

# The Wednesday

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

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## Editorial

### *The Truth About Truth*

We have been discussing vision in the last two weeks. This directly links to the idea of truth. Plato linked the idea of vision to that of truth. The highest knowledge for him is to see the truth directly. Plotinus, and Neoplatonism, developed it into the idea of receiving illumination that reveals the truth to the eye of your mind. These ideas became rooted in language itself and in religion. When you assent to someone's idea, you say 'I see' but you don't really see any actual object in reality. You only see it with the mind.

The truth, also, as has been pointed out by Caputo in his little but interesting book *Truth*, meant, initially, much more than what we now mean by it. God is referred to as the truth. Truth is also linked to goodness and beauty. In our time, it has been reduced in value. It is now a property of a proposition. Rorty, as reported by Caputo, thought that truth was merely a compliment we pay ourselves when things are going well with our beliefs.

Truth was certain and considered as one, particularly in religion. But now, it is a problematic concept. Some philosophers, such as Rorty, considered it to be a relic of the old metaphysics and religion. He thought that since philosophy replaced religion, a post-modern philosophy should be a post-philosophy. It is clear from this how much is at stake in this debate. Some philosophers, mainly the post-modernists, want to replace The Truth with countless other small truths.

The old certainties were based on the existence and absoluteness of truth. But if we wish to leave behind these certainties, how would we conceive of truth? We can of course adopt the views mentioned above. But there is also the more interesting view

that truth is a process and it is in the making. There are many versions of this view. There is the view which could be attributed to Hegel that truth is in continuous development and realisation until we get to an absolute Knowledge (truth). But there is also the view that the truth is a continuous search. Lessing, the German philosopher, once said: 'If God were to hold all Truth concealed in his right hand, and in his left only the steady and diligent drive for Truth, albeit with the proviso that I would always and forever err in the process, and to offer me the choice, I would with all humility take the left hand.'

The Islamic mystics, particularly Ibn Arabi, asked God to increase them in perplexity. I take that to mean that they are on a journey and that they don't wish it to come to an end. Alternatively, they might have thought that the Truth (which they connect with God's Names and not His Essence), conceived by them as the whole of reality, is beyond the finite capacity of human reason and that what people of faith take it to be is only partial and subjective and that a journey towards God is a never-ending journey.

Some writers, such as Ian Almond in his book *Sufism and Deconstruction*, find the views of Ibn Arabi close to those of Derrida. But there is a difference. For Derrida, there is an endless *différance*. The truth is not there and not even the outcome of a search. But for Ibn Arabi, it is there but it is beyond what we take it to be.

In conclusion, these changing views of the truth are interesting and need a greater degree of open-mindedness and tolerance than has hitherto been exercised.

*The Editor*

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## Why Are We Confused About Concepts?

We had recently reported a Wednesday debate on concepts: What are concepts? How do we come by concepts? Are they part of the items in the world? Are they in the mind? Are they in a third realm? Why we are confused about concepts? How do they relate to words and language? Is the confusion about words or concepts? How are category mistakes related to concepts? Below are some answers to all these questions.

CHRIS SEDDON

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### What are concepts?

Concepts are part of a description of how language and thought connect to the world. My own analysis is roughly as follows:

#### *intentional action*

That the *action* of a *person* is *intentional* means: that the *action* is a direct result of the *person's* belief that certain situations exist and their desire that certain other situations exist.

#### *language*

That *vocabulary* and *grammar* are *language* for a *person* means: that the *vocabulary* comprises signs that the *person* associates with concepts, and the *grammar* comprises ways of combining signs that they associate with ways of combining concepts to describe such situations.

#### *concept*

That *something* is a *concept* means: that *it* is either a description of a situation or *it* combines

with other concepts to form another concept.

