The *Wednesday*

Editorial

De-mystifying Mysticism

I mentioned last week that Russell used the word 'mysticism' to describe Wittgenstein's thought. Russell used it to describe Wittgenstein's acceptance of truths beyond conceptual thinking. But what is wrong with the term 'mysticism'?

I think that the term 'mysticism' is normally used in a general way without making subtle distinctions. Mysticism is used, at one level, to denote a type of truth that is non-conceptual and not open to discursive thought. This might be what Wittgenstein talked about as something being shown and not said. What can be shown and not said is beyond conceptualisation and language. Mystics are very aware that they are dealing with a reality that is beyond the categories of the understanding, i.e. concepts, and they attack reason (or strictly speaking the understanding) for trying to apply its categories beyond the realm of their applicability. The philosophers for their part say that mystics refuse to deal with them on level ground, the ground of the understanding, and hence they can't make sense of what the mystics are saying. The two sides are not engaging with each other.

This situation gets more complicated when mystics start to make idiosyncratic claims. For example, mystics think in terms of images and poetry. They may borrow the structure of their world-view from philosophy but express it in poetic and imaginative descriptions rather than clear, well-defined concepts. Most mystics rely on the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus. They take the Forms from Plato and refashion them into the Divine Names. They also take the First Intellect from Plotinus and identify it with a number of personalities and items. The choice of image either becomes canonical after a while or shifts and varies, depending on the individual mystic. In my reading of mystics and mysticism, I tend to go beyond this apparent imagery and try to identify the underlying structure, one that a philosopher could deal with. This way, mysticism becomes accessible to philosophy.

But being mystical may mean a pre-conceptual insight, a thought that hasn't become clear yet and there is only a vague feeling of it in the conscious mind. The common way of speaking about such an idea is a vision. Thinkers may be visionaries in the sense that they are not bound to material facts but consider something larger than individual facts and look for a whole. Being imaginative is another name for it. Such a vision may not be the thought itself but the source of thoughts. This aspect is shared by mystics, philosophers and artists.

At a higher level, mysticism is what can philosophically be called speculative thought. It is a standpoint beyond empiricism and at the root of philosophical systems. You could in some cases start from this point of view, such as the unfolding of reason in history or the self positing itself in the empirical world, in that it becomes conscious of itself. This is traditionally given the name Idealism, but one can start from the empirical standpoint of consciousness and then abstract to the condition of such consciousness. Philosophers have tried both approaches and so have the mystics.

But whichever meaning one attributes to mysticism, there is always the recognition that there is a picture bigger than the individual facts of the empirical realm. This picture could be a transcendent or an immanent one. Different times have seen the ascendency of one or the other. But I believe that there is a need for a wholeness without which there will be a sense of uneasiness and fragmentation for the individual and culture in general. Such wholeness is important for the mystic and the philosopher.

The Editor

Referential and Social Meanings

I might think of myself as a Logical Positivist, insofar as I regard meaningful statements as expressing beliefs, and true beliefs as referring to existing situations. In other words, I regard statements and beliefs as being about situations the existence of which would make those statements and beliefs true.

However, I am not a Realist, because, for example, I do not generally regard nouns or pronouns as being about objects the existence of which would make those nouns or pronouns meaningful. Instead I believe that nouns or pronouns - like adjectives or verbs - only have meaning as parts of statements. In other words, I regard such signs as expressing concepts which can be combined to form beliefs - a false statement or belief is one that can be combined with a sign such as 'It is not the case that ...' or the concept of logical denial to form a true statement or belief.

CHRIS **SEDDON**

Some philosophers might say that the meaning of a sign is the role it plays in our form of life, but I find it more helpful to say that the referential meaning of a sign is the role it plays in referring to situations, either on its own or through being combined with other signs, and that its social meaning is the role it plays in our form of life, which depends primarily - although not entirely - on its referential meaning.

This seems more helpful to me because it allows us to view the concept of meaning from two perspectives: first, the extremely diverse ways in which we use language; and second, the somewhat less diverse ways in which language makes references. For example, let us take a philosopher at random and pick some types of language that he feels do not make references, and analyse how they play a role in our form of life because of the part they play in making references, rather than instead of it:

'Here the term language-game is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others: Giving orders, and obeying them - Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements - Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) - Reporting an event - Speculating about an event - Forming and testing an hypothesis - Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams - Making up a story; and reading it - Play-acting - Singing catches - Guessing riddles - Making a joke; telling it - Solving a problem in practical arithmetic - Translating from one language into another - Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. - It is interesting to compare the multiplicity of the tools in language and of the ways they are used, the multiplicity of kinds of words and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (Including the author of the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus).' (Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations,* paragraph 23).

