

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Memoirs of an Outsider

Journalists are interested in memoirs because they provide a rich source for gossip. But my interest in philosophical memoirs is in the background they provide to thinkers or particular schools of thought, including their development and insights. The memoirs of the late Bryan Magee entitled *Confessions of a Philosopher* is rich in terms of all these aspects. In fact, the subtitle says 'A Journey Through Western Philosophy' and truly it is. You will read about modern philosophy, starting with Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant and Schopenhauer. These for the most part are impersonal accounts. But you will also read about recent philosophy since Magee entered Oxford at the end of the forties before going to Yale. Here the account is more personal and interesting. He also describes his meeting and friendship with great philosophers.

What interests me most is his view of philosophy at Oxford from the time he went there until the publication of the *Confessions* at the beginning of the Millennium. He went to Oxford to study history but after finishing his degree he started another degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. During both courses of study, he was in touch with philosophy students and was always discussing philosophical problems with them, though we don't get their names. His time at Oxford was during the hegemony of Linguistic (or Analytic) School of Philosophy and the remnants of Logical Positivism. He didn't like either and thought that the task of philosophy lay in providing understanding of real philosophical problems and not analysing bits of language. Logical Positivism was by then well refuted by Popper and others, but the influence of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin was still dominant. At Yale, he found more openness and diversity but also a great interest in the philosophy of science. He said that Yale's students of philosophy had done science, while, in contrast, philosophers of science at Oxford were ignorant of science.

The philosopher who was against positivism and linguistic philosophy was Popper. No wonder then that he became Magee's favourite philosopher after Kant. His friendship with him had an impact that was only matched by his discovery of Schopenhauer. Magee thought that Popper was working in a Kantian framework but one that was not transcendently ideal but real. Kant thought that the world was only appearances and that we couldn't know reality in itself. Popper thought that a part of reality would always remain beyond human cognition. I take it that Popper would allow human knowledge to expand into a more hidden reality, but that this knowledge did not exhaust reality. Kant's position is much stronger because it says that we can't know reality in itself.

The view that Magee found interesting in Popper's work was his conception of the workings of science. Popper thought that science works on conjecture and refutation, which is remarkably different from empiricism which holds that science works on observations. Popper thought we start with a problem, theoretical or practical, form a solution using our insight and imagination and then subject it to criticism. I think Magee's point was that science, art, music and literature are not copies of observed reality but things the mind brings to bear on reality. They are all rooted in human creativity.

One thing that Magee and Popper share is that they were both outsiders in the philosophy establishment in the UK. Magee thought that Popper's work had not been given the attention it deserved, and that Popper's moment would come in the future. Magee was an outsider himself and maybe in the future there will be a revival of interest in his work, but I am not sure.

The Editor



Identity – Replies to Some Questions

Issue 99 of *The Wednesday* included an article on logical identity and personal identity illustrating how logical analysis can help clarify philosophical discussion without replacing it. The article was subsequently discussed in June by the Philosophical Society discussion group which meets every second Friday of the month at Rewley House, Oxford. This article summarises some of the questions arising during the discussion, which focused mostly on logical identity.

CHRIS SEDDON

Three types of logical identity were identified:

Absolute Identity

That a relationship is an absolute identity means that if it relates an object to a subject then they have the same descriptions.

And $a:b:d: \text{If} [\text{relationship}, a.b \text{ } d.a]. d.b$

Equivalence

That a relationship is an equivalence means that it is symmetric, reflexive, and transitive.

And

[*Symmetric.relationship*
Reflexive.relationship
Transitive.relationship]

Approximate equivalence

That a relationship is an approximate equivalence means that it is symmetric, reflexive, and there is a locally connected relationship which relates one way or the other anything which it relates.

And

[*Symmetric.relationship*
Reflexive.relationship
Or.r.And
 $[a:b: \text{Locally_connected.r}$
Iff
 $[\text{relationship}, a.b$
 $\text{Or} [r, a.b \text{ } r, b.a]]]]$

The above definitions rely on some other logical properties of relationships:

Symmetric

That a relationship is symmetric means that if it relates an object to a subject then it also relates the subject to the object.