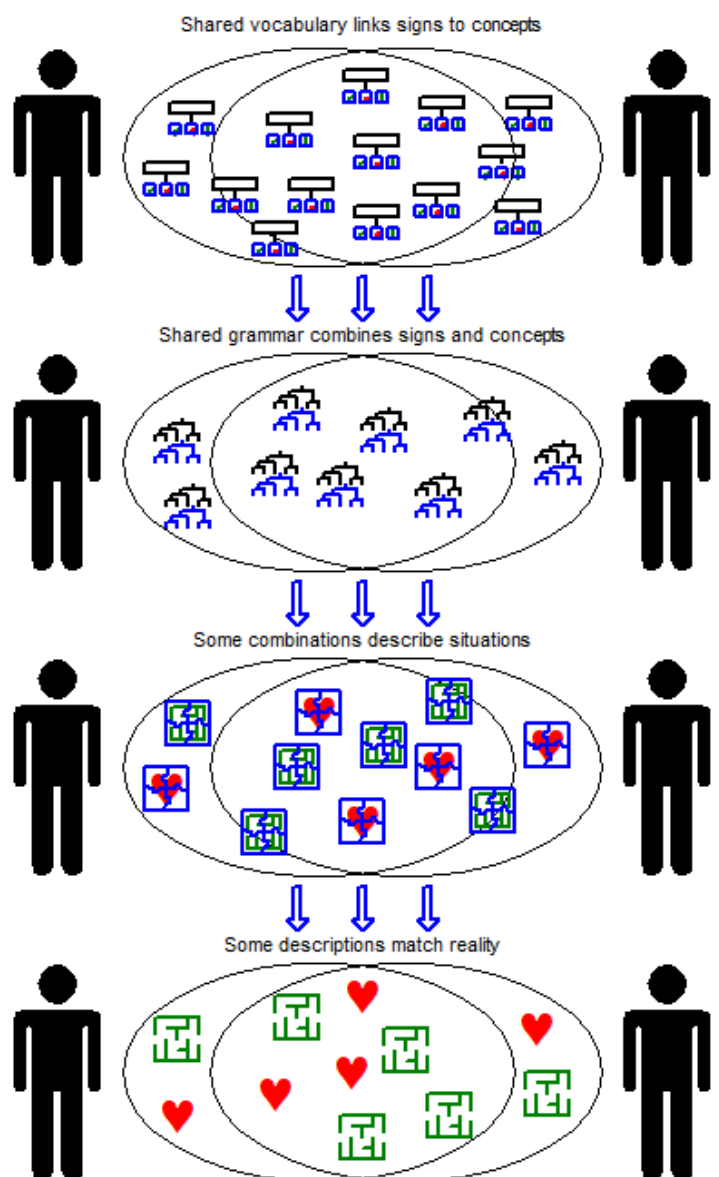
Language has gone beyond the simple function of describing what we believe and what we want. In his later work Wittgenstein points out that language fulfils many functions besides making factual claims. I agree, but suggest that the way in which language fulfils its many functions - what truly distinguishes language from other social artefacts - is through its ability to describe situations.

The definition of a concept makes a distinction between concepts that describe situations and concepts that combine with other concepts to form another concept. In logical jargon, concepts that describe situations are *niladic*, which merely means that one can use them to make a description without providing them with a subject to describe. In English our superficially consistent grammar leads me to say that such concepts describe *situations*. The word *situations* here is really just grammatical noise. This is in contrast to other concepts that describe some particular thing or group of things - in logical jargon these concepts are *monadic*, meaning that one can use them to make a description only by providing them with a subject to describe. For example, we understand the concept of *being a cat* in terms of something being a cat. Similarly, *dyadic* concepts require two subjects, or a subject and an object, for example, the concept of *sitting on something* only describes a situation if we specify or generalise about both the thing sitting and the thing being sat on, as in *The cat sat on the mat*.

What both types of concept have in common is their role in describing language and intentional action. We may be used to the idea that signs mean facts or things, but this analysis suggests that it is more helpful to think of combinations of signs as meaning concepts, and combinations of concepts as describing situations.

### How do we come by concepts?

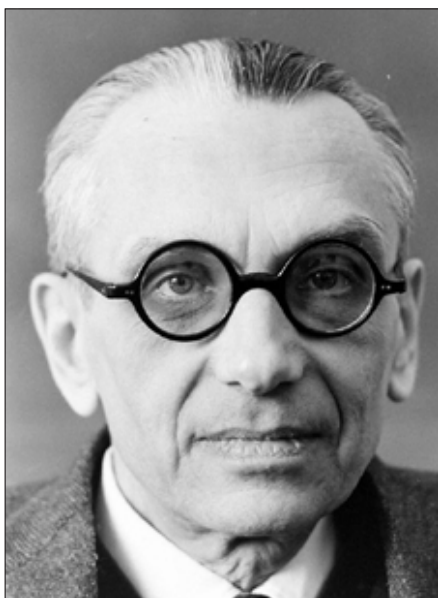
Doubtless some concepts are innate, and some are learned, discovered, or created. Innate concepts are presumably the result of evolution.