Giving orders, and obeying them
For example, 'March!' - said by a Sergeant to a Private. What situation would this order truthfully describe?

Well in part it describes the situation in which the Private marches, but that is only part of the meaning, because if the Private answered politely 'I think not, sir, I haven't left this spot.' he would have misunderstood the order, or pretended to.

The phrase 'I want you to march' describes the situation a little more precisely, because in that context that is all the information the Private needs to decide what to do next. If he does not march, the

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Chris Seddon

Sergeant has not been proved wrong, rather, the Sergeant's wishes have been disregarded.

But giving an order is not merely a statement of personal desire - there is also the implication that the person with the desire has some authority over the person receiving the order. As an example of a false order, in the film Wee Willie Winkie, 1937, the Sergeant orders his squad to parade in the midday sun. A Private objects, but the Sergeant knocks him down. Subsequently the Colonel shows that the Sergeant's order was wrong by ordering the squad to undertake a route march as a punishment for the Sergeant. Giving an order not only implies desire and power, it implies authority.

'Authority and power are two different things: power is the force by means of which you can oblige others to obey you. Authority is the right to direct and command, to be listened to or obeyed by others. Authority requests power. Power without authority is tyranny.' (Jacques Maritain, 'The Democratic Charter', *Man and the State*.)

Thus, the order means 'I want you to march and I have the authority to demand it'. If this correctly describes the situation then it gives the Private information which will help him decide what to do next. In the film the first part was true but the second was false. All but one of the Privates decided to march, but they all knew the Sergeant was wrong.

But what is the point of this analysis? Why not just say that this is an order and not a statement? Well it certainly is an order and not a statement, but it is helpful to understand what an order is, and this understanding is helped by analysing what situation it would describe.

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements

For example, 'This article is getting long'.

This example reminds me to keep my explanation brief. But that isn't what it means – that's just how I respond to being reminded of the situation that it describes.

Constructing an object from a description

For example, building a flat-pack wardrobe.

Just as obeying an order is a response to language in line with the intention of participating in a structure of authority, so constructing an object from a drawing is a response to language in line with the intention of constructing such an object.

The instructions describe how the wardrobe in the illustration can be constructed from the contents of the kit. If it doesn't work, either I have misunderstood the instructions - the diagram - or the instructions are wrong.

The instructions say 'If the parts looking like this are assembled in this way and in this order they will form a wardrobe looking like this'.

Reporting an event – speculating about an event

For example, 'A dyslexic walked into a bra.'

If the event actually happened, then we might find the report to be helpful information. But if it is merely interesting, we might not even care so much whether it actually happened or not.

Events can happen more than once. We might speculate on it happening at some time in the future, or perhaps having happened sometime in the past. Or we might speculate on it happening every time something else happens. In this sense reporting an event suggests including specific

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information about when it happened, whereas speculating about an event could be more general. but both the specific and the general express beliefs, which if true, refer to situations.

In this example I deliberately introduced a play on words. The report itself is merely bizarre, but the combination of the situation actually described, and the word play is intended to be amusing. This exemplifies one way that the situations described by language contribute to the role it plays in our form of life. '*Ein Legastheniker ging in einen BH'* describes the same situation but does not quite play the role of a joke.

Forming and testing an hypothesis
For example, 'If sodium is exposed to the air it will give off a dense white caustic smoke.'

This could be tested to a certain extent by repeated experiment, but in order to test whether it will always occur, I imagine that scientists will study a number of reactions and the chemical structures underlying them of the components of air and the atoms of sodium. The description is only approximately true, because other factors such as humidity, pressure and temperature have not been specified.

It is worth noting that descriptions need not be completely true, or even true at all, in order to play a role in some form of life or other - including forming and testing scientific theories.

