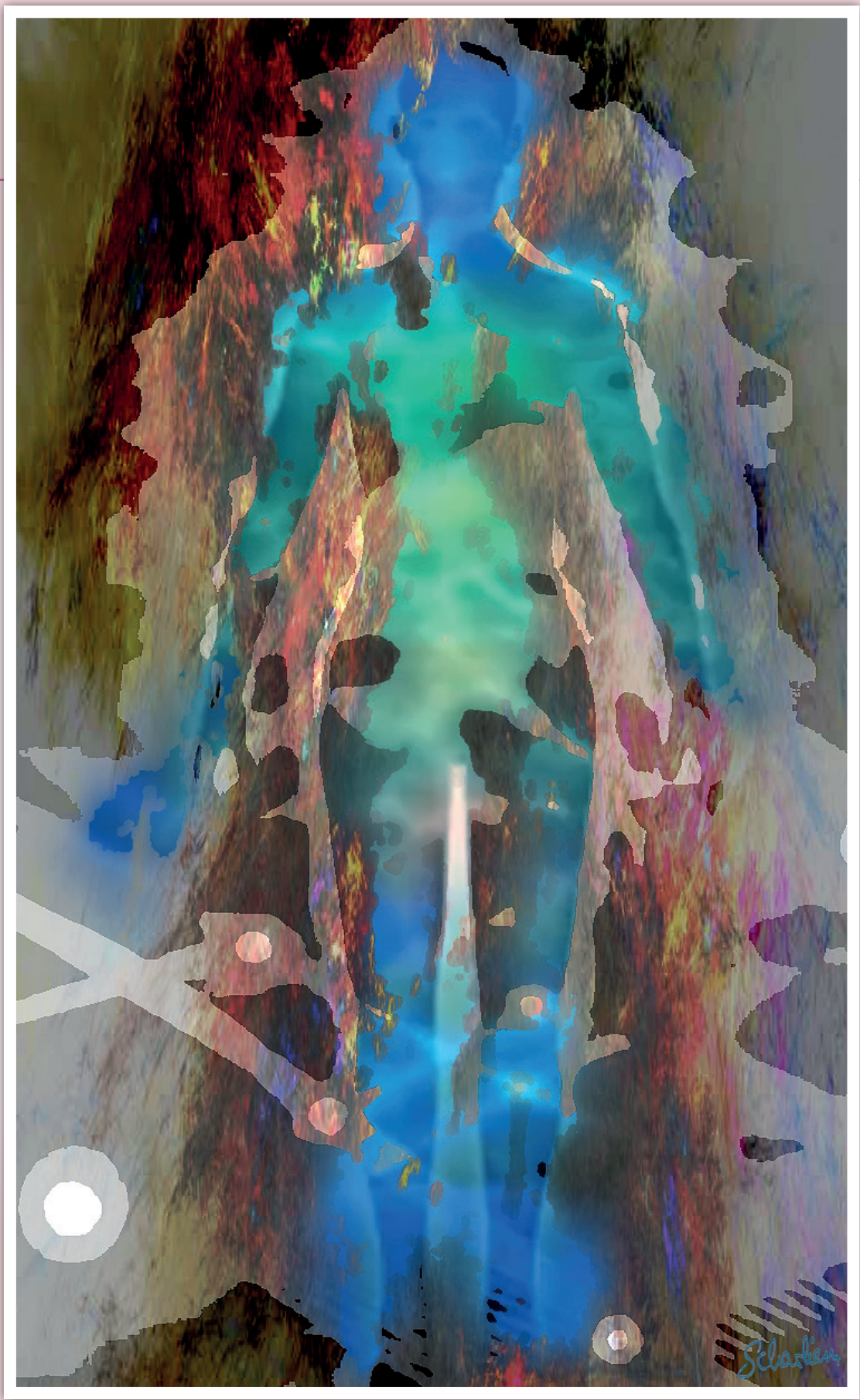
Chris reading his poetry at Opera Café, with Paul (right) and Val (left)



The celebration cake kindly donated by Simon Froud and family, Rahim's supportive neighbours

Miracle

They like to think it was a mystical encounter.
What I recall was that my body was lifting and flew,
my ears heard bells ringing louder and louder
and thistle-down words kept on floating
out of the dark, like the fireflies
that my inner child always had searched for.
I told them whatever they wanted to hear,
that my pain had vanished miraculously,
that I had suddenly been healed
and should be sanctified.
Who cares what they believed,
as long as I will enter the long queue
of the unforgotten.



Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Adorno: Dictation



CHRIS NORRIS

Dictation makes it possible for the author to slide into the position of the critic during the earliest phases of the production process. What one puts down is non-binding, provisional, mere material for reworking; once transcribed, however, it appears as something alienated and to a certain extent objective Thanks are due to those who take dictation, when they flush out the author at the right moment through contradiction, irony, nervousness, impatience and lack of respect.

Adorno, 'Sacrificial Lamb', in *Minima Moralia*, trans. Jephcott

I speak my thoughts as thinking finds its way.
He listens, takes them down as I dictate;
Attentive, silent, thoughtful, up to speed,
Yet analyst and ironist combined.

Thoughts tentative, as suits a first assay,
Caught 'on the wing', well short of finished state,
Though by his dispensation somehow freed
To think what else might not have come to mind.

His subtlest gestures have their role to play,
His frowns, sighs, nods, slight wince when phrases grate,
And suchlike ways to let me know that he'd
Perceived me heading for some double-bind,

Found biases that led my thought astray,
Seen sticking-points I failed to indicate,
Or guessed beforehand how I might proceed
To leave those looming obstacles behind.

Call it a quaint old practice though you may,
A bourgeois thing, way past its use-by date,
Or else – on this we're pretty much agreed –
An intellectual's get-out from the grind



Of *ars scribendi*, still I'd want to say
Dictation has this virtue: to negate,
Like dialectics, any thought decreed
Truth absolute, infallibly divined.

It shows your idols to have feet of clay,
Your timeless truths soon going out-of-date,
And those, your precious sentences, to need
His quiet assent before they're countersigned.

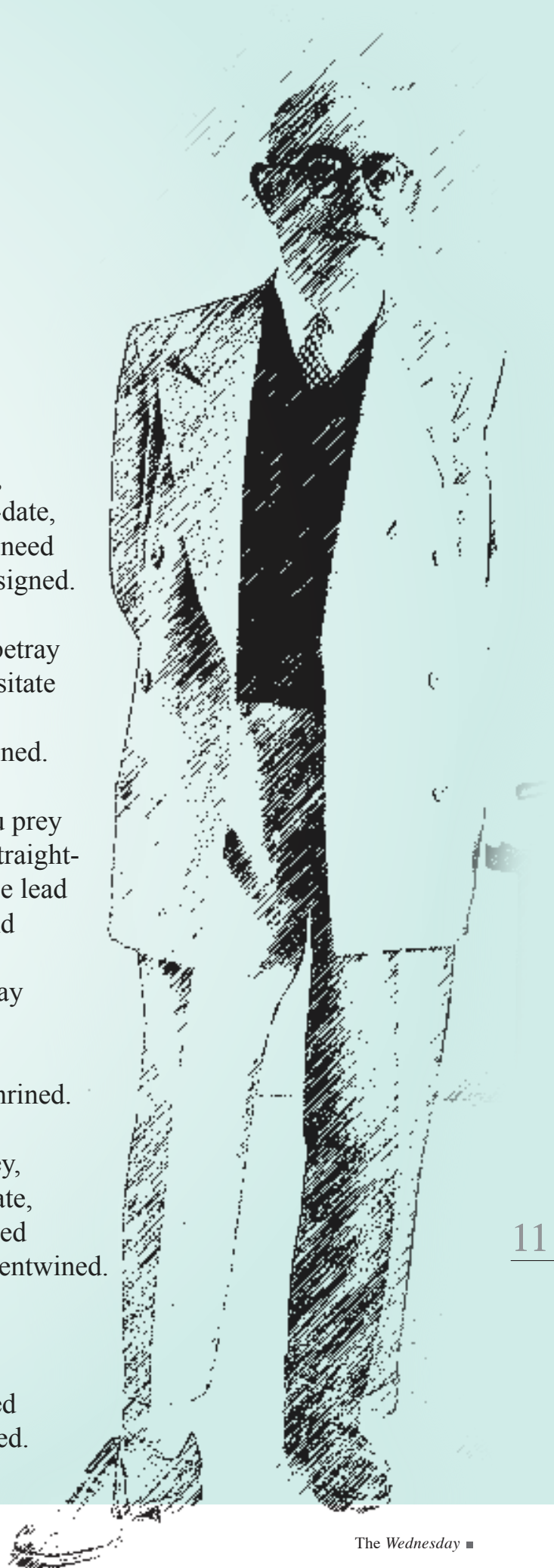
Then there's the tell-tale gestures that betray
Some doubt, some hint that has you hesitate
Before permitting all the world to read
A claim too sweeping, crude, or ill-defined.