And.a:b:If[relationship,a.b].relationship,b.a

Reflexive

That a relationship is reflexive means that if it relates an object to a subject then it relates the object to itself.

And.a:b:If[relationship,a.b].relationship,a.a

Transitive

That a relationship is transitive means that if it relates an object to a subject and the subject to another subject, then it also relates the object to the other subject.

And.a:b:c:If

[relationship,a.b relationship,b.c]

. relationship,a.c

Locally connected

That a relationship is locally connected means that if it relates an object to three others and two of those to the third, then it also relates those two one way or the other.

And.a:b:c:d:If

[relationship,a.b relationship,a.c

relationship,a.d relationship,b.d

relationship,c.d].Or

[relationship,b.c relationship,c.b]

What are these *objects* and *subjects* – isn't this all terribly abstract?

Yes, the first part of this talk on logical types of identity is quite abstract, because the intention is to show how logical analysis can help clarify the more practical philosophical discussion in the second part.

Terms such as *object* and *subject* in this context merely refer to the things being related by a relationship. In this sense, nothing is an *object* or a *subject* in itself, it is only one or the other by virtue of its place within a given relationship. Sometimes in analysing the logical structure of relationships they are called *places*, *arguments*, *terms*, or *relata*.

Although quite abstract these concepts are not unduly so. In ordinary English too, we have adjectives that, instead of describing an absolute

property of something, describe its relative role within a relationship. For example, the *lover* and the *beloved* in a relationship of love simply describe which is the subject and which the object, or in other words, which place, argument, or term each fulfils.

Are you saying that love is a form of identity?

Not at all. I am saying that love is a relationship, and use it only as an example to illustrate the terminology used to describe relationships in general terms. *Absolute identity*, *Equivalence*, and *Approximate equivalence* are types of relationship. As it happens, love is not any of those types of relationship. It is not an *Absolute identity* because I may love someone who has a different description to me. It is not an *Equivalence* because I may be loved by someone who does not love everyone I love, so it is not *Transitive*. It is not even an *Approximate equivalence* because love may be unrequited, so it is not *Symmetric*.

But what does *identical* mean in ordinary language?

The discussion of personal and other types of identity confirmed my original thesis, that in ordinary language *identical* means different things depending on the context.

Relationships associated with the term *identical* in ordinary language are hardly ever what I have called *Absolute identities* (and I explain why below). Instead it usually denotes a relationship that is what I have called an *Equivalence* or an *Approximate equivalence*. As explained above, many relationships are not any kind of equivalence, but some are *Approximate equivalences*, and of those, some are also *Equivalences*, and a few of those are also *Absolute identities*.

Which particular relationship is denoted by a statement of identity is usually implied by the context rather than explicitly stated. The money collected for the rent of the room provided some examples:

Everybody paid three pounds towards the rent using various coins and notes - identical amounts but not identical denominations.

I counted the number of one pound coins - identical denominations but not identical coins.

One of the coins got scratched - identical coins but not identical temporal instances.

In this example I have highlighted four different relationships:

- identical amounts
- identical denominations
- identical coins
- identical temporal instances

I would suggest that *identical denominations* is a type of *Equivalence* relationship, because it is *Reflexive*, *Symmetric*, and *Transitive* - for example, if my coin is an identical denomination to yours, then of course mine is an identical denomination to itself, yours is an identical denomination to mine, and mine is also an identical denomination to any coin to which yours is an identical denomination. It even sounds weird to say such obvious things, because we already intuitively know that *identical denominations* denotes an *Equivalence* relationship, even if we are unfamiliar with the terminology.

