

# The Wednesday

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

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## Editorial

### *Misunderstanding and The Principle of Charity*

Pierre Hadot says in his seminal book *The Veil of Isis* that 'to write the history of a thought is sometimes to write the history of a series of misinterpretations', or 'to write the history of misunderstanding'. He made it the guiding principle of his book and applied it to the concept of nature, its veiling and unveiling since Heraclitus. We will have an occasion to discuss this book, but I want to elaborate on this idea.

Misinterpretations and misunderstandings are rife in philosophy, especially with the distance of time, places and cultures. There is always something that is lost in the translation. Is Plato faithful to his teacher in his report of his dialogues or is he just using him as a mouthpiece for his own view? Is Heidegger correct in his interpretation of the Greek terms he cites frequently? Have the post-Kantians, especially the ones who are not fashionable now, been faithful to Kant or have they altered his vital vision? Do we know exactly what Wittgenstein said or are we to listen to his countless interpreters and the reporters of his lectures? The list could go on, especially with authors who are no longer with us to check the correctness of the interpretation or the recording of their talks.

The misinterpretation and misunderstanding could happen in original works, such as Nietzsche's self-criticism in the second edition of his *The Birth of Tragedy*. He thought he should have let his own ideas fly in the realm of thought rather than be shackled by the shadows of Kant and Schopenhauer. But most of the time the misinterpretations and misunderstandings happen in secondary literature. There are many reasons for it. It could be a matter of understanding a term or translating it. It could be an ambiguity in the thought itself that opens it up to different interpretations, it could be a bad

edition of a book and it is always advisable to have an up-to-date edition or a critically edited text.

But there is a difference between a normal misunderstanding that comes from some of the factors above, and an intentionally misleading interpretation, based on choosing the bad edition or taking a piece of philosophy out of its context or manipulating a text in the process of translation to serve a given purpose, to denigrate a view or to turn it to support one's own view.

I am grateful to one of my former teachers who taught me, and others, on attending our first class, that we were going to read a lot of philosophical texts. We shouldn't quickly rubbish an idea or a view. We should give the author the benefit of the doubt and adopt a principle of charity. The philosopher whom we were reading did not just write down anything without considering carefully the possible objections to his thought. I think he was right. But I also learned from reading philosophy that we should be charitable to the philosopher we are reading by constructing his thought in the best possible way before replying to it. If we don't and we think we have achieved a victory, that will be an empty victory and it will not succeed.

Voicing an idea, through writing, lecturing or a discussion, is a moral responsibility besides its knowledge claim. The author of the idea has a moral responsibility to his audience in leading them to the truth as much as it is in his capacity and so has the reader in his reception of the idea. Knowledge is power and it should be well propagated and used.

*The Editor*

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# The Concept of Being in Heidegger, Husserl and Sartre

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the philosophy of being and existence once again became an important philosophical concept to study, linked to the rise of phenomenology and existentialism. The philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre were probably the key figures in this investigation of being, though there were others of course such as Camus and Jaspers. The article below looks at the similarities and differences in the concept of being in the philosophies of Heidegger, Husserl and Sartre.

PAUL COCKBURN

Let us look at some basic philosophical assumptions which all three of these philosophers share. Physical objects exist in space and time. As humans, we are in the world as physical objects, and we experience the passage of time and we move in space. We are placed in a natural environment and with our senses we can perceive the world. We recognize other human beings and we live our lives in a social environment. So 'being' covers all of this, but it quickly becomes a lot more complex!

### Husserl and Phenomenology

Husserl in his early philosophical studies tried to link mathematical concepts to our direct experience. For example, when we count objects, how does this relate to the logical abstract numbers of mathematics? Or how does our notion of force relate to the force  $F$  in the equation ( $F = m \times a$ )? How can our consciousness attain objective knowledge, what sort of existence do the mathematical laws of gravity say have, and how do they relate to our experience of gravity? However, he could not make this connection explicit. He then turned to studying consciousness and the subjective

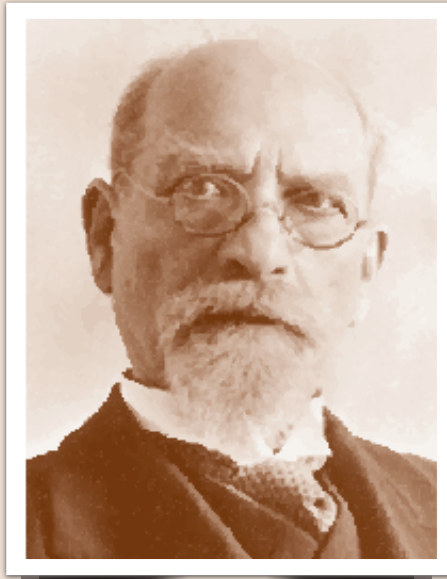
realm in more detail. He criticized scientists for ignoring the subjective realm, separating themselves from it in the search for only the objective.