Yet if this next-word-hanger leaves you prey
To doubts and self-misgivings, he's a straight-
Man, goad and trickster also, one whose lead
May point your way to regions of a kind

Unlooked-for in the course of day-to-day
Philosophising or the null debate
Of minds self-tutored never to exceed
The 'laws of thought', canonically enshrined.

For it's the riskier's blessing they convey,
The gift of those who pull down to create,
Who think no safe conclusion guaranteed
Since all truths come with errors close entwined.

That's how he merits his Socratic pay,
That shrewd amanuensis; by the rate
Of change in monologic when it's keyed
To thoughts aslant, resistant, non-aligned.



Can We Trust the Media?

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 17th July 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

We discussed the question ‘Can we trust the Media?’ We wondered what is happening to the media and the reporting of the news. Is our grip on reality being eroded?

There are now many sources of news and opinion; the number of news channels is increasing. Special interest groups, some of them sinister, are able to peddle lies on the internet and social media. These groups want to recruit followers, and lead people to join them with psychological ploys. We interact socially with others on social media, and this can have devastating effects, especially on young people. We can post our opinions, but is there true dialogue? Elections can be manipulated. How can we eliminate bias and rhetoric, find the truth?

Fake news is created and controversial tweets by senior figures in politics are reported and then quickly forgotten. The media (and we?) have a short attention span.

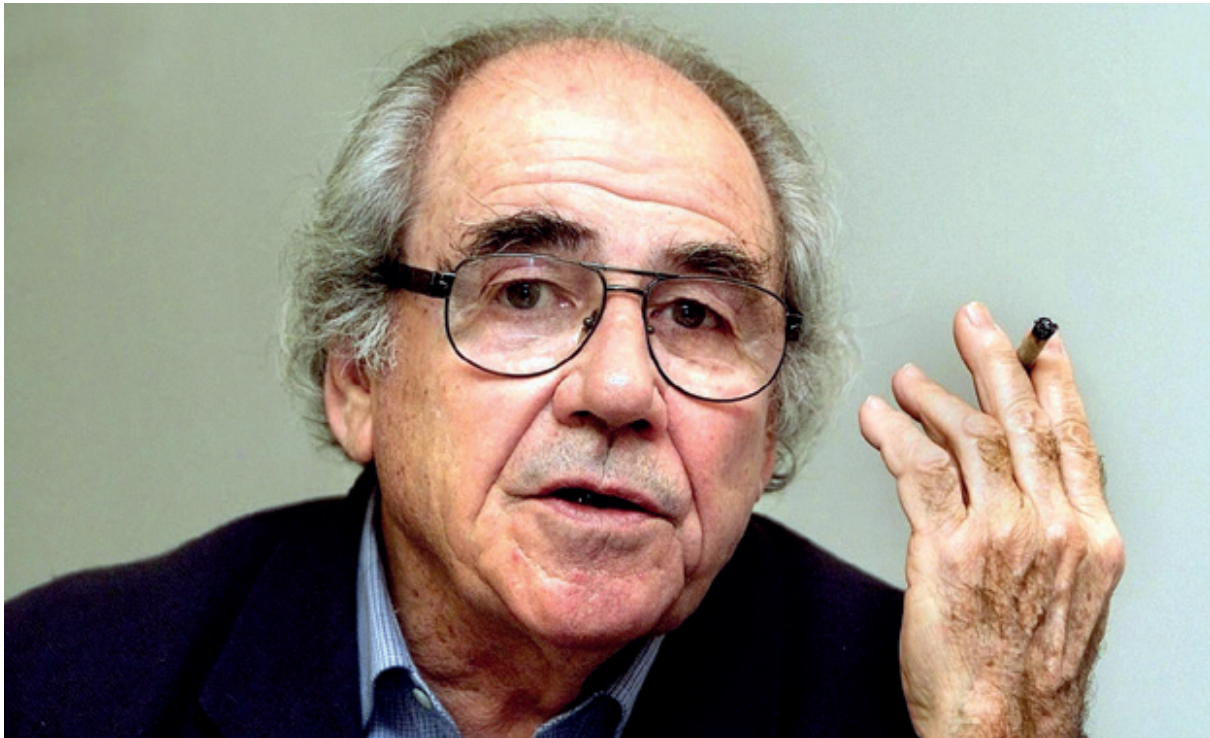
Communications technology has progressed so much that it has changed what we can see. We can see videos of what happens in a demonstration in say Cairo within hours of it happening based on the use of mobile phones carried by those who took part in the demonstration. Powerful images shock us, but the camera or a video can only show what happened, not the reasons behind an event or the causes of it.

