

The Wednesday

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Virtues and Vices in an uncertain World

There has been an increasing interest in virtues and vices in recent months. Following Hegel, we may say that they concern persons, civil society and the state. Nottingham University organised a conference on civic virtues in November last year and there is a plan to hold a workshop on civic vices in March of this year. The concern in both workshops is to focus on the linkage between these terms and both epistemology and ethics.

Epistemology and ethics may seem two separate fields, but they may turn out to be dealing with the same problem. Justice in ethics may be applied to doing good or bad to an agent in the epistemic sphere. Increasing work has been done to show different types of injustices that have been perpetrated on minorities and genders in terms of evaluating the worth of their testimony, knowledge and identities. This may be going beyond the traditional way of doing epistemology or ethics and may require a new way of philosophising. But philosophers will stick to the job they are good at by investigating the concepts of virtue and vice with clear necessary and sufficient conditions. This may look too theoretical and remote from a practical point of view, but I can see the social and practical motivation for it in a rapidly changing and globalised world.

It is interesting that the motivation alluded to above comes out clearly in another workshop to be held in Germany in March which will deal with hate speech. Hate speech is a clear sign of vice that carries with it the potential for physical or mental harm to individuals, society and state institutions. The description of the workshop says:

‘... it is far from clear what exactly hate speech is – despite occasional attempts to provide sufficiently precise definitions. Some authors focus ex-

clusively on hostility on the internet, others equate hate speech with the verbal expression of a speaker’s vitriolic emotions, and still others treat “hate speech” as synonymous with legal terms such as “incitement of the masses”.

‘In addition, there’s a lively scholarly debate about how hate speech and harm are related. Empirical studies suggest that there is a direct or indirect causal link between certain kinds of speech and harm. On the other hand, leading scholars in feminist philosophy of language have long pointed out that, arguably, there is a constitutive relationship between speech and harm as well. According to this constitutive view, certain speech acts in themselves are harmful acts of silencing, subordination, or oppression.’

My take on all this is to go to the idea of flourishing and to connect it with essential values, such as rationality and freedom and adding to them catalysts such as religion, ideas and culture. The decline of rationality will be limiting to freedom and the decline of religion, ideas and culture will threaten the cohesion of society. There is also the question of motivation in the social sphere that comes from emotional participation and the sense of belonging. There is a nostalgia for an established harmony, but there is also the need for a critique, otherwise society will become stagnant. But critique should be done with responsibility or it will lead to more fragmentation and fear. The aim will be to restore harmony at a higher level. Failure to achieve that will produce more fragmentation and fear. It is in a climate of fear that vice and hate tend to establish their roots. Philosophy should do its best to undermine such roots of evil. So we could ask: how might philosophy contribute to the reduction of fear? There’s another important discussion!

The Editor

Atman And Brahman In Indian Philosophy

The *Upanishads* are philosophical texts written in the Indian subcontinent mainly between the eighth to sixth century BC. They are often considered as texts having a religious connotation. The *Upanishads* state that the ultimate liberation from the human lifecycle is freedom or *mokṣa*. One can achieve this state by realising the ultimate truth that we are all part of a supreme being known as *Brahman* or universal consciousness.

Although there is more attention paid to philosophy outside Europe, there is still a lot to be understood and learnt from non-European philosophy.

The ideas in this article influenced many European philosophers. One philosopher who built his philosophy around the 'Veil of Maya' was Schopenhauer. The veil is an illusion under which we feel that we are separate individuals. But under this illusion of individuality there is a unity that includes all of us and nature. Nietzsche built his book *The Birth of Tragedy* around this idea. In a world of increasing fragmentation and concentration on the ego, there might be a lesson to be learned from Indian philosophy. The article below explains the main terms in the debate and discusses some of the problems it raises.