The same might be said of the relationship of *identical amounts*, in the simple sense of taking identical amounts from each person towards the rent, but in other contexts the intended relationship might only be an *Approximate equivalence*. For example, if identical amounts included conversion to another currency, then the relationship would have to take into account the highest practical level of accuracy, but then, even though repeated conversions might individually attain that level of accuracy and so be deemed to yield identical amounts, the cumulative approximations could end up with an amount that was not sufficiently close to the original to be regarded as an identical amount in the same sense, so such a relationship would not be *Transitive*, however it would be *Locally connected*.

So, a relationship such as currency conversion that relates a sequence of objects which ends with something so far removed from the original that it is not related to it is likely to be an *Approximate equivalence*.

Hold on a minute - I wouldn't call amounts identical if they were only approximately the

same!

You might not, but some people would, and more importantly, the word *identical* is often used for relationships which are only approximate equivalences. In philosophical analysis I am not focusing primarily on terminology, I am only using temporarily agreed terminology in order to focus on concepts. In some financial contexts *identical amounts* denotes a relationship which is an *Equivalence*, whilst in other contexts it denotes a relationship which is an *Approximate equivalence*.

Hold on another minute - I wouldn't call a coin merely equivalent to itself, it's identical to itself (if that even makes any sense outside mathematics).

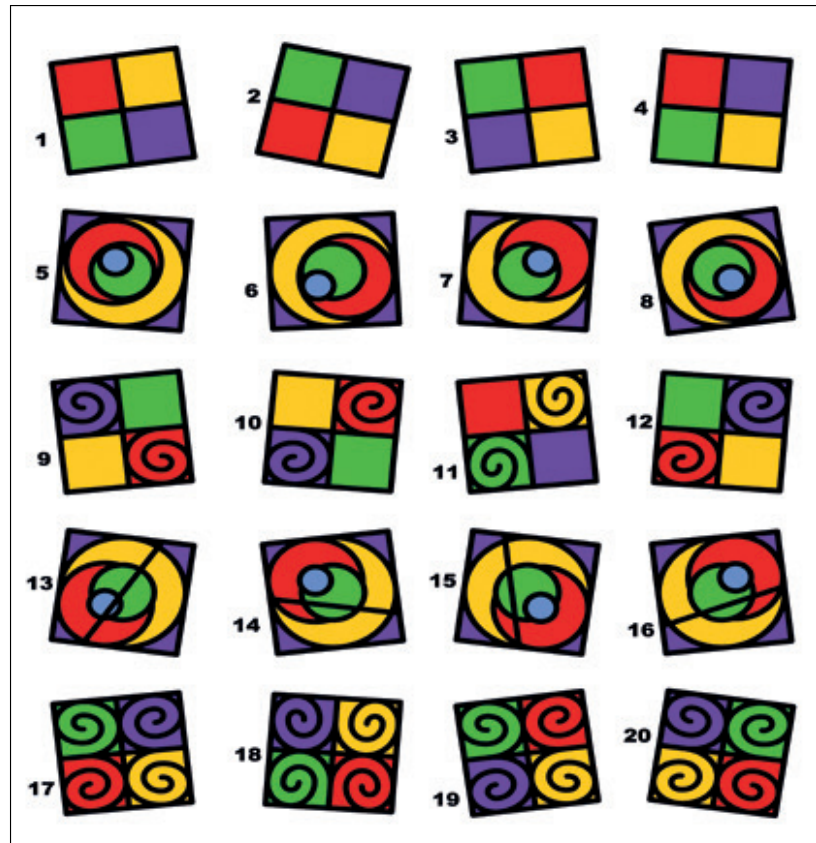
The example of a coin that got scratched, and indeed the concept of change generally, is an illustration that what we generally call *identical* is not what I have called *Absolute identity*. Even a coin that got moved from one place to another is no longer *Absolutely identical* to how it was. It is the same coin, just as another coin may be the same denomination, or another collection of coins may be the same amount, but it is not the same in every respect.

(Mathematical and logical concepts should always make sense outside of mathematics - apart from the intellectual pleasure of investigating such concepts, it is their purpose to be applied to real-world situations).

Surely getting scratched or being in a different place is only an accidental property of the coin, but in all essential properties it is identical only to itself?