Concepts can be learned through experiences of language or related mental processes. The difference between learning, discovering, or creating concepts seems to be the degree of originality: if the language or other behaviour of those around me clearly exemplifies their use of the concept, I would tend to say I learnt it from them; if their use of it is more implicit or barely understood, I might say I discovered it; if I am the first to use it in a description of some interesting fact, I might say I created it.



Wittgenstein



Gödel



Quine

A more definite answer to this question could well be an unjustified generalisation about a very diverse process.

## Are concepts part of the items in the world?

Concepts have no independent existence - they are just parts of descriptions. Descriptions also have no independent existence since they too are concepts which are also just parts of other descriptions - for example, when I describe what a person believes or desires. If a description of a situation is true, then the situation has an independent existence, but the description does not. In the diagram above, only the bottom layer depicts situations, which have an independent existence.

But there is a difficulty here. I believe the question above was intended as a philosophical question and I have answered it as such in the negative, but it reflects a common-sense assumption which my analysis contradicts - namely, that language designates items with an independent existence. For example, we imagine that in the sentence *Chris loves Dolly*, the words *Chris* and *Dolly* each designate objects with an independent existence. We do not generally imagine that the word *loves* designates an object with an independent existence, although some logicians do. However, both assumptions turn out to be not only unnecessary, but unhelpful. The most we need to suppose, to make sense of language, is that the sentence *Chris loves Dolly* - if it is true as I understand it - designates a situation with an independent existence, otherwise the sentence *Chris does not love Dolly* does.

So, although concepts have no independent existence, the same is true of most of the things we think of as items - they too are just parts of descriptions of situations, and it is only the situations which have an independent existence.

This is not to say that Dolly and I do not exist. In the ordinary sense of the word *exist*, of course we exist, but that ordinary usage is just a vague way of saying that some key descriptions of Dolly and I - which ones being implicit in the context of the statement of existence - are true. Dolly and I, like love, are just concepts which play a part in more or less useful true descriptions of situations.

This analysis is somewhat structuralist in its account of how concepts combine to form descriptions, but positivist in its account of how those descriptions finally con-





nect to the world. In his early work Wittgenstein wrote that the world is the totality of facts, not of things. I have taken a similar approach, but the terminology of *facts* versus *things* does not reflect a deep ontological principle - it merely reflects the grammar of our natural language, which distinguishes between nouns or noun phrases which we think of as describing things or objects, and completed sentences, which we think of as describing facts or situations. In fact, this analysis is ontologically neutral - logic should say nothing about the types of things which exist.

### **Are concepts in the mind?**

Concepts form part of descriptions of what is in the mind. One reason for developing the concept of concepts is to explain people's behaviour in terms of mental states such as beliefs and desires, even in the absence of any linguistic signs. Another reason for talking about concepts - rather than just talking about signs - is to describe common semantic structures in language, such as translation.

As an example of an explanation in terms of concepts without linguistic signs, we might con-

sider that a dog which scratches at the door in order to be let out has a concept of a door and a concept of being out. We might be even more inclined to suppose that they have the concept of a door if they scratch at a strange door in a strange room when they want to be let out, but never, say, at the walls. Scratching at the door might conceivably be a sign expressed by the dog to the owner to communicate their desire to be out, in which case we might at a stretch consider it to be linguistic, but supposing that the dog has learnt to press door handles in order to get out of rooms, then we would rightly suppose that they have a concept of door handles, independently of any linguistic signs. In similar ways we use concepts as parts of useful descriptions of human behaviour, even though the humans in question may also represent many of those concepts in language.

### **Are they in a third realm?**

No. I fail to see how positing separate *realms* explains anything.

### **Why are we confused about concepts?**

This is a fascinating question and I can only hazard a few guesses.

Firstly, the concept of a concept is a very general concept. Many people and some philosophers are understandably suspicious of exceedingly general concepts, since there is the possibility of generalising an ordinary concept so far beyond its normal context that it loses all practical meaning. In the case of the above analysis I think this suspicion is unjustified, but it is understandable.

Secondly, we have evolved to treat certain objects - which we can handle and use - as concrete and therefore as somehow more real, yet the analysis above suggests that concrete objects are concepts just as abstract properties are. In this way the concept of a concept cuts right across some deeply felt instinctive distinctions.