RANJINI GHOSH

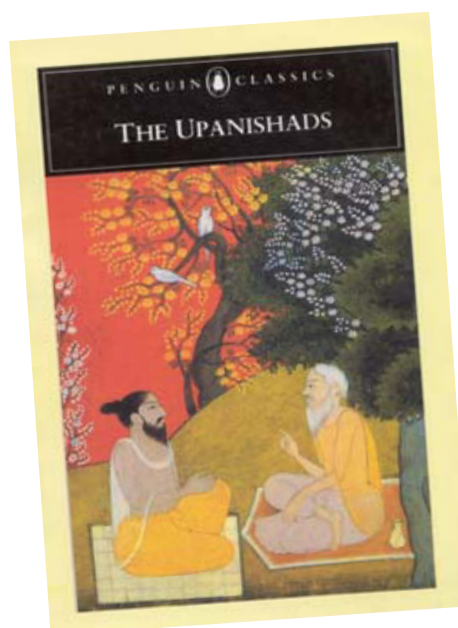
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The basic metaphysical claim of the *Upanishads* is that *ātman* is *Brahman*. It says that at the core of every individual there is a self; this self is different from the mind or the body. This 'self' is our essence known as '*ātman*'. *Brahman* is the one underlying substance of the universe, the unchanging 'Absolute Being', the intangible essence of the entire existence. It is the undying and unchanging seed that creates and sustains everything. The *Upanishads* say that the fact that we are all different is an illusion; deep underneath our essence is the same. When we realise this truth that each of us is actually an *ātman*, we come closer to realising that we are thus a part of the pure consciousness i.e. *Brahman*.

The Drop and the Ocean

Kupperman in his book *Classical Asian Philosophy*, states that *ātman* is like a drop of water and *Brahman* is the ocean. This is

not to say that several *ātman*s make up one *Brahman*, but just to say that they are one and the same thing contained in a sphere with no



The Upanishads



The Hindu God Brahma

boundaries. To further discuss the analogy of the drop and the ocean, one can easily argue that one drop is not the ocean. In which case the question arises, what exactly is the ocean? It can be said that the ocean is many drops put together. Hence one can assume that the ocean is in the drop, i.e. the drop has the potential to be the ocean. In the same manner the plant is within the seed although we cannot see it when we see a seed with the naked eye. Thus, it can be said that the *Brahman* or higher truth is within the *ātman* or lower truth. This can also be explained by an analogy of ice and water. Though they may be in different forms they are identical to each other.

There are further complications when one realizes that the *ātman* is permanent but this seems to be contradicted by the fact that everyone has a unique individual personality. However, the *Upaniṣhads* make it clear that these features of an individual are merely a part of Superficial Reality, and once these layers are peeled off, what lies at the core

is the *ātman*. While these layers might be different and may change over time, they are simply unreal. They disguise the Ultimate reality, and what lies beneath everything is *Brahman*, and is numerically identical although it may not be qualitatively identical. What it is essentially saying is that beneath our individual personalities which have transient features lies an unchanging essential entity. This entity is the *Brahman*. If this were taken to be true then it can be said that one does not become Brahman rather one has always been *Brahman*: what in Sanskrit has been termed as “*tāt tvam āsi*” or Thou Art That (thou refers to *ātman* and that refers to *Brahman*).

To put things simply, what we mean when we speak of *ātman* is that it refers to the soul. When we die it's the body that dies, the soul remains immortal. One can say that *ātman* is the ultimate superficial reality and *Brahman* is the ultimate higher reality. But in such a case we cannot have two ‘ultimate(s)’, so we can say that *ātman* is *Brahman* in purely

mathematical terms. But the question now arises whether we become *Brahman* or have we always been *Brahman*?

The Veil of Maya

The *Upanishads* say that upon realisation that all the world is an illusion (*maya*), the higher truth becomes clearer to us. The native realises that everything around him is just a falsity. Illusion does not mean that the world around us is unreal or that it is a mere imagination, that is what a delusion is. The word illusion here means that it is just a superficial reality. When the individual attains enlightenment, he understands that it is just *maya*. He has ignorance or *avidya* which makes him think that everything around him is real and that he is separate from everyone else and from the higher consciousness. Enlightenment here happens through extreme conditioning of the mind, through *yoga*. The individual has to give up desires as that creates frustration and concentrate on his own being. Through continued meditation and training of the mind he comes in contact with his innermost self. He understands that the real truth is within him, the *ātman* is within him. When he realises this, he now knows that he is a part of the larger pure consciousness, the *Brahman*. This would then imply that we have always been *Brahman*, it is only a matter of realisation of the transient nature of the world around us.