A property is *essential* or *accidental* only relative to another property. It is an *essential* property of a spinster that she be unmarried, but it is not an *essential* property of a woman. Similarly, in most senses of the word, objects are *identical* only relative to a given equivalence relation. The only reason we would call a coin identical with itself even when moved or scratched is because we already have an understanding of which equivalence relation we mean when talking about a *coin* in certain ways.

How many Equivalence relations are there?



Absolutely identical?

As illustrated in the original article, in the discussion, and above, there are many *Equivalence* relationships and many *Approximate equivalence* relationships - a subject that is related to an object by one *Equivalence* may be related to another by a different *Equivalence*. Strictly speaking there are also many *Absolute identity* relations, but they differ only in their subjects, and even though one *Absolute identity* may relate people, and another numbers, whilst a third may relate everything, objects which are related by one *Absolute identity* cannot be related otherwise by another.

Can you give a non-mathematical example of objects being *Absolutely identical*?

Not easily. Recall that an *Absolute identity* only relates an object to a subject if they have the same descriptions. This is such a strong relationship it is usually a statement of a hypothesis rather than the result of an investigation, and most identities outside such definitions - which are in a sense hypotheses - are therefore not *Absolute identities*.

In fact, the main use of *Absolute identities* is to express definitions. The term *means* in the opening definitions denotes an *Absolute identity*. For example, the definition of a *Spinster* might state:

That a woman is a spinster is *Absolutely*

identical with the proposition that the woman has never been married.

This statement effectively limits the meaning of the term *spinster* within the context of the definition by stipulating that anything that describes the proposition that a woman is a spinster also describes the proposition that the woman has never been married (note that such statements of *Absolute identity* only constitute definitions within an appropriately quantified context, see my article on Concepts in issues 93 through 95 of The Wednesday for details).

It is also worth noting the grammar of natural language implicitly requires the concept of *Absolute identity* to establish contexts within which different occurrences of lexically equivalent words or phrases mean the same thing.

Doesn't Black's thought-experiment of a symmetrical universe containing nothing but two exactly resembling spheres contradict the principle that indiscernible objects are identical?

No. I have defined a useful concept, not stated an empirical principle. In Black's thought experiment the speaker B claims to suppose a universe with two spheres. The usual definition of *two* relies on



Max Black

we need to understand the concept of identical denominations as well as the concept of identical coins.

Aside from what *identical* means, what does *identity* mean in ordinary language?

Identity has been used in the relatively ordinary language above as a verbal noun to act as the subject when referring to the meaning of the relational adjective *identical*.

In other contexts, *identity* can perform a similar but different grammatical function by acting as the subject when referring to a property. For example, to say something about my identity as an Englishman is to say something about the proposition that I am an Englishman. To talk about national identity in general is to talk about an *Equivalence* which relates people of the same nationality.

Another familiar use of the word *identity* is to describe a relationship between two properties which both refer more or less precisely to those



W.V. Quine

objects which are identical relative to an implicit *Equivalence*. For example, to know the identity of the masked man is to know that everything that is the masked man and everything that is the Lone Ranger is the same man. There is a connotation in this sense that the audience knows something relevant about one of the properties (the identity) which they do not know about the other - for example, if you don't know where the Lone Ranger is, it won't help you much to know that the identity of the masked man is the Lone Ranger. A more useful statement of identity might be that the identity of the Lone Ranger is the guy sitting next to Tonto over there. The link between this concept of *identity* and *Equivalence* is that a property being the identity of another property implies that both properties apply only to those objects which are related by the implied *Equivalence*, in this example, that there is only one man satisfying both properties.

How does this apply to personal identity?

The original article described the borderline case of dissociative identity, arising from borderline cases



Two identical balls



The masked man and the Lone Ranger

of having the same memories, emotions, character, and mental abilities. These and other possible *Equivalences* and *Approximate equivalences* were mentioned as candidates for characterising personal identity in general, illustrating that what it is for any of us to be the same person is not an *Absolute identity* but a matter of some contingent equivalence, and which equivalence is intended is dependent on context. Another borderline case was that of dementia, in which the history of a person's body might form an *Approximate equivalence* which might or might not map onto consistent memories, emotions, abilities or even, in some sad cases, character.