Thirdly, in analysing language the concept of a concept may seem at first sight to be an unnecessary abstraction - it is not immediately obvious that we can't say that the meaning of a name is the object it denotes, or that the meaning of a sentence is the situation it describes. Yet the analysis in this and my previous articles show why it is better to say that names and sentences - and other signs - mean concepts and that only some of those concepts denote situations. This is not a level of abstraction we need in a primitive state, so it intuitively feels over-complicated.

Fourthly, there has been a significant negative reaction to analytical philosophy, even within that tradition. I am thinking for example of reactions from the later Wittgenstein, and from some famous articles by Gödel and Quine which, in drawing attention to some admitted shortcomings of early attempts at philosophical analysis, have given the impression that the whole venture is flawed. Perhaps this has provided others with an excuse not to undertake the difficult work of repairing specific weaknesses in the foundations and building on them.

Fifthly, the use of the concept of concepts in explaining intentional action is even cruder than its use in explaining language - there are many areas of vagueness and uncertainty in understanding language, but there are probably even more

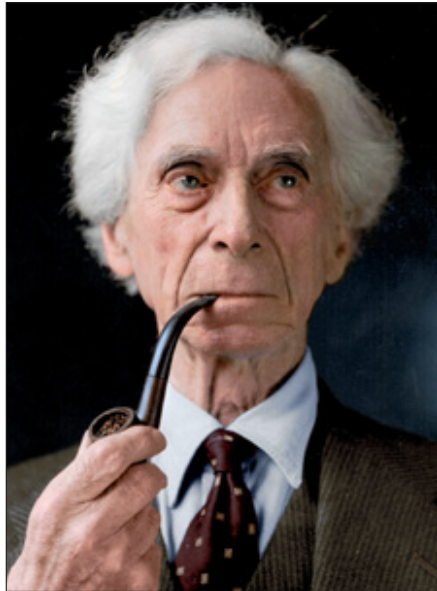
in understanding behaviour. Sometimes it can be very hard to tell the difference between an analysis that is a good - perhaps the best - foundation for more nuanced investigation, and one that is simply wrong.

### **How do concepts relate to words and language?**

Each person has a dynamic vocabulary linking recognisable signs to concepts. As they encounter an instance of language - something someone says to them, for example - they interpret it in line with their pre-existing vocabulary. At the same time they adjust their pre-existing vocabulary as they interpret the new instance: they may temporarily adjust their vocabulary to take account of explicit definitions or other generalisations in the language they have just encountered, and they may make more permanent adjustments to their vocabulary as they learn new words or meanings from the language in context.

An example of a temporary adjustment is when I understand who the speaker means when they say *that woman*. In rigorous artificial language, I make similar adjustments when I come across a variable name - in natural language such temporary variables are often indicated by pronouns, for example in *Happy is everyone who fears Jehovah, who walks in his ways* we should adjust our vocabulary so that *who* refers to the one who fears Jehovah, and *his* refers to Jehovah, at least within that paragraph. An example of a more permanent adjustment is if I begin to realise through reading the Bible that the word *fear* may not always mean exactly what I used to mean by *fear*.

Generalisations show most clearly that a person's vocabulary may relate a single sign to more than one concept - in such a case we have to infer from the context how to combine the different results arising from the different concepts. In the above example, the word *every* indicates a universal generalisation, which means that every concept can be substituted for the word *one* and the word *who*, but we also understand from the linguistic structure that only those concepts



Russell



Ryle

which describe humans who fear Jehovah and walk in his ways are also being described as happy.

Ambiguity and vagueness can also indicate that a person relates a single sign to more than one concept. In this way, concepts can be precise, even though language and thought are not.

A person's grammar relates certain combinations of words to corresponding combinations of the concepts related to those words. A grammar says, if words are combined in such-and-such a way, then the concepts they are related to are to be combined in so-and-so a way, so that the combination of words relates to the combination of concepts.

### Is the confusion about words or concepts?

Philosophical confusion knows no bounds. I may be permitted brief moments of clarity during philosophical debate, but at such times extended feelings of clarity probably mean I am missing an important point.

Having said that, I think in philosophy that we are focusing primarily on concepts, not words. So a philosophical definition is different from a philological one. The latter attempts to describe how other people actually use a word. The former just seeks a temporary overlap in vocabulary sufficient to share concepts.