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams
Here we probably do care whether the situation has been described reasonably accurately. Are diagrams language? Some languages are historically based on pictograms, which are more or less highly stylised diagrams. So, this question requires a pragmatic answer to fit the situation. We might view tables as combining numerals and labels in columns and rows as language using a tabular grammar. We might view the headings, captions, and context of the diagrams as saying 'The sodium looked like this at the start and like this after three minutes', but equally we might regard the diagrams themselves as part of the language. We might be less inclined to view the diagrams as part of the language if they were replaced by photographs.
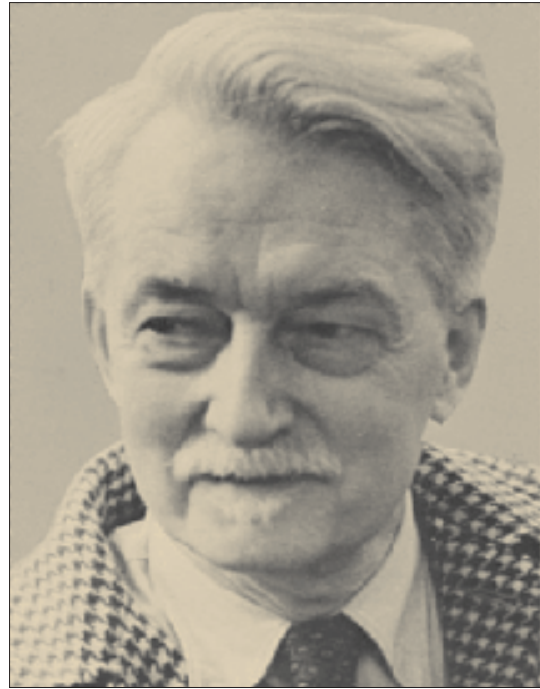
The extent to which we regard communication as language is determined by the extent to which we are interested in the use of a more-or-less conventional grammar - the way they are combined with other elements of language. Tables have an obvious conventional grammar, abstract diagrams

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Wee Willie Winkie, 1937

Wittgenstein

Jacques Maritain

follow certain conventions, but photographs are less obviously merely conventional, although even they have conventions such as, the subject is more likely to be in focus near the centre than at the edge of the photograph or blurred.

Making up a story
For example, 'Once upon a time in a cottage in a wood there lived three bears.'
Normally this is not like the example of a report, because normally we do not believe that this is true, or care. But what if I submitted it as part of a study on the use of abandoned human dwellings by wild creatures? Then it might be a report. It would describe the same situation - at least as far as it goes without the additional images suggested by the context - but that description would be put to a different purpose.

Play acting
For example, 'Prodigious birth of love is it to me / That I must love a loathed enemy.' in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

This is another good illustration that the referential meaning of a statement is essential to the role it plays in a form of life, though not equivalent to that role. Referentially the statement implies that the speaker loves somebody. If it were spoken outside a play, it might or might not be true, but since it is spoken in a play, we are happy to disregard whether it is actually true and instead just imagine

what it would be like for it, and the rest of the play, to be true.

Singing catches
For example, 'London's burning! Fetch the engines! Fire, fire! Pour on water!' - ANONYMOUS

For example 'Fa, la la la la la la la! Fa, la la la la la la la!' etc - MOZART

For example 'Ah! Ah ah ah! Ah ah! Ah! ...' etc - RACHMANINOV Vocalise

The speeches in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet are not referentially true - no Romeo and Juliet ever had exactly those experiences, but Shakespeare uses their referential meaning within the context of a story, which may in turn express generalisations about love that many take to be referentially true.

Similarly, the words of a song are not literally true, but often the lyricist and composer use them to express emotions - which I regard as a type of generalisation. A sad song expresses the concept of sadness, which we may respond to by imagining situations in which we or others are sad - although the concept expressed and the images we make of it are typically much richer than expressed by the simple concept expressed by the mere word 'sadness'.

The example of a catch is interesting, because

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traditionally catches are regarded as mere musical pastimes in the execution of which the participants may take some pleasure, but which are not intended to express any particular emotion.

Thus, in the first example, the sentences are not literally true, because London is no longer burning, although perhaps the singers remembered the great fire of London in 1666. The oldest version is thought to date from about 1580 and runs 'Scotland it burneth'. It is thought to refer to the burning of many Scottish strongholds by the English earlier that century. In such a case the words are not literally true because the English had been beaten back - for the time being - and the burning did not affect the whole of Scotland, but perhaps they were true enough to fulfil the social function of uniting the singers and their audience against a common enemy.