Is this multiplicity of identity relationships an example of Quine's semantic network in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*?

No. Quine believed there is no fundamental difference between definitions and use and no such thing as meaning (see my article on Concepts in issues 93 through 95 of *The Wednesday* for a refutation of his beliefs in this respect). My account uses concepts and definitions but accounts for vagueness in several respects: firstly through recognising implicit parameters dependent on context, such as an implicit equivalence relationship; secondly through the concept of an *Approximate equivalence* (which if I had wanted to pick a fight I could have called *Family*

resemblances); thirdly through relatively precise concepts such as *Equivalence* and *Approximate equivalence* which can apply to relatively vague concepts such as *the same person*; and fourthly through an account of language in which vague words or variables denote multiple precise but relatively unspecified concepts.

What's the point of all this?

One general point is to illustrate that logical notation can aid philosophical analysis, which in turn can help practical philosophy.

A more specific point is that, when a philosopher or a scientist or anyone else questions whether certain things are the same or different, or starts talking metaphysically about essence or substance or identity, we ought to remember that such language usually depends on an implicit *Equivalence* or *Approximate equivalence* dependent on the context.

There are more points which I have not explicitly drawn out, such as the possibility and desirability of completely avoiding any ontological commitments in philosophical analysis, such as for example the definition of referential terms, and unjustified assumptions about the material nature of the objects of science.

‘Eye’

By *Scharlie Meeuws*



Surrealism and the Imagination

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 7th August 2019

Surrealism was one of the great artistic movements of the twentieth century. It started in paintings but spread to poetry, films and theatre. Some think that it was a reaction to modernism and new inventions. Others think that it was a reaction to the First World War. To some, it is avant-garde, to others it is a sign of decadence. It was also considered as a bourgeois phenomenon, but it was also interpreted as an anti-bourgeois movement. We discussed Surrealism in our weekly Wednesday meeting with an excellent presentation by David Clough. Here is a summary and comments.