### Concepts and category mistakes

Ryle coined the concept of a *category mistake*

to help identify situations in which a person has associated a concept with a word in a context which does not make sense, for example, when a tourist, having been shown several colleges asks to be shown the university, not realising that the university is comprised of colleges. Ryle explains this by saying that the concept of the university is not in the same category as the concept of a college.

Most artificial languages implement this idea with the concept of a variable *type*, so that the computer can warn the programmer at an early stage if they specify a variable of the wrong type within a certain context.

There are languages which do not use types, but there is always the possibility that a combination of concepts dictated by the grammar does not yield a concept. Often this is because our understanding of how to combine concepts is limited to only certain combinations, but it can also happen if we understand how to combine certain concepts in some external situations, but not in others. The latter case is the cause of the liar paradox and other limitations of language such as those underlying Russell's paradox and Gödel's incompleteness theorem.

A proper account of language therefore cannot rely on a theory of types or so-called *category mistakes*, but must include a grammar which describes the result when certain combinations of concepts do not make sense, because in powerful enough language this is inevitable.

## People I Meet

A tree that blusters in the wind draws silent force  
through deep roots.

The tree in the storm seeks calm in the earth.

When I argue with people I am in my own storm,  
my mind swings and blusters like the tree.  
I find myself wanting to be quiet.

Where I can find reasons, from words deep inside.  
Perhaps these will best calm a conflict.

With these words I find inside,  
I always look forward to gently dance and flutter with others again

