

# The *Wednesday*

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



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## Editorial

### *What is Philosophy?*

The Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) in Ireland will be holding its eighth conference in May. The subject of the conference is in the form of: ‘What is philosophy?’ Last year Warwick University held another conference on the same question. Both conferences raise further interesting questions that aim to clarify the nature of philosophy, its methods, aims and roles in society. Here is what how SWIP put it:

‘What is philosophy? What qualifies one as a philosopher? What counts as doing philosophy? Who decides what philosophy is? Who polices its boundaries? Have perceptions of philosophy changed in recent years? What is its proper or intended audience? Is it merely a theoretical consideration of practice, distinct from practice, or is it very much science itself? And what are philosophy’s blind-spots?’

‘In times of political, social, cultural, environmental, and existential uncertainty, it is important to reflect on philosophy’s role in helping us to address the challenges we face. In so doing, it is equally important to reflect on its legacies, its genesis and its ‘underside’. There is a clear need for the analytic tools and the critical and creative thought philosophy cultivates. But questions about how philosophy can contribute to current debates in politics, arts, science, the environment, and education, and how might it be understood as part of the ‘public humanities’ broadly construed remain unanswered.’

The *Warwick Continental Philosophy Conference* (WCPC) was concerned with academic philosophy and ways and strategies for breaking through the rigid and abstract way of doing philosophy at the academic level and to connect with and impact society in general. The problem the conference highlighted was summarised as follows:

‘Today it seems that the idea and practice of philosophy is as controversial as ever – for philosophers and non-philosophers alike. The questions have however

been rephrased: What is the place of philosophy in an increasingly specialised academia? How does society perceive philosophy and how can philosophy itself impact society? Has philosophy progressed, or simply adapted to the political and social world in which it is found? Is a single foundation possible, or must we always “begin again”, seeking new philosophical tools in pursuit of the problems we encounter?’

Both conferences seek to problematise philosophy and to contextualise it within knowledge in general in both science and the humanities. They also aim to enlarge the scope of the debate historically and geographically in order to see other traditions and other ways of doing philosophy. But more than that, they both question the identity of philosophy. The (WCPC) asked: ‘Who is the philosopher? Who are the female philosophers to be rediscovered in the history of philosophy? Who are those excluded from philosophy? Is philosophy a ‘luxury’? How do non-philosophers think of philosophers and vice-versa? Is there a single language and style of philosophy?’

All theses and other detailed questions asked by both conferences are worth separate treatments in other editorials. We also encourage our readers to think about and discuss them through the magazine or our website

([www.thewednesdayoxford.com](http://www.thewednesdayoxford.com)). But one thing worth mentioning here is that although the questions raised appear to indicate a sense of crisis in philosophy now, they are asked from a position of strength and the confidence that philosophy is an important discipline that should be given a larger role to play in society. They also aim to make philosophy more inclusive of ethnicity and gender and to go beyond geographical and historical limitations, religions and cultures. This is the line we have always promoted in and through *The Wednesday* and we are pleased that such a need has been finally recognised and subjected to serious study.

*The Editor*

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# A Being Theory of Mind

**Consciousness is at the centre of the philosophy of mind. How do we make sense of it? There are many theories of consciousness. One theory makes the distinction between phenomenal consciousness and accessible consciousness. Others propose an eliminative theory of the mind. However, in this case we seem to lose the subject of the experience of consciousness. The article below argues that we need to re-instate the subject, we need a being theory of mind.**

PETER STIBRANY

**K**ant famously said that we could never know anything directly; never know things-in-themselves. We only know what our mind presents, as received and arranged by our senses and by how our minds work. He expanded this idea to include our internal understanding of ourselves, as explained in this entry from the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (SEP).

‘The objects we intuit in space and time are appearances, not objects that exist independently of our intuition (things in themselves). This is also true of the mental states we intuit in introspection; in “inner sense” (introspective awareness of my inner states) I intuit only how I appear to myself, not how I am ‘in myself’. SEP, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*,

A world of consequences emerges from Kant’s idea, but what I’d like to isolate is the way it appears to distinguish the thought from the thinker. By doing so, Kant affirms the mind-body problem. According to this entry in the *Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind*

‘Kant offered a strong critique of rational psychology and took a broadly sceptical attitude towards knowledge of the soul and the mind/body relation.’ In other words, Kant doubted he could get to a complete theory of mind. I believe there’s a good reason for that.

Separating the thinker from the thought makes the thinker invisible to investigation; it invites the thinker to disappear. Neuroscience has shown the physical traces of thought to exist in the empirical world, tightly connected to the electrochemistry of the brain. But it’s hard to see how neuroscience

could find a thinker; if the thinker is not the thought, then what is it?