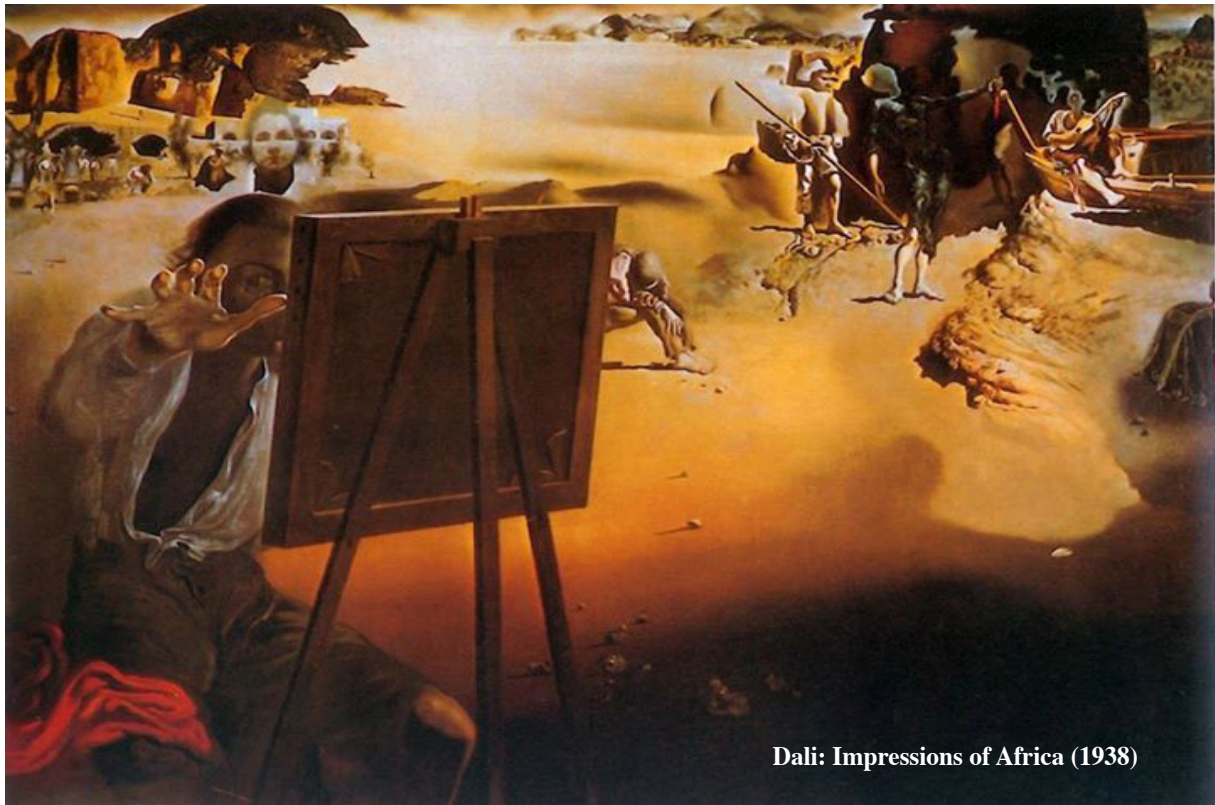
PAUL COCKBURN

Surrealism developed in Europe in the 1920s. Andre Breton was one of its main leaders, and he wrote the Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. The survivors of the First World War had to face the virtual disintegration of society which resulted during from the war. Surrealism was a response to the undermining of the social context of the time. Breton's politics combined Surrealism and Marxism. He became a communist and then an anarchist after the Second World War. In his *Manifesto*, he questioned rationality and championed the imagination and the role of the subconscious:



The Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)

Du Champ: Nude Descending a Staircase



Dali: Impressions of Africa (1938)

‘We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. Logical ends, on the contrary, escape us. It is pointless to add that experience itself has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make it emerge. It too leans for support on what is most immediately expedient, and it is protected by the sentinels of common sense.’

The Manifesto goes on to discuss the limit of rational thought and reason itself in the light of the new discoveries of the subconscious and the repression of desires and dreams for the sake of civilisation:

‘Under the pretence of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted

practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. On the basis of these discoveries a current of opinion is finally forming by means of which the human explorer will be able to carry his investigation much further, authorized as he will henceforth be not to confine himself solely to the most summary realities.’

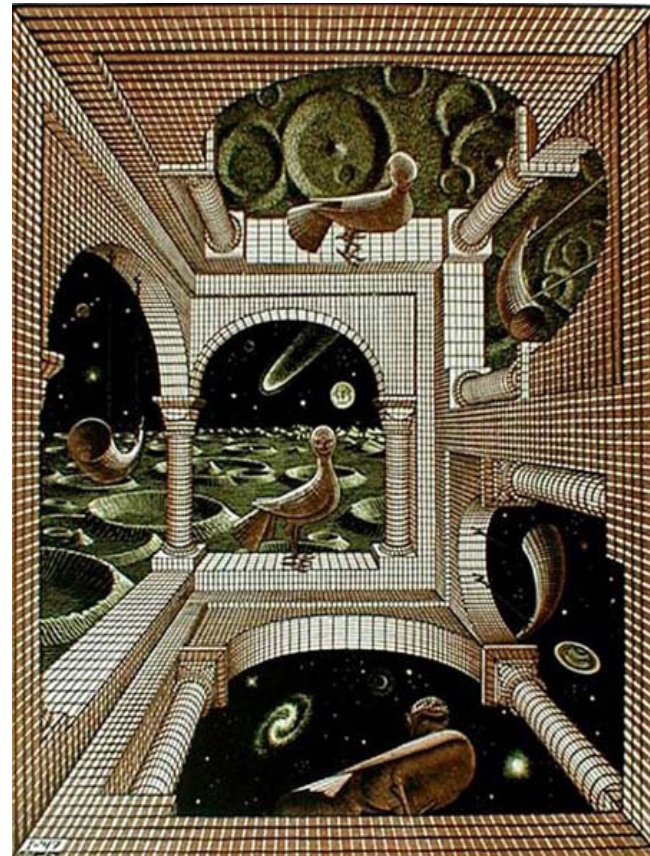
What is hinted at is the power of the imagination:

‘The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights.’