In Indian philosophy, two well known schools of thought have apparently differing conceptions of the nature of pure consciousness. The *Sāṅkhya* school of Indian philosophy is one of the oldest systems of thought in the Indian cultural tradition. It is an account of the evolution of the universe and also of the evolution of the mind-body complex. This school posits a radical division between pure consciousness and the mind-body complex. Ordinary consciousness is a part of the mind-body complex while pure consciousness is different from the intellect, mind etc. which are considered as parts of the

mind-body complex. The ultimate goal of the *Sāṅkhya* philosophy is the realisation of the self as being different from the mind-body complex that it usually identifies itself with.

In this system of thought there is a clear division between pure consciousness on one side and all that is an object of this consciousness on the other side, which is the complete mind-body complex (Daya, *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective*). The object side includes the mind, the intellect and the sense of ego or the 'I-ness'. The pure consciousness has been called *purusa* and the object side is known as *prakriti*. Ordinary consciousness is known as *chit* and is to be distinguished from the pure consciousness or *purusa*. The *Sāṅkhya* school of thought underlines the basic insight that pure consciousness can never be identical to what appears to it as an object. Such a categorical dichotomy between pure consciousness and its objects has not been attempted in any philosophy in the world.

We normally identify ourselves with our body, mind and intellect but all these are only objects to pure consciousness. It is the sense of ego which gives rise to feelings of possession and desire and therefore unhappiness. The aim is to dis-identify oneself with one's bodily desires and attain pure consciousness which can only lead to freedom from bondage i.e. the ultimate soteriological goal of Indian philosophy. At the level of our ordinary perceptions and sensations we are continuously identifying ourselves with our *prakriti* side, but our pure consciousness is merely witness to all our sense perceptions and consequent feelings of pleasure and pain. The foundational confusion which is the root cause of all misery lies in the identification of pure consciousness with all that is different from it. When the subject realises that it is not the object at any level, it is released from all error and suffering and attains liberation or *moksha*. The remedy therefore is to de-identify pure consciousness with all that are merely objects to it. This can



Brahman



Hindu Goddess

be achieved through training the mind which paves the way for pure consciousness to realise its true nature. This transcendental praxis has been called *yoga*.

The School of *Advaita*

The school of *Advaita* philosophy or non-dualism however, takes a completely contrary view of the nature of the self and universal consciousness. It says that the fundamental ignorance is a lack of identification of the self or *ātman* with the *Brahman* or the all-pervading universal consciousness. For the *Sāṅkhya* system, the ultimate reality consists of two absolutely disparate entities which for *Advaita Vedānta* are absolutely identical and there can be no difference whatsoever. The assertion of an ultimate difference is the central contention of *Sāṅkhya* while the absolute denial of all ultimate difference is at the core of *Advaita*. In the *Sāṅkhya* system the *purusa* (self or subject of all experience) and *prakṛiti* (nature or the object of all experience) are the two distinct realities and their identification at any level will lead to a basic ignorance or *adhyasa*. But if a complete identity between the self and

nature or between the subject and the object is the ultimate truth, then any assertion of difference between them leads to foundational ignorance or *adhyasa*. The latter is the view of *Advaita*. The *adhyasa* of *Advaita Vedānta* can be formulated as ‘I am not this’ where ‘I’ refers to the self (*ātman*) and ‘this’ refers to nature, object or *Brahman*. The distinctive contention of this school of thought is complete identity of the subject and the object or that of the *ātman* and *Brahman*. This philosophy states that once the veil of ignorance or *maya* is lifted then the self (*ātman*) realises that it is nothing but identical to the higher consciousness or the *Brahman*, which alone is real.

Conclusion

The central concern of Indian philosophy has been the goal of freedom from the cycle of birth, death and misery. In pursuit of this end it has been the endeavour of various schools of thought to stress the realisation of the true self or pure consciousness and its identity with the consciousness pervading the universe and all individual selves. The *Brahman* is the telos of the self or *ātman*.

Virtues and Vices in a Multi-Cultural Society

Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 22nd of January 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

Having discussed Intellectual Vices last week, we moved on to Civic Vices and Virtues. Rahim Hassan introduced this topic, saying that an overall aim for society should be the flourishing of all the individuals in it. Aristotle thought you could not separate the well-being of the individual from the well-being of the community and state. The values of rationality and freedom should be promoted, and religion (or an ideology) and a healthy culture were also needed. A sense of belonging was important and also harmony in society.