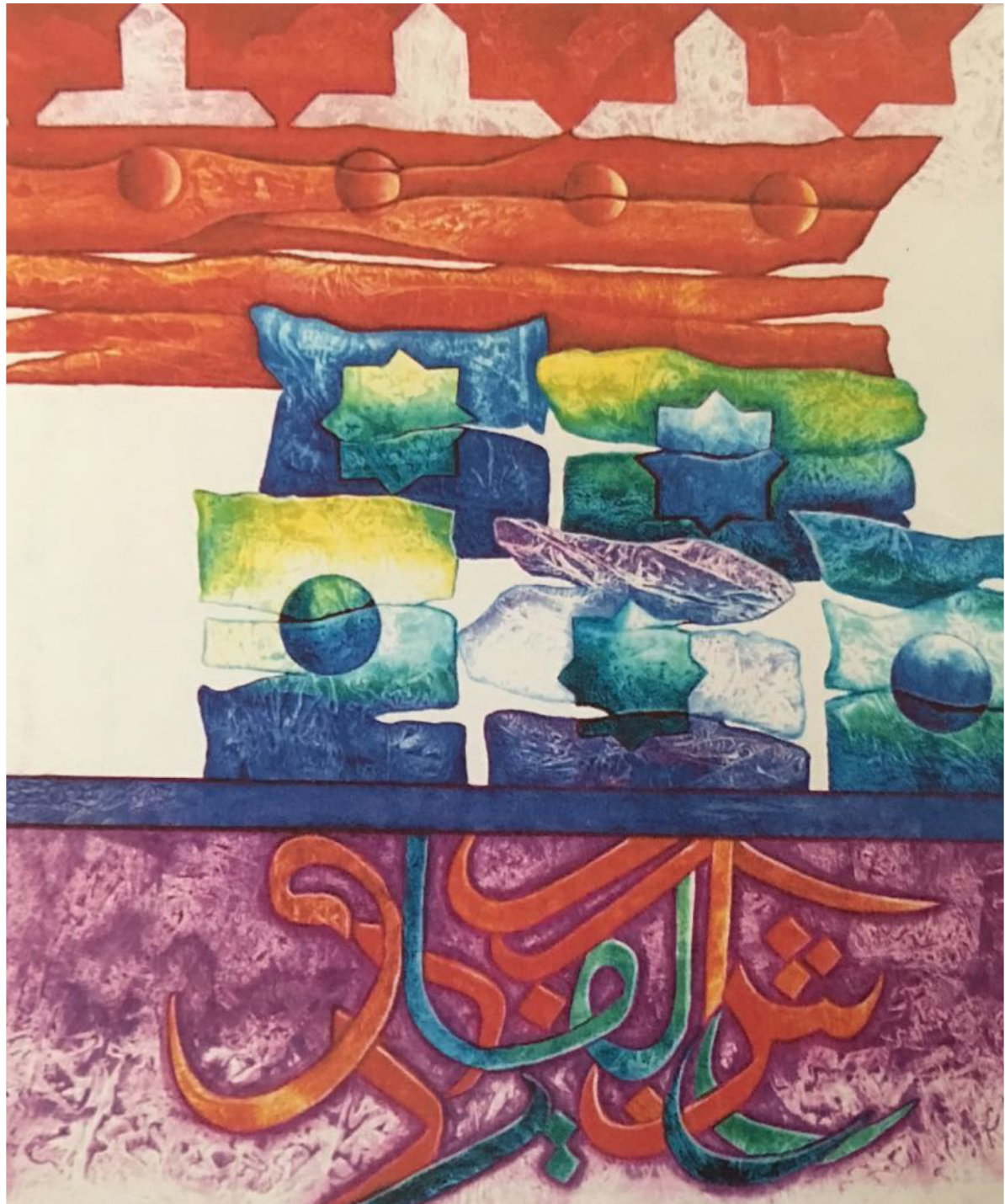
### *SungHun Song\**

- *SungHun Song is a Korean poet. He visited the Wednesday group in the summer term last year and this year and read his poems to the group. The poet did the translation from Korean.*



## *‘Contemplation’*

*By Mohamed Mustafa Kamal*



## The Sheepfarmer

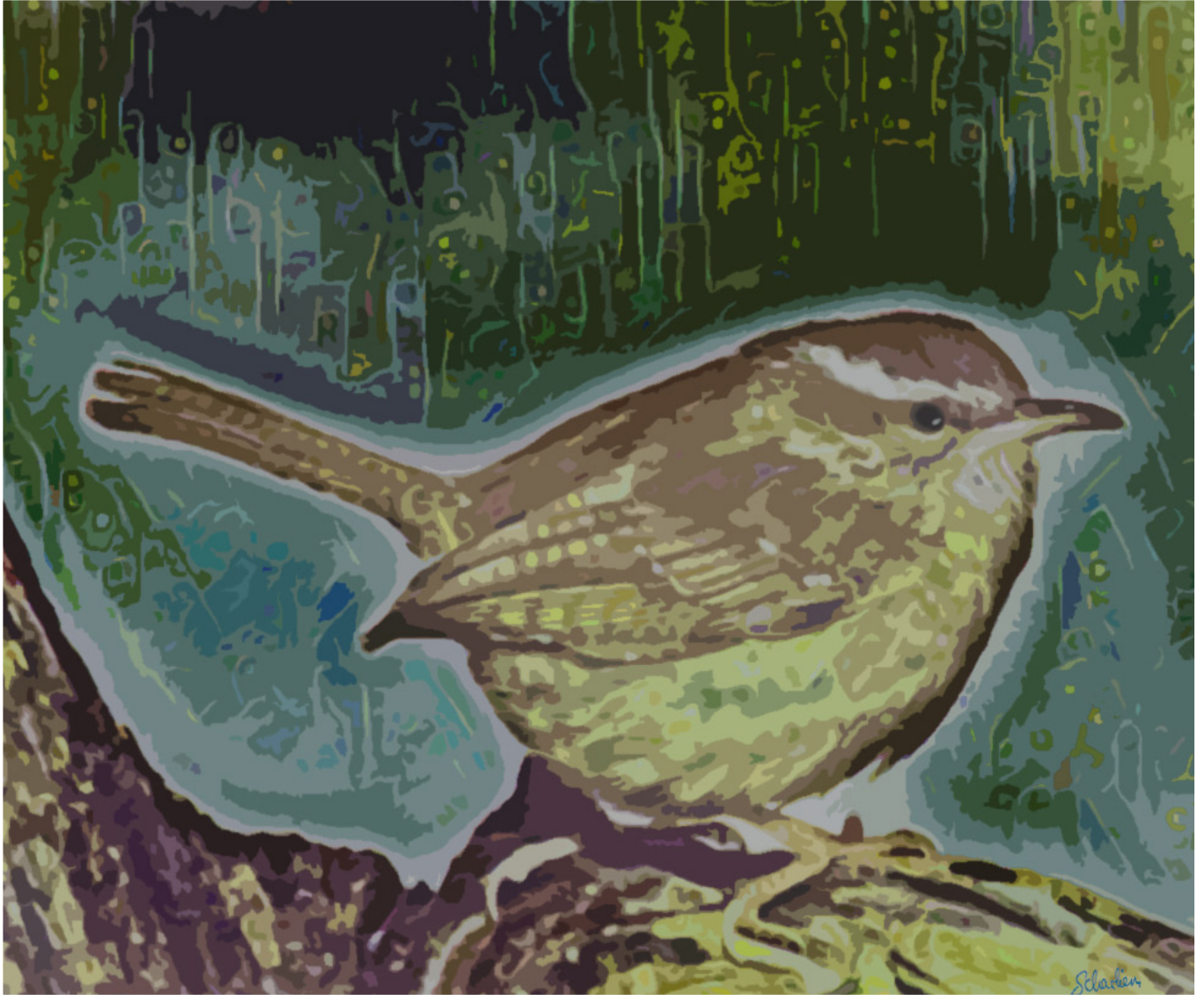
Where the cock-tailed wren is darting  
across the sally tree in the breeze,  
where winter colours come suddenly in slanted light

