

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Philosopher as a Broadcaster

It is sad to hear of the death of Brian Magee (1930-2019) over a week ago. He was a figure I have seen around Oxford, especially along Broad Street, going to Blackwell's bookshop, or walking towards Jericho. Although he wrote accessible books, his large figure, his fame as a television interviewer of the most famous philosophers of his time, and his long list of publications, from *Popper* to *Wagner*, made him seem unapproachable. When we started *The Wednesday*, I thought of interviewing him for the magazine. I was encouraged by the fact that he occasionally visited the Albion-Beatnik Bookstore, but it was too late. He was by then in a retirement home in Oxford.

Brian Magee got interested in philosophy while studying history at Oxford. This led him to a PPE at Oxford and postgraduate work at Yale university. His wide interests – from music, his first love, to politics, as an MP, and as a philosophy lecturer – enabled him to enter the media and to popularise philosophy on television. His real interest from the start was to be a writer and this bore fruit in his books. He said of himself that he didn't realise he was a Kantian until he started studying philosophy, and that the discovery of Schopenhauer was a life-changing experience for him. *Wagner* was there all along.

You have the feeling that Brian Magee was happy with himself. He wasn't limited by specialisation or academic pressure. He wanted to keep himself free from these fetters. He was highly impressed by the achievement of Kant but he didn't write a whole book on him, but he did write on Schopenhauer. This book is now out of fashion, but his book *Wagner and Philosophy* is informative and easy to read, compared to Tanner's book *Wagner*.

The lasting contribution of Brian Magee to philosophy, in my opinion, was in his role as a broadcaster on

philosophy in the seventies and eighties, something that was rare at the time. He broadcast first on radio (1970-71), published as *Modern British Philosophy*, then on television 1978 (although prepared and put on tape 1975-77), published as *Men of Ideas* (reprinted as *Talking Philosophy: Dialogues with Fifteen Leading Philosophers*). The interviews ranged from the new analytical philosophy of Russell to Wittgenstein and Ayer to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School with a figure such as Marcuse. Lastly, there was an introduction to Western philosophy through dialogues with major philosophers, published as *The Great Philosophers*.

These interviews were conducted in a language that Brian was happy with and which was accessible to the viewers. They show how these philosophers thought and what vision lies beyond the specialised jargon of academic philosophy. As he said: 'For television as for radio series the discussions were prepared but they were unrehearsed and unscripted.' But they were worked out in collaboration with the particular philosopher interviewed. They were a bit different in the published form.

It is important to appreciate the work of those who popularise thinking and philosophy and Brian Magee was a leading philosopher in this regard. He lived in a special time with lots of big names around and he managed to interview a good number of them. There are now a number of philosophers and intellectuals who contribute to the middle position between specialised philosophy and the all too dilettante popular writers and speakers. There are also groups and organisations that are promoting the cause of philosophy and *The Wednesday* is happy to be also doing so. Magee has done his share and should be well recognised for this long after his death.

The Editor

Animal Ethics: Do Animals Have Rights?



Descartes thought that animals were automata, they do not possess consciousness or think in the way humans do. He also thought that they did not feel pain. But now we think differently. Peter Singer argued in his book *Animal Liberation* that all animals should be treated with equal consideration, including humans. ‘Speciesism’, favoring humans for instance, is wrong. What should we do about animals?

PAUL COCKBURN

In thinking about how we should relate to and treat animals we need to think about a difficult question: what are the differences between humans and animals? If we believe in human rights, and think that we are not very different from other animals, then perhaps animals should have rights as well. The Biblical account gives man dominion over other animals, but this still means animals can have rights.

One question is how intelligent are animals? There was a famous experiment where a horse was asked simple mathematical questions, for example $2+2=?$. The horse had to paw the ground four times to give the correct answer. This it could do. But it emerged that the horse was not actually calculating the answer, in fact in order to ‘answer’ correctly the horse relied on involuntary cues from its owner who was asking the questions and knew the answers. The effect is known as the ‘Clever Hans’ effect and illustrates how important social interaction

is in both humans and animals. It also shows the pitfalls of measuring intelligence - animals perhaps display intelligence about things that matter to them!