Husserl is the founder of phenomenology, the study of human experience and consciousness. It is concerned with perception, phenomena as they appear to us. He proposed a phenomenological reduction, whereby we 'bracket out' any meanings we add to the basic perceptions which appear to us. This might help us get to the fundamental nature of being. Children are perhaps the true phenomenologists as they don't have adult concepts which get in the way of our experience as it is given to us. These primal impressions are situated in a temporal horizon and we retain memories of them so that we can identify objects and predict what will happen. Following Brentano Husserl thought that consciousness was intentional, always directed to an object, whether this object was external or internal to the subject.

Moving away from the 'bracketing of the natural attitude', Husserl introduced the concept of the



Heidegger



Husserl



Sartre

‘life-world’, what is common to us all (as a particular group) in our basic understanding. In our own society we understand in a self-evident way our experiences and life: we know where to get food, get a book, control our immediate environment by turning a light on, and so on. There is according to Husserl a ‘we-subjectivity’, we function together as a society, organizing the world in an everyday manner.

### Heidegger and Being

Heidegger was a student of Husserl, but he came to hold different ideas about being and consciousness. He did not think the phenomenological reduction could be completely achieved. He thinks we have forgotten the intuitive meaning of ‘Being’ (note the capital ‘B’). He is not concerned with our perceptions, but with what type of being we are. He calls the human being *Dasein*, ‘being-there’. *Dasein* is an entity whose being is a problem for itself. Our essence, what we are, is determined by how we live. Heidegger jumps to a higher level of meaning than Husserl for his study of ‘Being’: we ask questions such as ‘does God exist’, does mind exist separate from the body,

and so on, but we forget to ask what does ‘exist’ mean? He thinks the Western approach is ‘onto-theological’, we refer to the ‘Absolute’ and God. It is hard for us to escape this way of thinking which is based on a strong tradition anchored in the past. In fact, Heidegger thinks our ‘being in the world’ means we make a home for ourselves in the world and we engage in projects to alter the world around us to suit our needs. Heidegger illustrates this by the use of a tool, a hammer. The hammer is ‘ready-to-hand’, it is used by us in an almost unconscious way once we are skilled at using it. So, the hammer as an object has a particular kind of ‘ready-to-hand’ Being. Objects are ‘present-at-hand’ when we look at them rationally, for example as a scientist would.

Heidegger believes we have to own up to who we are, making choices that define us. Our being is always an issue for us, and our human agency is thus tied into what our authentic character is. But in some sense we are continually making this character, showing what we are in our essential nature.

Heidegger also includes moods as being

important in our experience. We can be affected by the world, moods colour our existence and are part of our 'being-in-the-world'. There is also, as with Husserl, a basic everydayness in our being in the world. Dasein also has an aspect of 'Being with one another', we operate in the world as a community, we are part of 'the They (das Man)'. In average everydayness, we are 'as a rule adrift', acting as one of the 'herd' or 'crowd' - a form of life Heidegger calls 'falling'. This does not imply this is 'bad or deplorable', but he does think that 'more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves of it' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Article on *Authenticity* (2014)).

In his later philosophy Heidegger writes about technology, which he thinks can cut us off from our true 'being-in-the-world'. He prefers the technology of a craftsman, who physically uses imagination and skill to produce beautiful artefacts, rather than huge projects such as hydro-electric dams which can generate electricity for us, but also damage the natural environment. We are estranged by such projects. He values poetry, believing that language is the 'house of Being'. The truth of Being is revealed to us by a process of revealing, of 'un-concealment', in what is perhaps a mystical process.