In the second example there is no clear meaning to the words at all. It is a game, and not even a language game. I doubt that there is any social meaning to the words either, although the mere act of making music together may be said to have a social meaning.

The third example also lacks literal meaning, but unlike the second example, I think the music does express emotions, partly through the grammar of music. But then it isn't a catch, so I cheated by including it.

Guessing riddles

For example, 'When is a door not a door?'
Or:
For example, 'A box without keys or lid, yet inside golden treasure is hid.'
Or:
For example, 'What was tomorrow and will be yesterday?'

Questions have a referential meaning not because they refer to situations, but because in combination with an answer they refer to situations.

The first example uses puns, like the jokes in the example above about reporting an event. The literal answer is 'Never'. The correct answer is 'When it is ajar'. Puns use words that sound the same to express two different statements at once. They are amusing because we are relieved to have been clever enough to understand them.

Buster Keaton

The second example uses metaphors. The literal answer to the implied question 'What is a box without keys or lid etc' is 'There is no such box'. The correct answer is to extend the literal meaning of a box and golden treasure to include an egg and its yolk.

The final example uses neither puns nor metaphor, but ambiguous grammar. As I write this on 2020-01-09, one literal answer may be 'Nothing, because no day can be both 2020-01-10 and 2020-01-08'. The correct answer is 'Today, because it was meant by 'tomorrow' yesterday, and will be meant by 'yesterday' 'tomorrow'.

The usual role that riddles play is to amuse us through our own cleverness in understanding them, but they cannot play that role without having a referential meaning, and being composed of words with referential meanings.

Making a joke
See the example above about reporting an event for verbal jokes, which can be told.

For a non-verbal example, consider the gag in which Buster Keaton, on seeing the opposite forwards approaching, hands the ball to a team mate standing next to him.

The joke about the dyslexic relies on the reference in many jokes to a man walking into a bar, the implied reference to a dyslexic misspelling a three-letter word, and the referential meaning of a man walking into a bra. Like a riddle, it is amusing because of the relief of being able to assimilate the alternative meanings.

The Buster Keaton visual gag relies on the visual communication of a silent movie, which is largely non-linguistic since it uses comparatively little conventional grammar. However it plays the same role as the other jokes - we are amused because we are relieved to be able to understand why Buster has not properly understood the usual aim of playing football as we do, and his team-mate has not properly understood the aim of self-preservation as Buster and we do.

Scientists have traced laughter to the sounds other social mammals instinctively make to signal that

The Three Bears

apparent aggression is not dangerous. As animals that greatly rely on understanding apparent incongruities, the relief of understanding them generates instinctive laughter as we realise that our initial lack of understanding is not a serious threat. Sometimes this social function involves the use of language, although not always.

Solving a problem in practical arithmetic
'2 + 3 = 5' is not an example in practical arithmetic. It is an example in pure arithmetic - probably not quite general enough to count as pure mathematics. 'x + y = y + x' might be an example in pure mathematics, although a very trivial one. Pure mathematics, pure arithmetic, and pure logic are special cases of meaningful sentences - when correct, they all describe in different terms the same situation: minimal necessity. Their referential meaning is trivial, and the only interest they have is in the social role they play in illuminating the definitions of their terms.

For an example of practical arithmetic, consider my weekly grocery bill, which at £15.46 meant I had £4.54 in change - *ja, ich kaufe bei Aldi ein*. The information conveyed at the bottom of the bill was the sale value of the goods that the scanner indicated I had put in my bag, the amount which the assistant indicated I had tendered, and the change which the till calculated was to be returned to me. On checking the items and my change, as is my invariable habit, I found that the information was true. I have been known to return for a 20p refund, thus indicating how seriously I take the social role of this referential information.

Logic

Translating

Translation can be problematic because there is often no precise equivalent - no terms or combination of terms with a close enough referential meaning.

It can also be problematic because the referential meaning is usually only part of the role played by a sentence - see the above examples of puns, jokes, and songs, which not only rely on single referential meanings, but also on terms which have multiple meanings, meanings extended in an unusual way, and the sounds or appearances of the signs quite apart from their referential meaning.

Asking

For example, 'Will you stop writing soon, Chris?' Literally we may interpret this example as a question, combining with an answer to describe a situation - either 'Yes' or 'No', or maybe 'Maybe'.