he falls in love with this life, high up  
in the winds of the Black Mountains,  
this landscape that morphs and bends  
with the scent of dawn in the meadows,  
the noise of the tractors and the rattling of clippers,  
when the ewes peel in creamy waves,  
and the sour smell of lanolin drifts from the sheep  
belling in lanes on the way to be dipped.

He makes hay and shears his flock of small, hardy sheep,  
getting the ewes and rams ready for tugging,  
time after time on the rhiws that run upslope.  
between valleys and to the three-sided shelter.

In a quiet corner, braced to this plotted and pieced land,  
earth-drawn, all eye and ear, he observes  
a kerb-coloured sky, how the air whitens the sunlight,  
and the cold hardens the blue; he marvels  
over running water, the hidden strength of a spiderweb,  
and the moments when the birds sing  
close to the tune of harmony.





*Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws*

# Snow

In early childhood I saw the first snow-shovellers in thin shabby clothes. Asking about them, I was told they were men without work who were given this job so that they could earn their bread. Then they get what they deserve, having to shovel snow, I cried out in rage, bursting uncontrollably into tears.

**T.W. Adorno, 'Monograms', in *Minima Moralia*.**

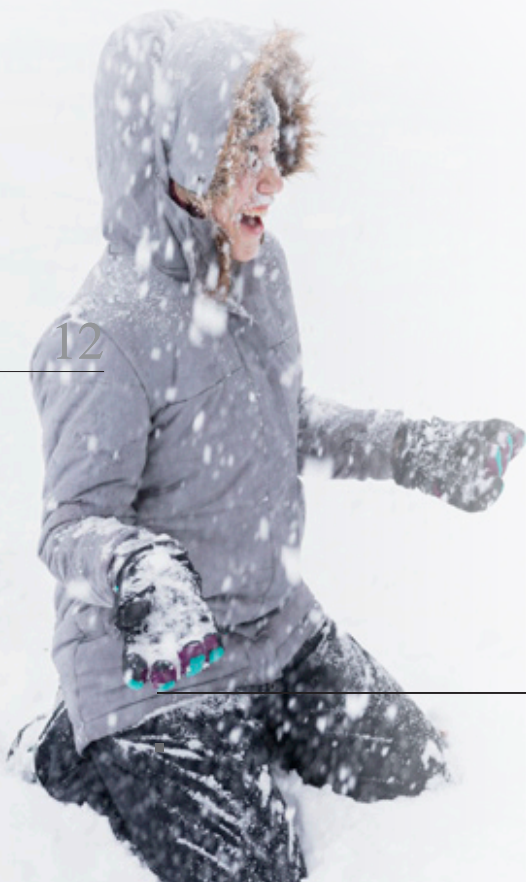


**CHRIS NORRIS**

Still with me, that first sob of childish rage.  
'No other jobs for them, just shovelling snow',  
Folk said. 'That's how they earn their daily bread.'  
The snow hard-packed, their clothes worn thin, they told  
A tale of some far-off yet nearby place  
Where justice meant such misery was their due.

No way those explanations could assuage  
My screaming-fit, ensure I'd soon outgrow  
The 'nervous disposition' that, they said,  
Came from 'the mother's side'. So, five years old,  
I first surmised: some things you cannot face  
Unless with cries of grief – to them stay true!

This too I learned: that if by 'living wage'  
They mean the debt of gratitude we owe  
For jobs that leave us soul-and-body dead,  
Like those snow-shovelers, then the lie we're sold  
Is one that turns boss-class to master-race  
By way of one adroitly managed coup.