## Sartre and Existentialism

Sartre distinguishes between 'being-in-itself' (the being of external objects unaware of themselves) and 'being-for-itself' (a being conscious of its own self, such as man). The for-itself is continually changing, negating itself, moving on. It is against the 'in-itself'. It has freedom to change and to choose. This doctrine of existentialism gives man the possibility of individual choice. Particularly in his early philosophy Sartre emphasizes our freedom, we are not determined by our background or our psychology. His view of Being is Cartesian, in that the mind is split from the body and matter. As conscious humans with free will we are 'condemned to be free', and can change, as opposed to inanimate objects which just exist. But our inability to define our character and

essence leaves us feeling uneasy and anxious, and we are dependent on how others see us. Sartre captures these aspects of human life well.

The 'for-itself' can also experience something that is 'not-being'. We can notice a lack: Sartre describes the experience of going into a cafe to meet his friend Pierre and noticing he is not in his usual place. Nothingness, Pierre not being there, is actually experienced, so it has a status similar to being. Sartre's most famous book is entitled 'Being and Nothingness'.

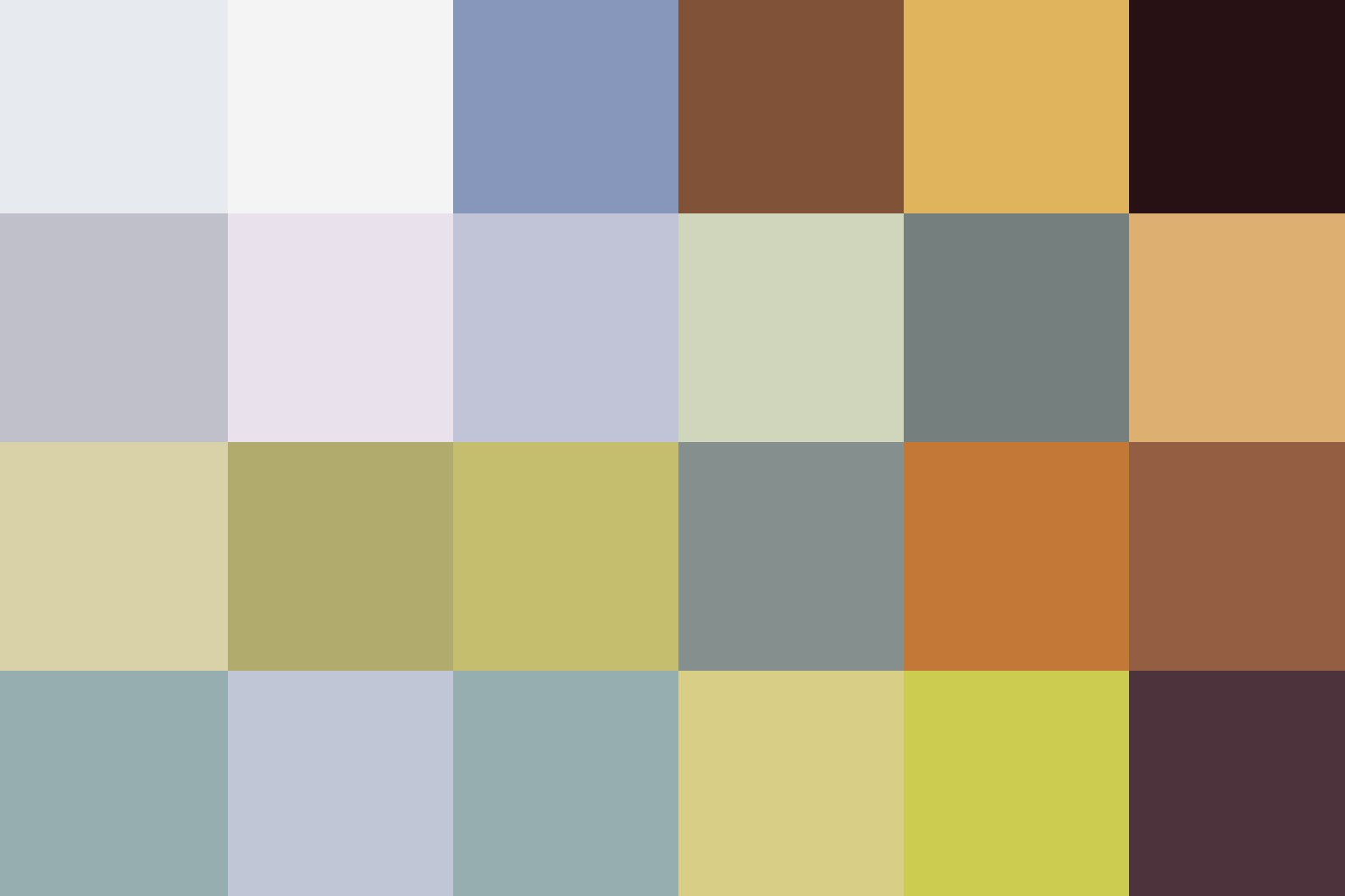
The 'Other' is a key concept for Sartre. 'The Other is the being for whom I am an object.' Sartre was a novelist and playwright, and his thought is permeated with stories which illustrate our 'being' and resonate in terms of describing the human condition. But our inability to define our character and essence, and our dependence on how others see us, leaves us with unease. Sartre captures this aspect of human life well, particularly in his novels and plays.