Recently, Nottingham University circulated the following questions as a basis for a workshop in March:

- What existing traits or characteristics of citizens count as civic vices?
- How stable or fragile are these traits?
- Are there different civic vices for citizens and for political actors - like politicians, civil servants, and others directly involved in the operation of the state?
- What is their significance for the design of political institutions or procedures?
- To what extent are civic vices ethical, or epistemic, or distinctively political?
- Are there ways of designing political institutions or procedures to make them less vulnerable to being undermined by civic vices?
- Can political systems and structures be appraised according to their tendency to fuel or promote certain vices?

These and other questions were looked at during our debate.

One of our members raised the question: Can

you have a private vice that is a public virtue? He gave the example of gambling. This is probably harmless for the individual if you bet a small amount of money every week on a horse say. But the government gains a large amount of money from the taxes on gambling. Those who do not gamble gain from the taxes raised from those who do gamble, and some of these have a serious harmful addiction to gambling. Is prostitution a virtue or a vice? These issues are complex, and generally we muddle on until the harm done to people is considered to be too great and action has to be taken in terms of enforcing new laws. Governments should in some sense be paternalistic! One view was that philosophy was not much help with such complex issues, you have to take a pragmatic view. But philosophers such as Aristotle and John Rawls do provide a framework in which societal values can be examined, and these issues are important and should be discussed.

Cultural and family activities should bind us together, and some conformity in behaviour is necessary for any society to function. People need to obey rules, whether these are explicit laws or generally accepted customs. We also need to have trust in others and hope for the future.

We moved on to discuss minorities in society, for example immigrant communities. Would we expect 'hybridization', with the new foreign cultures tolerating and mixing with the existing national culture, and vice-versa. Traditional cultures may be intolerant of what they regard as strange new practices of another culture in their midst. Mixed-race families can have particular problems coping with two cultures. America is a melting-pot of many cultures, with some diversity between states,



Cecil Rhodes statue at
Oriel College, Oxford



Demonstration
against Rhodes statue

while Canada perhaps has more of a general cultural mix. We can find ‘the other’ living in our midst strange, mysterious and frightening. Alternatively, may be we can ‘hybridize’!

Traditions and common ways of doing things must exist in a society but some citizens are unhappy with the status quo and want to experiment and innovate. Things have to change over time, and they do! We need innovators to light the path ahead.

We moved on to discuss hate speech. On-line abuse is growing, with extreme and derogatory messages increasing. Logical argument seems to be decreasing. Moderators of on-line groups have a difficult task in determining whether certain messages should be disallowed – what are the rules for this? It is difficult to make

up precise rules or accurate definitions, they are often vague. They have to be developed. Philosophy can help to justify the rules and make the definitions more precise. We look for consistency in applying the rules and precedents can also help. On-line abuse can do great psychological harm, especially to the young. It does damage people. In universities a culture is growing where some opinions are just not allowed, ‘group-think’ operates and you must follow the ‘agreed’ opinions or be ostracized. Examples are the Cecil Rhodes statue in Oxford must come down, the colonialism he represents is too awful. Or ‘you must be a vegan, it is healthier for you than meat and you will save the planet’. ‘Agreeing to disagree’ is somehow becoming more difficult, the discourse is too polemical and personal.

Old Navajo Games

Spider Woman taught string games
to keep thoughts in order, yet
only in winter, when spiders sleep,
or else will she tie your eyes shut.
You will learn about the night sky,
concentrate on star clusters, find planets
in your weaving patterns:
the earth is my mother, the sky my father.
Star pinching, the pattern to follow:
Female Arrowhead,
Big Snake, Lightning, Cloud. Weave in
the sacred four colours: white for dawn,
blue for the day, yellow for twilight,
black for the night.
Weave on child, weave the universe in motion!
Play your string games, your sand games
in perpetual regeneration.

Breathe child, breathe
the sacred act of breathing! The Holy Wind
is in all the living, nothing exists in isolation.
It is what you long for, the good and the evil,
the natural and supernatural in balance, connectivity
to all living things. Follow the stars' constellations,
Scorpio, Cassiopeia, The Pleiades, Aldebaran,
Canis Major, Ursa Major, Sword of Orion
they all touch your body, each one its part assigned,
filling the space of your transitory nature.

Learn them, chant them, weave them
into your memory!
They will remind you how to live your life,
not the emotionally overtaxing, the highly pressured,
materially oriented, the spiritually depleted.
Seek your escape
from the fast paced, media blitzed world!
Walk in beauty, not the outward appearance,
but order, blessedness, pleasantness
everything that lifts you.
Reach an old age by living
in harmony with the universe.