Socially it may play the role of a question. Perhaps someone wants to know whether they can get to sleep soon without the sound of typing on the computer. Or it might play the role of a rhetorical question, equivalent to the command 'Stop writing soon, Chris' - which as we have suggested above, is equivalent to the statement 'I want you to stop writing soon, Chris, and I have the authority to demand it'. We might imagine a language or a speaker with reduced vocabulary, for example: 'You stop writing soon, Chris' with perhaps or perhaps not a slightly raised final intonation suggestive of a question or a polite request.

In such a case we might be tempted to view the referential meaning as equivalent to the statement 'Chris will stop writing soon'.

This illustrates that the distinction between referential meaning and social meaning is not always straightforward, and it is a pragmatic decision varying from one person to another. Meaning is attributed by individuals, although we need attributions that are sufficiently similar to our interlocutors to enable effective communication. We need not infer, however, that it is therefore never useful. Most of the above examples illustrate how useful the distinction is.

Thanking

For example, 'Thank you for promising to stop soon.' A useful literal interpretation might be 'You promised to stop soon and I want to encourage you in that'. What about promising? For example, 'I promise to stop soon'. A useful referential interpretation might be 'I will do everything in my power to stop soon'. If I do not, then the statement would have been proved false, and I will have broken my promise. Similarly, if I have no intention of stopping soon, even though as it happens I do, the statement would still have been false and my promise was worthless.

Cursing

For example, 'Damn you Chris, I'm trying to sleep!'

In a more superstitious age, perhaps this meant 'I'm trying to sleep and I ask God to send you to hell when you die'. Perhaps it still literally means that, but the social meaning has been greatly mitigated.

Greeting

For example, 'Good morning Chris'.
Referentially this means 'I hope you have a good morning Chris'. If the speaker does nothing to help me have a good morning when they have an opportunity to do so, then their greeting is referentially false, although it might still have served the social role of recognising my presence and displaying politeness.

In summary

Although the distinction between referential and social meaning is pragmatic and may sometimes be unclear, communication in general and language in particular performs its various social roles primarily through the employment of meanings, which are the ways in which signs are combined to form sentences which express beliefs, which if true, refer to situations. Not every sign that combines with others to make such references makes a reference in isolation. In particular, in terms of our usual grammar, situations normally exist independently of the sentences which describe them, but objects do not normally exist independently of the terms which name them.

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SOME FRIENDSHIPS ARE LIKE PLANTS

Some friendships are like plants, they grow a while,
Then, with a sudden unexpected frost,
What had so gradually bloomed
Is in a moment lost.

This is a thing which must leave us resigned,
Glad to enjoy the blossom while it lasted,
Although we hate to count the cost
Once blossoming is blasted.

Such is the human weather, unexpected,
So disconcerting, saddening and strange,
From sun to cloud, from calm to storm,
The one thing constant, change!

It's hard to be resigned, though we must try
To accept the veering of capricious fate,
Though we endeavour to repent,
Too often it's too late.

Perhaps the sun will once again revive
The withering flower before its petals scatter,
Perhaps the precious cup that fell
Stay whole, not shatter.

And from that cup we'll drink once more with joy,
And share the friendship that we used to share,
There's not much love in this poor world
To let that love go spare.

Edward Greenwood

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In the know how

You said you discovered
the ultimate secret
in a sudden line
of one of my poems

I do not know
the line I wrote
nor which of my poems
you referred to

still you insisted
you had found it
but could not recall
what it was, only

that somehow
you were for sure
in the know how
but not what it was

that you again lost
and you loved me
for writing it
and I loved you back

for forgetting it
so others might find it,
assuming there was
such a secret.

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Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

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Poetry

Material (a sonnet)

CHRIS **NORRIS**

There would be more kudos in allying myself with crystals – images of the seductive twinkling of snowflakes or diamonds – rather than grains which might conjure up no more exciting a picture than a handful of sand. Grains and crystals are rather like Cinderella before and after she goes to the ball.

Valerie Randle (Norris), 'The Cinderella of Sciencespeak'

This article surveys the current status of 'grain boundary engineering', i.e., the deliberate manipulation of grain boundary crystallography in polycrystals in order to produce a material containing grain boundaries which have superior properties compared to average boundaries.