We as humans are a particular species, and it is fair to assume we have a bias towards our own kind. I may be prepared to lose my life for a friend or my child, but I probably would not be prepared to risk my life for an animal.

A lot of our behavior towards animals is governed by tradition. Humans have domesticated a number of animals over a long historical period. Why do we eat pigs but not horses? We keep pets. It seems that in most cases our relationship to our pets is a loving one, and mutually beneficial. Farmers of course keep and breed animals and use them for economic gain.

Animals often do not appear to have morals, but they look after their young and they exhibit



Animal rights protest

unselfish behavior. It is highly probable that they do feel pain, although this cannot be conclusively proved. Many animals have a similar nervous system to humans, and behave in ways that seem to show they feel pain (e.g. howling, whimpering). They often display amazing abilities and behavior. Elephants live as long as humans, and when they die the herd will sometimes exhibit mourning behavior, returning to the spot where one of the herd has died and turning over the dead bones.

Do animals on the way to the slaughter-house know they are going to die?

Robert Burns in his famous poem 'To a Mouse' pities the poor mouse whose nest has been destroyed by his plough. But he sees the mouse as being only in the present, the human cursed by a greater knowledge:

Still you are blessed, compared with me!
The present only touches you:
But oh! I backward cast my eye,

On prospects dreary!

And forward, though I cannot see,
I guess and fear!

His poem makes it clear we have a relationship to animals, and there are many extraordinary stories which bear witness to this fact. There is the famous story of Greyfriar's Bobby, a Skye Terrier who spent fourteen years guarding the grave of his owner in Edinburgh in Victorian times. More recently, Lawrence Anthony, a South African conservationist, describes how he rescued a herd of rogue elephants in South Africa from death in his book *The Elephant Whisperer*. He established a remarkable relationship with them.

An interesting aspect is the size of animals in relation to our human size. We have to be careful with elephants as their sheer size is a danger to us. A mouse is not so dangerous, but even a small animal such as a spider or a snake can kill us by

biting and poisoning us. The sheer diversity of the animal world makes it fascinating.

What sort of consciousness do animals have? Thinking may not require language or concepts. One view might be that human consciousness is the most advanced, and that the consciousness of other animals is graded in some way in terms of the sophistication of their consciousness. We could look at animal behavior and assume in a crude manner that complex behavior means more complex brain processes and hence a more complex consciousness. But we cannot easily get inside each other's brains to read the thoughts of other people, and it is even more difficult to get inside the head of an animal however much we study them.

Main Ethical Concerns

(1) Should we kill animals for their meat?

Tolstoy entertained some guests who asked for a meat dish. He famously put a live chicken on the dinner table and invited them to kill it for their meal. Pythagoras and Leonardo da Vinci were vegetarians.

It is estimated that for the whole planet some 70 billion animals are killed every year for their meat. It is also estimated that 20% of all carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere is produced by animals.

(2) Should we eat dairy products and eggs?

(3) Should we kill animals for their fur and skins?

(4) Should we experiment on animals for the benefit of humanity?

It is estimated 115 million animal experiments of varying sorts are carried out in the world each year.

(5) Should we keep pets?

(6) Should animals be used to entertain us, and kept in zoos?

(7) Should we try to keep endangered species alive?

Descartes thought that animals were automata, they do not possess consciousness or think in the way humans do. He also thought that they did not feel pain. This opinion he held in the seventeenth century may have had a lot of influence on how people treated animals and may have led to the perpetration of a lot of cruelty to animals.

Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* was published in 1975. He believes all animals should be treated with equal consideration, including humans. 'Speciesism', favoring humans for instance, is wrong. We need to reduce all suffering, whether it is human or animal suffering. We cannot ignore the suffering of animals. However, it could be argued in utilitarian terms that experiments on animals might be justified if they reduce human suffering by a great amount when compared to the suffering inflicted on the animals.