The movement had its strongest impact on Europe, mainly France but also Germany and Spain. Britain had some contribution to make. However, Surrealism had less influence in America. It is understandable that American art after the First World War was optimistic, contrasting sharply with Futurism and Surrealism which have a dark side.



Andre Breton



M.C. Escher: Another World (1948)

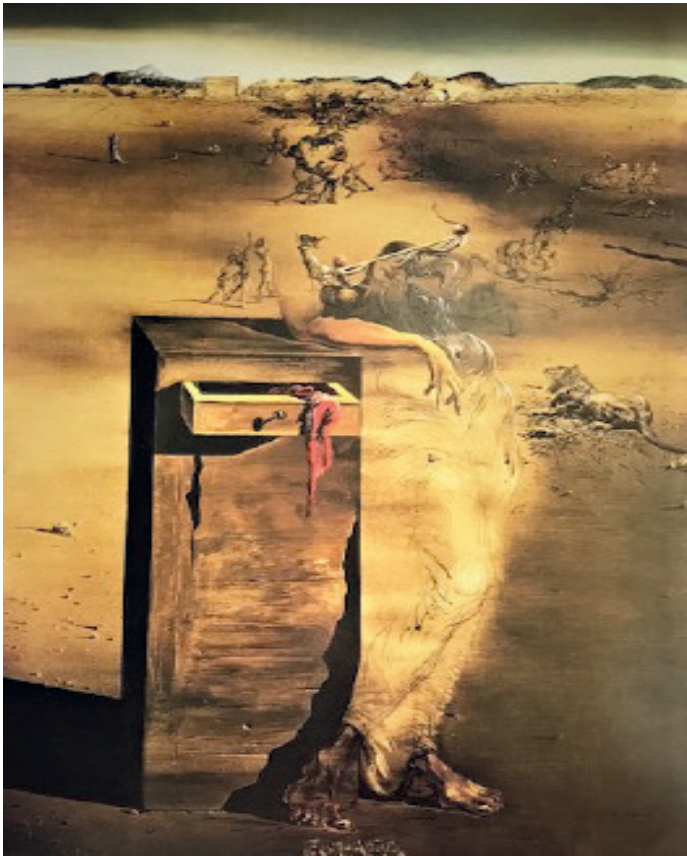
Tradition idolises our current understanding, but Surrealism aimed to break existing artistic conventions and seek new artistic connections which are often disturbing. The surrealists moved decisively away from the traditional art of landscapes and portraits. There is the 'shock of the new': a major disruption which we have to somehow cope with (or reject!). Their landscapes were more like dreamscapes of the mind. But saying that, Surrealist artists also demonstrated that they can be good in adapting portraits and landscapes, as can be seen in some of Dali's and Magritte's paintings. These two painters in particular invite you to compare realism and Surrealism in the same work.

hear and feel with our senses is real, our senses give us trustworthy information about the world around us. But science tells us that objects are really made up of atoms and force-fields we cannot see, our senses are maybe fooling us about reality in some way. Matter is mostly empty space. We live in a world of appearances, but the 'reality' is elsewhere.

There is also a 'tyranny of the eye' as Coleridge once put it. Realism depends on direct perception of a given reality. But Surrealist art takes us somewhere else besides what we normally see. The images probably come from the subconscious, linked together in an imaginary way. And then there are illusions which look real – as in the work of M.C. Escher - we do have to doubt our senses sometimes! We have to adapt, perhaps even to surrealist and modern art, although it seems more comforting to look at sweet rural landscapes. The simple becomes deep: the landscape is just the surface.