Valerie Randle, abstract of article in *Acta Materialia*

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Stress-tested and case-hardened, you and I,
Grain-boundaries aligned, good alloy steel.
See how tight-packed the latticed atoms lie!
Each flaw elucidates the pure ideal.
Your gift, to scan at microscopic scale,
Observe as streamed electrons find the flaws,
And then – in case some stressed component fail –
Review the crystallites, find out the cause.
Else bridges fall, jet aircraft crash and burn,
Space-rocket debris flames across the skies
As seals corrode, and lovers fail to learn
From those, like you, keen-eyed and boundary-wise.
No alloy, no soul-union, where no plea
On matter's part for mind's microscopy.

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Intellectual Vices and the Philosopher

Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 15th of January 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

Based on the work of Quassim Cassam, current professor of philosophy at Warwick, we discussed intellectual vices. We should avoid intellectual vices such as gullibility, impatience, dishonesty, dogmatism, malevolence, snobbery, closed-mindedness etc. These vices get in the way of knowledge. Nietzsche wrote that you should be true to yourself, but sometimes we are not aware of our faults. 'Know yourself' was the ancient Greek advice. What is our motivation in promulgating our views? We may be stupid, but surely usually not intentionally so. Is there some pleasure in seeking approval from others of our views? We also tend to notice and point out mistakes in arguments, rather than looking for the good points contained in them.

We generally want to be open-minded rather than 'closed'. If we are open-minded and start to question a traditional belief or knowledge we have we will probably experience cognitive dissonance, trying to hold conflicting ideas at the same time. For a project it is not always the case that being open-minded is better. For instance it may better to be open-minded at the start of a project, when all options are being considered, but once a particular option for action is chosen, it is probably better not to revisit the decision – just get on with what has been agreed. Philosophy can be snobbish, deliberately over-using technical terms which are unintelligible to most people. We could say that snobs 'should know better', but it is natural perhaps for cliques to form. The problem comes when they are closed to new members and new thoughts, and this links in to the 'academicization' of philosophy departments in universities. There is a 'dog-whistle' effect: only philosophers in a particular group can hear and understand the special code and words being used. Some philosophers outside of traditional university departments seem to have an impact far greater than those inside them.

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Justin Kruger

David Dunning

For intellectuals and planners there is a danger of over-complexifying, using difficult and arcane terms. People are fed up with experts who tell them what to do and make their lives more difficult – climate change for some is a case in point. In planning generally there can be solutions which only address part of the problem: for instance, we can build more houses to address a housing shortage but it then turns out no-one can afford them. Of course, the counterargument for philosophers is that some philosophy is technical and difficult, and we don't want to 'cast our pearls before swine lest they are trampled on'.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is the over-confidence that people tend to exhibit in terms of their competence in a particular field or knowledge of it. People who know a little often think they know a lot and over-estimate their abilities. But having some confidence may not always be a bad thing and may be better than not trying and bemoaning one's inadequacies and lack of knowledge. Philosophy is probably a difficult discourse for people to engage with, even a short history of philosophy can confuse the beginner rather than whetting their appetite.

With regard to ethics, philosophers used to speak about justice, with the hope that it will be more widespread. Now, many of them, especially those from a disadvantaged background, talk about injustice in the hope of eliminating it.

Leaders of nations may be of good character, even pious, but be responsible for policies which cause many deaths. We tend to worry about the character of our leaders, but is this so important for intellectuals? We want people to be authentic, to follow their moral beliefs and put them into practice. This can lead to conflict with 'the authorities', and we admire those who take a moral stand against tyranny and in some cases they have been put to death because of their beliefs and actions.

Are we in a 'post-truth' age? Group effects mean it is difficult to stand out from the crowd. Some like the 'power-play' that many leaders employ and want a strong leader to represent them and see this as advancing their cause.

Poetic Form in Köln

Stepping and squeezing through the Weihnacht's crowd,

amid tingles, sparkles and Glühwein sips.

Suddenly I stood before a smiling young lady seated

 in an open hut beside a pile of fingered anthologies.

Facing her, an empty seat just waiting for me.

She smiled me in, as if I were timetabled,

 offered to read a poem of my choosing.

Any poet I preferred.

I mentioned Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

At random she picked one from her pile,

leant forward, gave a perfect delivery.

It touched the searings harboured in my head

That door half open offering a light beyond the dark.

I heard: pass through now or it will soon be locked.

Once read she handed it to me and I gave it another go.

This time tear stained, by the familiar notion.

 How could she have known?

David Burridge