There are many ethical theories, for example utilitarianism, Kant's theory of universal reason and duty, social contract theory. It is not easy to apply these to animals who do not belong to our species. The key aspect in terms of animal ethics is probably what sort of rights should animals have? There are already laws against mistreating animals, but should these be extended to give animals more rights?

Cora Diamond in her essay 'Eating Meat and Eating People' has some interesting ideas about eating meat. She asks why do we not eat our own dead? It is just impossible for us to do this! It is a cultural rule. It is also a rule that we do not eat our pets. If we do kill an animal and eat it, it is not a pet. A pet takes on some of the characteristics of a person, it becomes part of a family, shares our home and is mourned and buried when it dies. Does this mean we don't have respect for animals which we are prepared to eat? Well no, they just have a different status. If we somehow have the same respect for all living things equally, then maybe we would not eat animals. But then what would we eat – are



Peter Singer



Robert Burns

vegetables not living things?

Animals are amazing in that they behave in a straightforward way. As humans I believe that to some extent we have free will, and we are self-conscious as well as conscious. This means we can have doubts about how we should behave and feel bad when we do not behave according to certain standards. We have instincts, but we try to control them when our instinctual behavior is not appropriate (or ‘society’ tries to control us when we overstep certain limits). But most animals seem to act by instinct, they do not agonize over what they should do. As humans we sometimes say ‘you should act according to your instincts’, but we also often have reservations about doing this (often for good reasons!). If animals do act on instinct, this seems to lead back to Descartes view that their behavior is determined, they are automata. But in fact, looking at the world of animals we can see that they are not soul-less machines, most animals are far more beautiful than machines, and exhibit exquisite beautiful behavior – think of a bird flying or a deer running. And it is probable that their instincts include emotions and feelings, and that these are also rational. But this animal rationality may be unconscious, unlike human rationality, which seems to be more in the conscious realm, and can be taken to extremes, ignoring our feelings.

The seven animal ethical concerns listed above cover a very wide ideological area. We should all think about the issues involved. Philosophically we cannot just analyse the issues in a rational way, though of course this does have great value. We have to take a more pragmatic view which involves our feelings about animals. For instance, to my mind, there are few prettier sights than a green field in the countryside with cattle or sheep grazing in it. It is an iconic traditional scene. Though we kill those cattle and sheep, and use them for various purposes, they would not exist at all unless the humans who own farmland are prepared to let them graze upon the land. We can of course use the land for other purposes, but I for one would be sorry to see these farm animals disappear from the fields. I am sad to see that the practice of factory farming, which is allowed in many parts of the world, is also leading to farm animals disappearing from the fields.

I also recognize that views are changing. Eating meat is not now regarded as a healthy eating option by many, and the large growth in the vegan food market is a sign that animal rights are being taken more seriously now by many people.

On the General Will

The idea of the 'general will' had a special significance for Rousseau and had an everlasting influence on political philosophy since the mid seventeenth century. We discussed the idea in our last meeting and here are three responses to it:

David Burridge presented the idea of the general will to the Wednesday group in their last meeting with his own take on the idea. Here is his text:

Tinkering With The Social Contract

There are two kinds of inequality:

- (1) Natural: age health, bodily strength, quality of the mind
- (2) moral or political inequality.

Man has the faculty of self-improvement and this in turn is empowered by his capacity for reason. But to prevent man becoming a monster he needs also to deploy the compassion that nature bestowed on him. Compassion must be stronger in order that the violence of the self-love can be moderated.

The Social Contract and Freedom

'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains,' Rousseau wrote. But what about the general will? Will it free us from bondage? Rousseau thinks that is possible:

'Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate identity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.'

'As soon as the multitude is so united in one body, it is impossible to offend against one member without attacking the body, and still more to offend against the body without the members resenting it.'