Breathe, child, breathe
the holy act of breathing! On breathing,
the powerful wind will enter.
Fingerprints and toe prints are its signals.
The whorls at the tips of your toes
hold you to the earth,
those on your fingertips
hold you to the sky.
This wind carries thought at conception.
When it ceases to blow inside you,
you become speechless.
Draw your string figures, child,
move and complete them
until Spider Woman will help to dissolve all.

Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Walking the Talk



CHRIS NORRIS

The larval sea squirt knew when it was hungry and how to move about, and it could tell up from down. But, when it fused on to a rock to start its new vegetative existence, it consumed its redundant eye, brain and spinal cord. Certain species of jellyfish, conversely, start out as brainless polyps on rocks, only developing complicated nerves that might be considered semi-brains as they become swimmers.

Amy Fleming, citing Shane O'Mara, 'It's a Superpower: how walking makes us healthier, happier and brainier', *The Guardian*, July 28th, 2019

I walk, therefore I am; I walk and think.
It's ambulation spurs the mind to thought.
Descartes got half-way there, but missed the link;
'I think, therefore I am': the proof falls short,
Seems strong enough, but fails to show they sync,
The 'I' that's object of that self-report
And subject 'I' who switches, in a blink,
To play judge-advocate in reason's court,
Assert 'I am', and hide the tell-tale chink
In psyche's armour. Message: don't resort
To mind as your last refuge on the brink
Of all-out scepticism if it's bought
At body's cost. For mind itself will shrink
As active locomotion drops to naught,
As cogito retreats, as neurons wink
And die, as software programmes self-abort,
And one last system-wide, mind-blowing kink
Delivers body's ultimate retort.


The humble sea-squirt's born with tiny brain
And, though invertebrate, with spinal cord
Plus basic nervous system. These remain
No longer than its urge to roam abroad,
Swim round a bit, and by those actions gain
Some new expansion-slot for its onboard
Computer. Yet the neurons grow in vain
Since, soon enough, the creature drifts toward
Some handy rock, makes that its home domain,
Clings limpet-like and then, if tides afford
No passing plankton, bucks the seafood-chain
By dumping any IQ-points it scored,
Re-running Darwin's tale against the grain,
And making brain and spine a smorgasbord
For its own sustenance. The lesson's plain
For you Cartesians: what you've ignored,
Perversely, is the desk-bound thinker's bane,
The sovereign intellect as two-edged sword.



Poetry

Your jellyfish presents a striking case
To contrary effect since it's no more,
To start with, than a see-through waste of space,
A brainless, sightless, nerveless metaphor
For every undead thing that bears no trace
Of innervation, or the buzzing store
Of species-knowledge that accrues apace
In living creatures. Yet, till washed ashore
To die, it somehow swims from place to place,
Seeks out new shoals and sea-beds to explore,
And so acquires in a short time, by grace
Of such activity, that which before
It neither had nor needed. Go off-base,
Some instinct says, get bearings, pop next-door
And find, if briefly, how the interface
Of world and creature brings a new *rapport*
As neurons learn, through movement, to embrace
A sense of unknown possibles in store.



A sepia-toned portrait of René Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, high-collared garment with a lace-up front. He has long, wavy hair and a slight mustache. His right hand is raised, with his index finger pointing towards the viewer.

Descartes

We walk together talking, you and I,
Our steps and talk in unforced synchrony
As landmarks, scenes and episodes pass by
At their own pace. Already we foresee
A time to come when memories multiply
And intertwine so we've some headroom free
For what remains to us of earth, sea, sky
Or recollected words that hold the key
To mindscapes further back. Same points apply
To us as to the whole menagerie,
The big land-lubbers and the smaller fry
Right down to those rock-polyps. Think how we
Co-ambulated till (it seems to my
Re-wakened sense of things) the you-and-me
Of lives apart was soon left high and dry,
Like a beached jellyfish, while we'd a sea
Of creaturely potential yet to try
As neurons mapped excursions yet to be.

A sepia-toned portrait of Charles Darwin, an English naturalist, geologist and biologist. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark, high-collared garment. He has a full, white beard and mustache, and his hair is white. He is looking slightly to the right of the viewer.