But there's more to it, more to guess or gauge,  
About my cry of protest: how a blow  
To human dignity must conjure dread  
In all sentient observers, how the cold  
And damp combined to stress their wretched case,  
And – truth to tell – how little we could do,

Us few 'enlightened' types, to turn the page  
On suchlike miseries. An added woe,  
Half-conscious at the time, was being led  
To speak those words that seemingly enrolled  
Me on the side of bigots who'd embrace  
A code of 'just deserts', as if that crew

Of outcasts hadn't long since passed the stage  
Where justice-talk applied. What I now know  
For sure I then knew dimly: that well-fed,  
Well-educated kids, the sort who hold  
Progressive views, may end up in a space  
Where words twist sense and logic far askew.

It's half a lifetime's thinking they presage,  
Those image-stricken words of mine that show  
What demons loom when some unyielding thread  
Of dialectic has me seem to scold  
Or catechise lest I be caught off-base  
By strikes and impulses I can't think through.

Sometimes I feel my thoughts become a cage  
Where passions pace, like tigers, to-and-fro,  
Their eyes ablaze with anger pity-bred  
For sufferings multiplied a million-fold  
By capital's long drive to clear all trace  
Of shared humanity from human view.



# Urban Space and Modernity

*Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2019*

**PAUL COCKBURN**

The topic for this meeting was on physical space and how it has been treated in modernity, with special reference to Baudelaire, the flâneur and French philosophy. David Clough presented a wide-angle view of about two centuries on modernization and the celebration of space. Between 1853 and 1870 Haussman re-designed and renovated the city of Paris. This meant the demolition of medieval buildings, and the building of new parks and squares, and wide boulevards. Baudelaire invented the term 'flâneur', to refer to a person who strolls through the modern city studying and observing people and the urban landscape. There is both a nostalgia for the old disappearing city, and excitement at the new city appearing.

Walter Benjamin in the twenties of the last century updated Baudelaire's ideas and poems on modernity to analyze modern society and the emergence of the new. They both had a nostalgia

for the past but also looked for the future and had a sharp eye for the social and artistic changes around them.

City architecture plays a psychological role in terms of our mental states, as of course so does the countryside. The pastoral experience of the countryside seems to relax us and 'declutter' our minds. But in the new vision, there is a bringing of the countryside to urban dwelling, in the squares and gardens in between built spaces.

De Certeau (1925-1986) was another French philosopher interested in walking in the city. He contrasted the walker at ground level walking in terms of a tactical sense, getting around using short-cuts etc., as opposed to the planners and government departments that have to make sure the city functions as an organic whole. Maps can give us a sense of how places relate to one another geographically, but there is also a psychological



Paris by Seurat

map of a city built up in our heads as we get to know it or live in it. There is a view from the ground, and a 'birds-eye' view from above.

There is an instinct to preserve the past which is expressed in architectural terms. It is interesting for instance that many cities have preserved the 'old city' in the centre, and have built hotels and office blocks etc. outside the centre. In the Arab world for instance Abu Dhabi has preserved the old style of the city, contrasting sharply with Dubai which is a truly modern or post-modern city.

We moved on to discuss Guy Debord and the Situationists. They played a large role in the student revolution of 1968 in France. They were Marxists who thought that under capitalism the creativity of most people had become diverted and stifled, and society had been divided into actors and spectators, producers and consumers. They were highly politicised and took part in the event of 68, but they also celebrated the city and they used to take coach trips around French cities. They took a special interest in photography and films and the image was particularly central to their thought.

In the light of this we also discussed the work of Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006), a German historian who highlights the difference between the political sphere and the private moral sphere. He holds that the Enlightenment championed utopian societal values in terms of non-political organizations. But political reality is in fact more constrained and limited, and conflict is inevitable in politics. High-minded morals do not offer a viable basis for the prevailing institutions and practices of the State. This results in 'anti-Statism' which can then lead to its opposite, totalitarian states.

Baudelaire talked about the heroism of modern life and he celebrated it in the ordinary life of the city. The notion of heroism also brings with it the idea of tragedy. The city is full of tragedies as well as the optimism of the new. There is always hope, as was proclaimed by Emily Dickinson's poem:

'Hope' is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.

One school of thought is that life is tragic. We are meant to learn from it but there seems no 'upside' to it. But others dismiss it. Woody Allen thinks that comedy is better and healthier. Perhaps life is both a tragedy and a farce.

## *The Wednesday*

**Editor:** Dr. Rahim Hassan

**Contact Us:**

[rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk)

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