Walter Benjamin wrote an essay on Surrealism

New scientific theories about matter and Einstein's theories of general and special relativity were also disruptive influences in the 1920s. Einstein sought a unified field theory which would unite gravitational, electric and magnetic forces with quantum theory. The word 'surreal' suggests something beyond the real. To most of us, what we see,



Dali: Spain (1938)



Magritte: Window

in 1929. He linked it to the world of the flaneur, wandering around the city experiencing moments of ‘profane illumination’, which can have ‘uncanny power’. These could be such things as chance finds in flea markets, collections of objects. But they are strange and have no narrative connection, they seem to be just separate bizarre experiences.

We discussed whether the unconscious was bigger than the conscious. A minority view was that the subconscious does not exist. There is a difference between subconscious and unconscious which is not very clear – perhaps we do certain things from motives which are not clear to us, they are based in our subconscious, but if we are unconscious we are not aware, perhaps sleeping.

We can perhaps link Surrealism to the world of virtual reality. Human beings have evolved in the setting of nature: of earth, wind, fire, water etc, but we can develop away from this into an artificial world, and we can take this to an extreme in terms of virtual reality headsets where we play with sensory input

from a computer, pushing buttons instead of interacting with nature in a natural way using our bodies and senses.

Magritte tackled philosophical themes in his work. In his painting ‘*Ceci n’est pas une pipe?*’, he draws attention to the fact that a representation is not the ‘real’ thing. It links to Saussure’s ideas of langue and parole, the sign and the signified. What does a work of art signify? But it also related to Kant’s distinction of the world of appearances and things in-themselves.

Magritte shows a painting of a landscape on a frame of a window as against the landscape itself. Art, it seems, occupies the middle ground of the real and the surreal. The mind may get input from physical reality but there is a lot more that it will bring to reality itself, not only in re-presenting something impinging on it by sheer re-arrangement of its elements but also in the sense of creating something entirely new. It is thanks to Surrealism that the role of the imagination has grown in philosophy, psychology and art generally.



Open Your Eyes

Splinter



CHRIS NORRIS

The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass.

T.W. Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, trans. Jephcott

It's truth's distorted form they magnify.
No shard so small it leaves the optic clear.
A gift, those splinters lodged in the mind's eye.

Your views are error-prone but truth can't lie;
Sight-lines locate obstructions, far or near.
It's truth's distorted form they magnify.

Light bends at speed but these it can't get by,
Wave-blockers, mote or beam, that interfere.
A gift, those splinters lodged in the mind's eye.

Thought's optics tell us certain laws apply;
No room for pleading 'just my viewpoint' here!
It's truth's distorted form they magnify.

Trust lenses crazed or cracked to show us why
Things aren't and cannot be as they appear.
A gift, those splinters lodged in the mind's eye.

Take your first test-results and then retry
The test with splinter plus good optics gear:
It's truth's distorted form they magnify.

Those false beliefs you're eager to deny
Have their close analogue in vision's sphere:
A gift, those splinters lodged in the mind's eye.

For that's what best enables thought to vie,
Sight-primed, with ideology's false steer:
It's truth's distorted form they magnify.

Let thought find out where sight-lines went awry
And vision compensate where mind-tracks veer.
A gift, those splinters lodged in the mind's eye;
It's truth's distorted form they magnify.



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A Sense Of Sovereignty



(Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains: Rousseau)

I am told I was born free,
can exercise reason and compassion,
enough to find some corporate identity.
As an individual I could be a piece of a whole.
Limbs that are moved by someone I can't see.
The joy of belonging is all I need.

Of course that can't be true.
Social chains have been carefully constructed.
I am told to keep my mouth shut and nod with the mob.
Freedom is viewed as a social disease.
Sovereignty is someone else's crown,
to whom I should always doff my cap.

But I want to belong.
It's part of me!
How else could I show compassion?
How else could I know I am free?

David Burridge