War is reduced to shocking theatre, sensation rules. Are we complicit in this theatre? If we see a distressing incident on the television which occurs in a place thousands of miles away, what can we do about it? Should we be more concerned about what is happening that is local to us? Technology

distances us from what we can do, even if we empathise with the suffering of a child, say, dying in a war far away. We feel alienated, powerless to stop evil.

Advertisers are linked to the media, and firms can analyse our usage of the internet and use the information to predict what we will be interested in, perhaps leading us on to buy products. Surveillance capitalism has arrived – there are cameras everywhere watching us, and it is possible that in the future the state could monitor where we are and what we are likely to be doing. It was even suggested that perhaps in the future we would not need passports to enter another country – facial recognition technology could be used. Big Brother could be watching us! The dystopian technological future worlds in the novels of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell may be on their way.

What do modern philosophers make of technology? Baudrillard thought we prefer the copy of reality, rather than reality – it may be more meaningful than our boring lives. He wrote of the ‘simulacrum’ where the hyper-real creates something that does not exist. The classic example is Disneyland in America, an imaginary world which we can enter and treat as real. McLuhan thought media technology changes the way we think, by bombarding us with images and messages. Heidegger thought technology can distort our lives and our understanding of the world. Truth is revealed to us, but modern technology devalues our relationships. There is not time to consider what we see and place it in a wider context. Is the media responsible for the world of ‘post-truth’? We talk of a distortion of reality, but we still search for the truth. Reason can lead us to truth, and it may be true that by using



Baudrillard

our reason we can find a deeper structure when we analyse what seems at first sight to be chaos, but objective truth about the deeper questions of existence will surely be harder to find.

Technology has clearly progressed and it threatens our integrity. We can choose on the internet and social media what is our truth and join a particular group. There are many groups on the internet, and this leads to diversity, but there also seems to be an intensification of loyalty to the particular group we have chosen. How do we in our 'group-think' cell regard other groups and their views? There seems to be a lack of moral responsibility in terms of the providers of social media such as Google and Facebook. For instance, they do not remove unacceptable content and abusive comments quickly enough.

Linked to this in many parts of the world there is a growth in populist politics. The philosopher Elizabeth Anderson of Michigan University is coming to Oxford in October to give the annual Uehiro lectures. The following two paragraphs are a summary of what she will say.

According to Anderson populist politics is powered by the activation of identity-based fear and resentment of other groups. Populist politics 'hears' the factual claims of other groups as insults to the groups it mobilizes, and thereby replaces factual inquiry with modes of discourse, such as denial, derision, and slander, designed to defend populist groups against criticism and whip up hostility toward rival groups.