So, if the social contract is formed to contain justice and fairness towards all its individual members and this is enforced it will achieve what Rousseau was seeking. But in order to get there we need to



David Burridge

question authority and how it is determined. If for example a mob decided that a particular individual was an adored leader and no one should question any decision he makes, then the social grouping is just a collection of brutes.

Justice has to be based on reasoned principles, which can and should be tested with practical facts. There should be a balance between individual and social needs to procure rights of individuals but also to prevent individual domination, or morally unacceptable inequality.

It is of course important to remember the difficulties societies have in balancing freedom of the individual and social need. Sometimes it appears that man has the potential to be free but prefers to opt for social chains. The fear of freedom and desire not to have to think is a common social disease.

Rational thought based on humane premises is the way to achieve human freedom and then empirical exercises to test all ideas to ensure they and support a compassionate society.

Some Thoughts on the General Will

CHRIS GAAL

Chris Gaal responded to David's presentation with the following comments:

Rousseau's idea of 'the general will' seems to link to Hobbes' vision of society as a set of individuals doomed to be in conflict unless they agree to subserve their individual wills to an authority they nominate, whose role is to protect their collective interests.

Hobbes, writing in an earlier age of kings and civil conflict, saw this authority as an absolute monarch whose will would be supreme. As with Rousseau, this contract would only apply as long as the monarch ruled in the collective interest of those appointing him.

While the appeal to 'the general will' sounds more democratic than appealing to an absolute monarch, I believe it has totalitarian tendencies which are even more dangerous and open to abuse. Rousseau it seems to me has taken the spirit of absolutism in absolute kingship, and applied it a non-existent metaphysical entity, the so-called collective or general will.

Part of the problem here is that the idea is vague, problematic and ultimately incoherent. If we were a race of clones with identical mentalities and wishes, it might make sense to extrapolate from individual judgments and wills to a collective 'general will.' But people differ widely in temperament, values, levels of understanding and aspiration for themselves and their society. In such a context, what can talk of, the general will' mean?

Consider Brexit. People who voted Leave did so for a wide variety of reasons, with widely divergent levels of understanding of what the issues were and what the consequences might be. They were encouraged by the Leave campaign to see the issue as simple, easy to deliver, something that would save money and enhance future prosperity. Three years on, when the whole message has transformed to war time rhetoric of 'do or die' and 'whatever the consequences' those who favour Brexit are still

banging on about respecting 'the will of the people' long after the promised scenarios on the basis of which people were encouraged to express a will, have fallen away.

This isn't just about a group of Tory hardliners taking over the government at the behest of a tiny group of Tory members, with no democratic mandate from the wider electorate in sight, and then fraudulently pushing their own extreme agenda as 'the will of the people'. Many more moderate Tory MPs also feel constrained by 'the will of the people' to stand up for the absurdity of going ahead with a Brexit when none of the original easy assurances have been fulfilled, and which now casts extreme doubt on any ability to deliver anything but short term economic damage, long term uncertainty and risk of relative economic decline.

I find the idea that people should submerge their own individual conscience and judgment in 'the general will' deeply troubling and totalitarian in spirit. It is the kind of thinking which demonises dissent and leads to the Soviet and other gulags. In a democracy, one accepts when another viewpoint has achieved electoral success, but that does not mean that one thereafter refuses to challenge this viewpoint and seek to get people to see things differently and change tack. A will that is divorced from individual judgment and conscience has become blind.

Rather than start with a Hobbesian view of society as a collection of separate individuals who need to collectivise themselves into a supra-organism governed absolutely, by a monarch or à la Rousseau, I think we need to acknowledge that the individual and the individual's social conscience remain fundamental, but to also acknowledge that we are not isolated individuals in need of absolutist protection, but are inherently social beings born into social and cultural groupings, and that the task of organizing society is to facilitate discussion and co-operation within a context of difference.