Darwin

Language and the Non-Conceptual

The editor received two comments on his editorials from Ruud Schuurman. They make interesting points and we print the (un-edited) e-mails here with his permission:

Comment on the Editorial in issue 131

‘Dear Rahim,

Thanks, as usual. Interesting editorial. But I do not think that the non-conceptual is beyond language. Let me explain.

What is non-conceptual is just that: not conceptual, i.e., no natural properties and categorical predicates can be truly predicated of it. It has no features, no characteristics. This means that we cannot say anything *about* it. But we can use language to, e.g.:

- Identify the non-conceptual (because identity does not require predicates – two predicateless notions are necessary identical because neither has a predicate that the other lacks) by means of synonyms (or referential equivalents) like being, consciousness, and God; supernatural, trans-categorical, trans-conceptual, and extraordinary; spirit, soul, atman, the unborn, deathless, unconditioned, etc.

- Point out what it is not: That it is not conceptual, not categorical, not natural, not ordinary, not physical or mental, not what is not but appears to be, etc.

Mystics, on my view, are people who deal with that which is non-conceptual, and with the difference between all that is conceptual and that which is not conceptual.

If mystics talk in contradictions (“paradoxes”) it is either because they are charlatans or because they have not found the words to express it:

- 9 out of 10 times, the insight comes

spontaneously (in times of extreme suffering, when one is forced to commit suicide or give up the ego, and they choose the latter).

- Of the remaining cases, 9 out of 10 times the insight comes as the result of:

- religious devotion (where one surrenders or sacrifices the ego / will to the divine) or
- meditation (where one directly sees (*vi-passana*) that subject is not any object).

Only very few come to the insight as the result of a rational search.

Mystics who have attained insight by non-rational means may lack the words to describe their insight. They often may not even know what happened, just that the suffering is gone. Subsequently, they end up making paradoxical (i.e., contradictory) statements, use poetry (where contradictions are seen as puzzles for higher understanding), analogies (none of which is perfect), art, and so on.

This is the very vacuum I am trying to fill: Develop a rational account of the non-conceptual, being qua being (and, *en passant*, get philosophy back on track, because I think it was and is supposed to be a rational path of mysticism).

By the way, of course the non-conceptual cannot be conceived (by definition, as non-conceptual means inconceivable), or imagined, or appear in a vision (however subtle), because it is not “out there” but “in here”, not any object but subject, not anything that appears to be but being, and so on.

For what it may be worth,

Ruud



Comment

On the Editorial of Issue 130

‘Again, a beautiful editorial Rahim! Indeed, all approaches (the rational (i.e., conceptual), but also the mystical (i.e., non-conceptual), the psychological (i.e., subjective), and so on) ultimately yield the same fruit: that which “cannot be expressed but only shown” (i.e., that which is not conceptual (i.e., “inconceivable”), has no attributes, cannot be analyzed into parts), provided one digs deep enough... Many of the greatest philosophers are polymaths (including “mystics”), who came at it from all (conceptual) angles, saw that there is no escape (no grounding), and were thus forced to face reality (i.e., the non-conceptual).

Russell’s “cleverness” repeatedly ran into contradiction. But then he quickly turned around, revised his approach, and tried again (to prove realism), instead of pausing in the face of the contradiction, going through it (so to speak), to uncover what it points at. I guess it is because he was married to realism: the view that, because things appear, they must also exist in some other way than as an appearance. That’s the central fallacy in all of life, including philosophy. I call it the Grand Reification. Even Russell’s neutral monism (the assumption that there is some neutral stuff out there) was but an ultimate attempt to keep realism alive. It is a shame that such conceptual cleverness (e.g., Russell’s, Kant’s, Aristotle’s) seems to block them from realizing the non-conceptual mystery.

Thanks!

Ruud

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Bag Of Doubt



Box of black leather – stood still looks substantial
Pulled towards the hearing, its tiny wheels
niggle - over pavement cracks.
Without a spring it jerks and jars hesitation
But I believe there is a case to answer -
so I tug on.

Inside - evidence tagged and bundled.
An order of facts - paginated truth – hours to
formulate sufficient reason,
then copied and stacked.
But is there substance to what is inside
I believe - So I unpack

Out of the black gulp testimony is lifted.
Arguments shared Points picked-on, references submitted,
assertions torn apart with vocal jabs until
all that remains is a wobble of opinion.
My bag now an empty vessel,
rumbles the journey home.

David Burridge