She argues that 'citizen science' and local deliberations within internally diverse micro-publics offer models of how political discourse can be re-oriented toward accuracy-oriented factual claims relevant to constructive policy solutions. Enabling such discourse requires that citizens observe norms against insults and other identity-based competitive discourse, and in favour of serious listening across identities. We need to communicate moral concerns without blaming and shaming others.

As an alternative, testimony and empathy can be mobilized to communicate moral concern so that those who resist shame and blame can come to share such concern.

Progress in Philosophy

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 10th July 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

We continued our discussion on the nature of philosophy and its relationship to the individual sciences. Science is more specialized and deals, mainly, with the realm of nature. But at the moment, science has been promoted as the model to be followed by philosophy and the humanities. There is an added complication: science has been presented in a reductive way. The laws of physics are generalized to the humanities and philosophy. But science need not be reductive. If it is reductive, then it loses the realm of meaning, values (moral and aesthetic) and religion. Science has however progressed, but has philosophy progressed over the years? Science gets results. We could believe science is developing and following a plan which will make it even more successful!

Did a philosopher such as Kant get any results? Kant says in the 'Preface' of the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* that science has developed while metaphysics (and philosophy) is still 'groping' in the dark. He was also rising to the challenge presented by Hume to the a priori thinking, which provided a basis for metaphysics and religion. Kant attempted to provide a framework for morality, and he wanted to establish the limits of human reason.

Since the Greeks many philosophical concepts and systems have been created, and every generation can look at these ideas and judge their relevance. But has philosophy got any nearer to 'the truth'? There can only be better or worse philosophical systems it seems. We can try to define truth in terms of morality, goodness and beauty, but these are difficult concepts to define. Tarski thought there was

propositional truth, a sentence 'P' was true if and only if P exists. There is a correspondence between what we think and the outside world. This is too reductionist for some! Truth could also be contextual, depending on the particular questions we are asking. One area in philosophy where there has been progress is in the philosophy of logic and mathematics.

In terms of history, many disciplines have branched off philosophy: this is true for most of the sciences – such as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. These disciplines are autonomous, but there is still a role some think in examining their fundamental assumptions and methodologies at a high conceptual level.

In our modern period, dialogue between philosophers has become popular, contrasting positions in order to reach a deeper truth. This has been particularly true for recent European philosophy. There is a great richness in philosophy, with so many concepts addressing so many areas. And in terms of our philosophical discussions at the Wednesday group, dialogue is a key requisite. We should benefit from the different views and concerns people hold. Collaboration and co-operation should be the key rather than divisiveness. The 'truth' may be multi-modal rather than uni-modal as we would like it to be. We are on a journey and open-mindedness may help us cope with the 'post-human' and social technology. And as can be seen in *The Wednesday* magazine and our discussions, we are keen to incorporate ideas and work from the humanities into our philosophical debates.

Letter from the Editor

The *Wednesday* Starts its Third Year

Dear friends and readers of *The Wednesday*,

I am pleased to announce the start of the third year of your weekly magazine. I am grateful for your encouragement and support. When this project started, I wasn't sure that it would last six months. I trusted that the Wednesday group and our poets, artists and writers would keep up the good work and move forward and so it was.

We start the third year with the support of a website: (www.thewednesdayoxford.com). It is a major step for the magazine. It makes available to our readers all past issues and it announces any forthcoming events. We will try to develop the website further in terms of searching for particular articles, writers and philosophers and make it more interactive. Please check the website and suggest ways of improving it.

We are also planning to print volumes seven and eight of *The Wednesday* books. Some copies of the previous six books are still waiting to be purchased by any interested readers. I know that the new trend is to have books, magazines and articles electronically but still a book in the traditionally printed version is interesting and worthwhile to have.

May I point out that the magazine is open to all our readers to contribute articles, poetry and artworks. We also welcome any comment by our readers, either on the published material in the magazine or suggestions for future articles or topics to be debated by the group.

Finally, the magazine may need a better marketing strategy to raise the necessary funds to cover the cost of producing it weekly and the cost of the printed books. If you have ideas for marketing or advertising in the magazine or the website, we would love to hear from you. Please write to: rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

Thank you very much. I wish you all a good summer.

Rahim Hassan

The Wednesday

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