In his later philosophy however Sartre as a Marxist seems to acknowledge that we need to exercise our freedom within a community. We have to build a better society and improve economic conditions. Presumably then freedom is limited by these economic conditions which affect the individual. However, he is best remembered for his forthright championing of the freedom of the individual, which seems to be inescapably linked to Sartre's existentialism.

## Conclusion

All three philosophers see a fundamental failing in the scientific world-view which is felt to be too objective, so that it squeezes out the subjectivity that is seen to be a more fundamental aspect of being human. Sartre in particular emphasizes freedom so that there is no determined or fixed essence for human beings: existence comes before essence.

Sartre seems to leave the question of what a human being is open, wider perhaps so that literature particularly can expand it, especially



## Impression with its meanings bracketed out

the complicated ramifications of inter-subjectivity. There is the danger that we see others just as objects, and by not acknowledging them as subjects we are somehow defined by how they see us. Heidegger's existentialism speaks of authenticity, to 'own' our life, and Sartre echoes and intensifies this. We exist and then continually define ourselves.

Husserl's attempt to analyse and break down our consciousness, particularly our perceptual experience, has led the productive field of phenomenology which is perhaps not as psychological as Sartre or Heidegger. It tries to use a methodology which is related to scientific methodology, looking at parts in detail, not the totality. But in the concept of the 'life-world' Husserl moves towards an intuitive way of being for our behaviour in society and this theory assumes a unity, a wholeness for society, which enables us to act together in the world.

Heidegger is a somewhat strange mixture: he harks back to the German Romantics in an

almost mystical way, but he also deals with the practicality and dangers of technology in a prescient way. And his later poetic philosophy is even more mystical. He has moved a long way from his teacher Husserl, performing an interpretative hermeneutical study of Being, as opposed to Husserl's more descriptive and empirical study into perception and experience. He is more like a metaphysician: the fundamental question is 'why is there something rather than nothing?' He enraged the logical positivists with his famous phrase 'the nothing noths' (Heidegger's Freiburg Inaugural Lecture (1929)). Sartre's most famous book is entitled '*Being and Nothingness*', and this is in a sense a homage to Heidegger, whose most famous book is '*Being and Time*'.

Interestingly Heidegger dedicated this book to his mentor Husserl 'in friendship and admiration'. All three philosophers are closely related to each other, and rather than any one of them being 'right' they all have insights into the nature of our 'being'.



# Philosophy in an Interdisciplinary Context

*Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2019*

**CHRIS SEDDON**

Alex Gath spoke on this topic to eight members of the Wednesday group in the basement of the Opera Café in Walton Street, Oxford on 25<sup>th</sup> September. He began by illustrating the role that philosophy can play in other disciplines from his own extensive experience studying philosophy, in practice and research as a psychologist, and as a lecturer in philosophy to psychologists and anthropologists. He went on to highlight some specific philosophical themes and distinctive problems as they arise in psychology and anthropology.

Alex told of a childhood enthusiasm for philosophy nurtured by his father, who was able to recommend the first episode in the broadcast series 'Men of Ideas' from his personal acquaintance with both Bryan Magee and his first interviewee, Isaiah Berlin. Subsequent guests included Charles Taylor, Hilary Putnam, Willard Van Orman Quine, Bernard Williams, Ernest Gellner, Noam Chomsky, Iris Murdoch and Herbert Marcuse, many of whom illustrated an inter-disciplinary approach to philosophy, and indeed exemplified this approach in their personal careers.