Limitations Of Rousseau's Vision

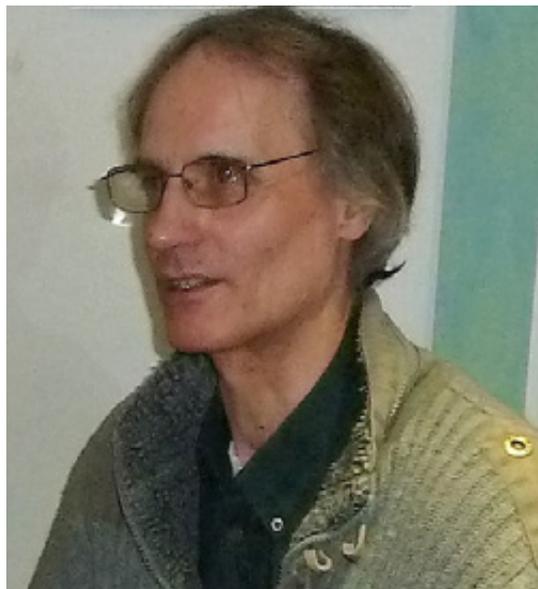
CHRIS SEDDON

Finally, Chris Seddon sent the following comments:

David Burrige writes: 'There should be a balance between individual and social needs to procure rights of individuals'. But Rousseau writes:

'These clauses, properly understood, may be reduced to one—the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights, to the whole community'.

How is the apparent contradiction resolved between this typical modern view and Rousseau's? In my ignorance of political philosophy, I also ask whether Rousseau ever recognised or sought to overcome the apparent gender exclusion? How about the omission of international justice:



Chris Seddon



Rousseau

'At once, in place of the individual personality of each contracting party, this act of association creates a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as the assembly contains votes, and receiving from this act its unity, its common identity, its life and its will. This public person, so formed by the union of all other persons, formerly took the name of city, and now takes that of Republic... Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of subjects, as being under the laws of the State.'

Since the concept of animal rights is still as strange now as the concept of rights for women or others without suffrage was at the time of Rousseau, I am not sure it necessary to ask whether Rousseau ever recognised or sought to overcome the apparent species exclusion. I struggle to see how such vague ideas as those put forward by Rousseau can possibly form the basis of practical social action or politics.

Rousseau and Freedom

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 31st July 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

We discussed the philosophy of Jean-Jaques Rousseau (1712-1778). David Burrige introduced the discussion with two short papers. The first dealt with Rousseau's last work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, published in 1778 after his death. The idea of reverie seems to link with our discussion of Bachelard last week, a philosopher who also wrote about reverie and day-dreaming. In walking in the woods, Rousseau found peace, beyond the pleasure and pain of human experience. A walk in the forest can generate calm in the soul. In the city, the 'flaneur' cannot escape the evidence of man's impact on the environment, but we can be receptive to nature in a wood.

Rousseau is famous for his theory of the general will and the social contract. How does the 'I' relate to the 'We', the individual to society? This has always been the basic issue underlying politics, and Rousseau's ideas on society, and those of philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke, were and still are influential. The dictates of reason are not enough for a healthy society: we need compassion as well. Are we 'hard-wired' to be compassionate? Is it our 'natural' state? Positive self-love can degenerate into pride and competitive spirit which is harmful and destructive.

Rousseau looked into the origins of society and thought that mankind had degenerated from a golden age. He believed in primitive man as the noble savage, who was in close touch with nature. Inequality had grown in society, and the 'high' culture of the arts and the sciences was possible only for the leisured rich. The social contract embodies an ideal society – Rousseau writes: 'Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.' But what is the legitimacy of this claim, Rousseau asks. His answer is that we all forfeit part of our freedom to be part of a whole that is free and secure. But even if this were possible, who embodies the general will? For Rousseau it



Paul Cockburn

was the sovereign people, but the government of a country can be delegated to a king or queen under the authority of the general will. However, the French Revolution which took place eleven years after Rousseau's death changed all that.