Finding the teaching of science at Magdalen College School in Oxford to be rather dull, Alex focused on the humanities and subsequently studied Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology (PPP) at St John's College, Oxford, and was awarded a Masters Degree in Psychology at the University of Sussex before working as a psychologist on a general psychiatric ward in Sydney, Australia, researching eating disorders. Although at Oxford philosophy is always taken in combination with other subjects, and there is the potential for inter-disciplinary approaches

in research such as the influence of culture on eating disorders, he found at this time that the realisation of such inter-disciplinary potential was comparatively superficial.

Under supervision through Edinburgh University, Alex undertook research into the anthropology of religion, undertaking field work in South India. During the last twenty years he has worked at Birkbeck University of London and the University College London Institute of Neurology at Queen's Square. Lecturing trainee psychotherapists on cross-cultural issues and other students on part-time and evening courses has underlined the value of an inter-disciplinary approach, and areas such as neurobiology clearly indicate the same value.

Alex recounted how the value of computational modelling for such complex fields has been called increasingly into question. Although at first it seemed to promise objective results and hence attracted research funding, the number of free variables required meant that many of the models created had little predictive power, and in the worst case may not even have been falsifiable. Over the years, researchers began to question whether any practical benefits had been achieved. The subsequent need to contextualise the focus of study exemplifies Alex's task of trying to persuade psychologists to take philosophy more seriously.

Alex illustrated the difficulty of this task by pointing out that philosophy and psychology were not separated until into the twentieth century, and to a certain extent the divorce has never really been fully achieved, nor has a constructive dialogue yet fully emerged. He argued for example, that the term 'cognitive'



**At the meeting: Carolyn Wilde, David Burrridge and Alex Gath**

has, despite its scientific air, little common understanding amongst philosophers or psychologists. He gave examples of schools and practitioners who used the term to cover a variety of different methodologies. At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Chomsky and Fodor were sympathetic to the value of modelling and artificial intelligence. At the University of Pennsylvania cognitive behavioural therapy was seen as a better way to achieve practical solutions to mental health problems rather than psychoanalysis. At Stanford the social constructivist focus too was intended to be pragmatic, whilst at Harvard social context and narrative were felt to be a more productive perspective.

These different approaches in clinical psychology were also reflected in accounts of how children learn language. Chomsky questioned how it was possible for children to master the complex structures that he envisaged accounting for an infinite number of meaningful sentences, but Alex suggested this was the wrong question, based on an assumption that the solution to such problems lies in the construction of a model. He drew the analogy of a cricketer learning how to respond to bowling, not by modelling every possible combination of pace, delivery, spin, height, ground, wind and fielding, but by learning gradually, piecemeal and above all

physically how to apply a limited number of approximate solutions. In British philosophy the focus was predominantly analytical, from the perspective of what the philosopher as analyst would be inclined to say, rather than a pragmatic study of what language users in ordinary life actually do and say.

To illustrate this latter point Alex quoted an example, which I gave at an earlier discussion, of the idea of a concept generalised to the point that a dog trying to get through doors might be said to demonstrate that the dog had the concept of a door. It was generally accepted that one might not be inclined to use the idea of a concept in such a broad sense in normal conversation, but it was also accepted that the generalisation was not wholly inappropriate and might in fact be more like the usage in ordinary language than in most philosophical debate. I suggested that the generalised concept was more useful than making an arbitrary cut-off point in a spectrum of nuanced concepts from sophisticated abstract human thought through pragmatic situational thinking to purposive animal behaviour.

As a further example of the role of philosophy in psychology Alex suggested that robotics and artificial intelligence needed to take account of phenomenological ideas of embodiment - that a computer cannot be said to have intelligence

comparable with human intelligence unless it does human-like things. It is suggestive that early advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) were in the world of chess, in which aims and rules are simple and unambiguous, although it was also suggested that experienced chess players can tell the difference over the internet from a human player, by the different style of thinking which an artificial chess player demonstrates even when it beats them. There are indeed said to be robots which are used to police chess websites to detect when a robot player is being used to masquerade as an unaided human player.

Alex gave other examples of the subjective role of the analyst from anthropology, for example in accounts of the concept of a miracle which he claimed depended on ideas of science that would not make any sense even in New Testament times.

In conclusion Alex suggested that whilst analysis and other methodologies provide useful techniques, they have no value in isolation, and good philosophers must have extremely wide interests, and be prepared to bring those interests to discussions with other disciplines.

# Hegel and Freedom

PHIL WALDEN

On the 18<sup>th</sup> September the Wednesday group discussed 'Hegel and Freedom' with Dr Phil Walden. Hegel's ideas about freedom are inextricably linked with his idea of progress manifesting itself in history. Progress is the increasing embodiment of rational principles in history. Progress is baked into history, teleologically.

Freedom is the recognition of necessity. So, freedom is not arbitrary, but depends upon recognizing the real constraints upon one, coming from society as well as nature.

Many philosophers of a British empiricist caste of mind - such as Locke, Hume, or more recently Bertrand Russell, Popper, or Isaiah Berlin - have found this incomprehensible, because for them freedom must involve a spontaneously free choice. But a completely free choice is precisely what social reality and historical reality does not give us. Here, Hegel was right to insist upon the distinction between the German words *Willkür* and *Wille*. There is a common delusion that freedom involves free choice.

A query was raised about whether Hegel was ruling out a bad end to history by an act of his own philosophical fiat? No. Rather, the



Hegel

systematic character of Hegel's philosophy (the way in which each part of the system supports the other parts, like an ingenious scaffolding) shows why history ultimately exhibits progress.

To get to grips with Hegel, Dr Walden suggested reading secondary commentaries on Hegel. But none of these are able to convey the full truth of Hegel's philosophy and there is no adequate substitute for discussing the original texts in reading groups.

Hegel was a Christian philosopher, but in what sense? Hegel is often taken as believing that God died on the cross with Jesus, and God passed on the Spirit to humanity to do what it could with it. But it is also possible to read Hegel's Spirit as involving a benign God who is trying to help us but is blocked in certain ways, which we can unblock.



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## Mutability of Language

A buzzard, the wheel of hawk's wings,  
an oak tree, the spread of branches  
and waxy green clusters of leaves,  
a wren, the brown flash of a tiny bird.

Words are different now, spoken in other tongues,  
*tweet* no longer describes just birdsong, *web* is no more  
just a spider's creation, *stream* means more than running water,  
and *cloud* is not only vapour overhead.