There can be malignant forces in politics, associated with domination. Technology can now be used by populists, hood-winking us with clever psychological tricks. Perhaps we all need to calm down and go for a walk in the woods. Rousseau in one of his reveries wrote:

'The conclusion I can draw from all these reflections is that I have never been truly fitted for social life, where there is nothing but irksome duty and obligation, and that my independent character has always made it impossible for me to submit to the constraints which must be accepted by anyone who wishes to live among men. As long as I act freely I am good and do nothing but good, but as soon as I feel the yoke of necessity or human society I become rebellious, or rather recalcitrant, and then I am of no account...I have never believed that man's freedom consists in doing what he wants, but rather in never doing what he does not want to do, and this is the freedom I have always sought and often achieved.'

I think many people would agree with his sentiments.

All Winter Long There Was Silence

All winter long there was silence, some words
fell, although they were hardly audible
through the haze and the low light, the secret
mist of a cold world. But still voices reached
like beacons into the freezing air,
not to keep warm by some hidden fireplace,
but rather to illuminate what really had happened.

As a child, I was well familiar with those impenetrable nights,
watch the fires on the hillside, signs
as messages, rising smoke their exclamation marks.
A skill, of some sort, soundless and visible over
vast distances.

Whenever the warriors saw them, they cheered
and every now or then,
they responded with counter signals.

But they barely spoke, never in long sentences.

What they meant was expressed by dancing,
in sacred movements, twisting and turning
to the rhythm of the night by the fires
and pleading with the stars overhead to reveal the future.



I still remember the medicine man,
muttering my name, over and over,
as though it was essential for my cure,
when they found my family slaughtered
and I was the last one, who had seen it all
and still had a tongue to speak.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*



CHRIS NORRIS

The Decline of Lying

Among today's adept practitioners, the lie has long since lost its honest function of misrepresenting reality. Nobody believes anybody, everyone is in the know. Lies are told only to convey to someone that one has no need either of him or his good opinion. The lie, once a liberal means of communication, has today become one of the techniques of insolence enabling each individual to spread around him the glacial atmosphere in whose shelter he can thrive.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: reflections from damaged life*

What happened to the good old lie,
The kind the bourgeois told,
As if to say ‘the rules apply,
It’s just that they’re on hold’?

Back then you got the thing to fly,
That falsehood they’d been sold,
In ways that kept the other guy
Within the human fold.

The message went: ‘let’s not deny
You fell for my fool’s gold,
Yet we matched wits before you’d buy,
Cajoler and cajoled’.

Those bourgeois still met eye-to-eye,
They knew the rules of old;
They’d lie to you, they’d bleed you dry,
But keep you from the cold.

What’s changed is how the glacial freeze
Creeps on from day to day,
How speech turns icy by degrees
As falsehood makes its way.

For now the dupe is one who sees
Straight through the games they play,
Those types whose every lie says ‘Please
Don’t trust a word I say’.



Poetry

It's old-style liars hide the keys
To truth for fear that they
Might slip up when they shoot the breeze
To keep the cold at bay.

Now no-one needs to tack and tease,
Like predator and prey,
When post-truth adepts lie with ease
And there's no price to pay.

Let's not look back in fond regret
Nor wish they'd come again,
Those times when lies were ways to get
One up yet still maintain

A semblance of the etiquette
That bid us not disdain
Our dupes because the trap we set
Turned out a precious bane.



No call for such nostalgia, yet
Those lies required we feign
Some lingering grasp of untruth's debt
To truths denied in vain.

Now post-truth stalks the internet,
That permafrost terrain,
While truth becomes an empty threat
In error's vast domain.

There's those still say we'll pay the price,
Pay dearly in the end,
When trust runs out and only ice
Can bind false friend to friend.

Some straightforward lying might suffice,
They say, to halt the trend
And yield, from that old-fashioned vice,
A new truth-dividend.

But those there are who warn: think twice
Before you re-extend
Lie's old domain lest, in a trice,
You've no old truths to mend.

For that's the snake in paradise,
The ladder you descend
When arctic bounds grow imprecise
As lies and falsehoods blend.

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Editor: Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

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Editorial Board

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

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