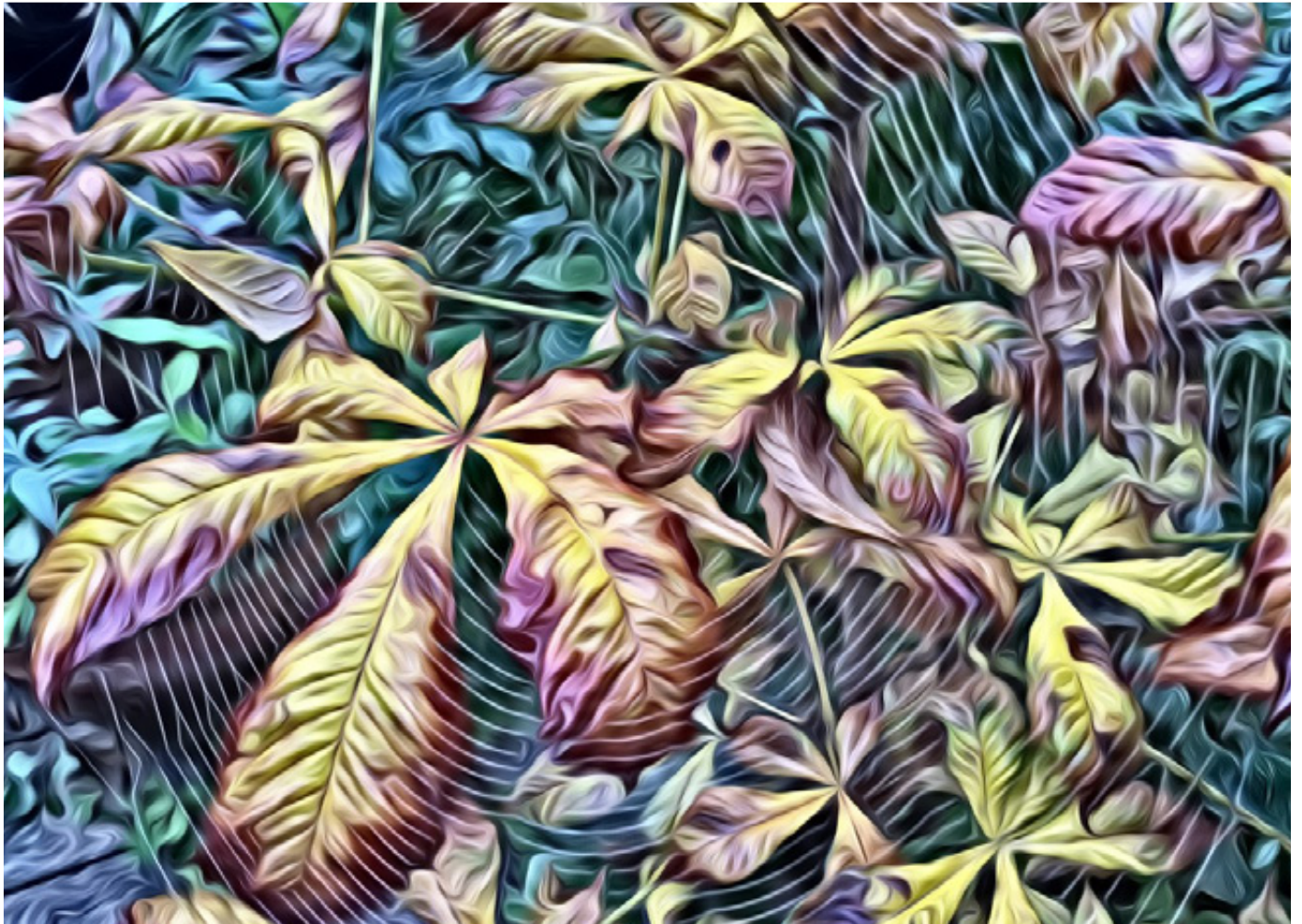
Words keep changing and shifting, *mutability of language*  
they say, though the rough porous language tries  
to hold on to the natural world,  
its ribbed expression still in the sling of mind

troubled to keep pace with a new virtual world, conjured in pixels  
pitching over the old walls into new territory,  
where the search is hampered for nuggets of the old ways  
in the yellowing grass of shifting technology and computer power.

Wind names *breeze*, *zephyr*, or words as *thunder*  
grown over centuries into the beauty of words, well known  
by the poets, those etymologists of roots and grafting,  
who remind, where nature and poetry collide, beauty is born.

We feel the loss of connection with nature,  
crouch to search, to recover and restore  
the echoes and shadows of the old words  
treasured by generations before us, such as:





*shadowtackle* (the pattern of light and shade in a wood)  
*ammil* (the fiery light produced by sun on hoar frost)  
*verglas* (blue ice on rock) or  
*summer geese* (steam rising from warm wet moors)

At a junction between wonder and loss  
we still hear an owl hoot, watch buds shoot and flourish in a hush  
and hold on to a truth that all is interconnected  
and we are part of it.

***Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws***

## Toy Story (Adorno)

Just because he deprives the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness, he seeks to rescue in them what is benign towards men and not what subserves the exchange relation that equally deforms men and things.

Adorno, 'Toy Shop', in *Minima Moralia*



CHRIS NORRIS

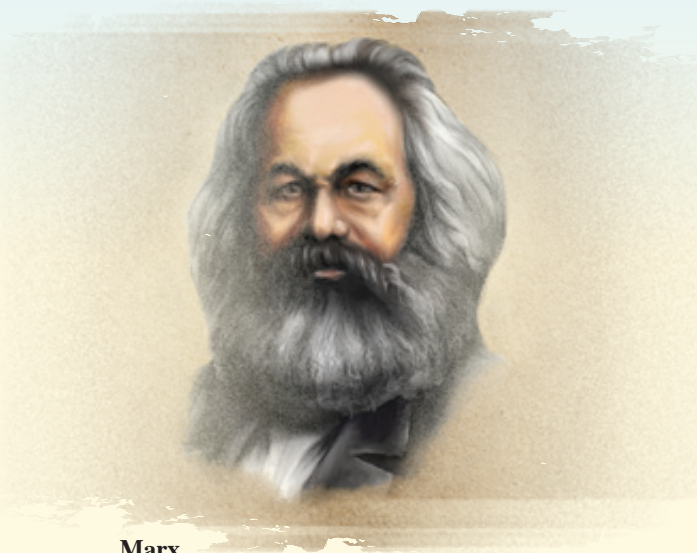
They do their thing, their mechanized display.  
The pipers pipe, the coachmen drive,  
The tightrope walkers make their risky way,  
The girls fetch water, divers dive,  
And children, watching, clap their hands and say  
(Or do we onlookers contrive  
To make-believe they do?) how bright and gay  
Life is for them, how they arrive  
Each time around, perform their short ballet,  
Their puppet-moves, and seem to thrive  
On the sheer joy of it, not work for pay  
Or drudgery of nine-to-five  
But every day another holiday,  
No endless struggle to survive,  
To keep the wolves of capital at bay,  
But graceful forms now dancing live!



So we suppose, we adults apt to blend  
Our Marx with a nostalgic take  
On childhood, one that retrodicts an end  
To that enchanted time, a break  
With all things joyous when the shades descend  
And things once prized for their own sake,  
Like toys, are now discovered to depend  
On work to ease the deeper ache  
Of hunger unappeased, of hours you spend  
In weary toil, of days you wake  
To yet more of the same, and how you bend  
Your every sinew just to make  
Ends meet while the life-changing dividend  
That should be yours goes to the snake  
In Eden, toy-dream spoiler, city friend  
Whose profit swallows your life-stake.



On exchange-value as the root  
 Of all iniquities, with which combine –  
 As it goes here – a child recruit  
 To represent the time when all was fine,  
 When things were value-tracked to suit  
 Their usefulness, and no percentage sign  
 Yet marked the quantity of loot  
 Drawn off as surplus value. Hence the shine  
 Accrued to playthings once we mute  
 The voice of sweated labour, or resign  
 That childhood world and substitute  
 The rituals fit for capital's high shrine,  
 The toys-turned fetishes, things cute,  
 Not magical, and all the Byzantine  
 Complexities Marx would impute  
 To the commodity, made near-divine  
 By each fantastic attribute.



Marx

The kids are smarter, not entirely sold  
 On playing dumb, typecast as blest  
 With a know-nothing role in the tale told  
 By Marx, his wake-up call addressed  
 To folk less innocent since pre-enrolled  
 In a hard school, folk long oppressed  
 By capital, hopes shattered, lives on hold,  
 Yet also, for that reason, knowing best



A toy factory

How a quite different story might unfold,  
One where the put-upon can wrest  
Power back from those who up to now controlled  
Their every life-chance, since the test  
Comes when class-lessons, got by heart of old  
(‘Read, learn and inwardly digest’)  
With Marx’s help, say to them: break the mold,  
Leave no class-grievance unredressed!

Somehow the child knows this, and knows it well;  
Perceives enough to think or feel  
‘These marionettes give notice of a hell-  
On-earth they must as yet conceal  
From little me, in my protective shell  
Of infancy, but must reveal  
Before too long when toys and puppets spell  
The truth out plain. “It’s our appeal  
To your humanity insists you dwell  
On all that makes your lives unreal,  
Reduces social ties to buy-and-sell,  
Rates toy-shops for the cheapest deal  
In town, and leaves us kids alone to tell  
You this home truth: no chance you’ll heal  
The class-wound or ring capital’s death-knell  
Unless, in our *Marionettenspiel*,  
You see reflected everything that fell  
Beneath commodity’s dark privy seal”’.



## *The Wednesday*

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## *Consuming Rudyard Kipling's House*



*Underneath RK's house in Villier's street there is a fast food café: EAT ME Just one of many down that street, serving meals to rush to work with.*

Go on; lose your head -  
whilst others get theirs to work on time!  
Nothing will be said, after all he's dead.  
Eat up the house, above your sign.

No one will notice you nibbling the stairs,  
Scoff a room or two no one cares.  
Their eyes won't lift above your sign.  
That blue plaque; a mint after you dine?

And when you've done with your 'brickfast' treat,  
You can lunch on his works above the street.  
Every last stanza, each para and worse.  
Clean up the couplets and all his verse.  
Chew over his classic stories too,  
Of the Raj and other glories he knew.

When there is nothing left but a space in the past.  
No one will notice they're moving too fast.

*David Burridge*