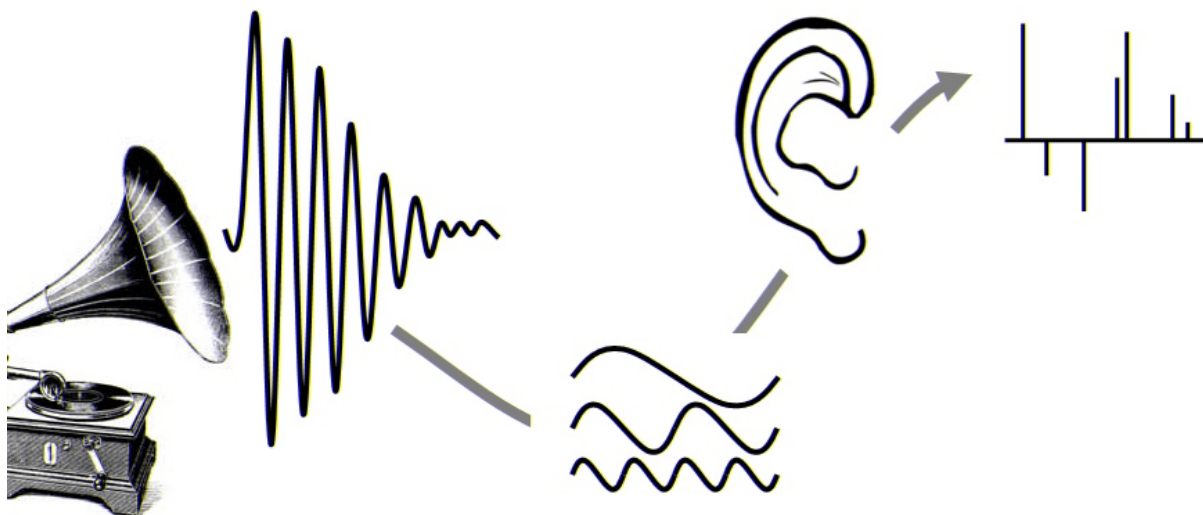
I’d like to pursue the idea that however dissociated and distorted we consider our inner and outer perceptions, the thinker is not nothing. I argue that a theory of mind should address the question, to borrow some language from Hegel: how is our *being* determined?

## Perception

To illuminate the difficulty of the question, let’s follow what scientists have discovered happens when a signal comes from the outside world into our heads.

Take, for example, sound. Sound, that is to say, the vibration of a compressible medium comes through the ear to a structure that converts mechanical vibrations into electrochemical signals. These signals don’t mirror the incoming waves, however. Instead of following the amplitude of the incoming signal, the ear uses a set of matched filters to create for the brain a Fourier Transform of the incoming signal, showing the strength of the incoming sound as a function of frequency. This separation of frequencies is maintained as a ‘tonotopic map,’ that is to say, neighbouring cells in the auditory cortex respond to neighbouring frequencies. These signals then appear in multiple centres in the brain, where different features are extracted.

At some point, we become able to report being aware of the sound, of perceiving it subjectively. And, neuroscientists have established a foundation for the subjective perception of sound. Here’s an excerpt from *Wikipedia’s* entry on the auditory



Fourier Transform example

cortex: ‘The auditory cortex has distinct responses to sounds in the gamma band ... It has been theorized that gamma frequencies are resonant frequencies of certain areas of the brain, and appear to affect the visual cortex as well. **Gamma band activation (25 to 100 Hz) has been shown to be present during the perception of sensory events and the process of recognition**’. [Emphasis added]

I’d like at this point to pause and point to the enormous difference between a set of signals measurable and quantifiable as neuronal activity on the one hand, and the subjective experience of listening to music, or *phenomenal consciousness*, on the other. The signals track closely to the thoughts associated with sound. But where is the thinker?

### Consciousness Without Awareness?

Ned Block, a philosopher in the theory of perception and cognition, made, in the words of his *Wikipedia* entry: ‘a distinction between *phenomenal consciousness* and *access consciousness*.’ *Phenomenal consciousness* consists of subjective experience and feelings, and *access consciousness* consists of that information globally available in the cognitive system for reasoning, speech and high-level action control. Block argues that *access consciousness* and *phenomenal consciousness* might not always coincide in human beings.

The SEP entry on this topic says: ‘When one reports on one’s conscious state, one accesses the state. Thus, access consciousness provides much of the evidence for empirical theories of consciousness. Still, it seems plausible that a state can be conscious even if one does not access it in report so long as

that state is *accessible*. One *can* report it. Access-consciousness is usually defined in terms of this dispositional notion of accessibility.’

When the subject’s brain is damaged, phenomenal states exist that could otherwise be accessible, but they are not because damage prevents this access from taking place. This means that some portion of phenomenal consciousness may not be accessible to any observer. The way I like to think about inaccessible consciousness is to ponder the following question: What would it be like to have a phenomenal experience that did not persist in your mind at all, not even for a fraction of a second? By definition, you can’t think about anything without



Fourier

## Subjective experience of listening



remembering it long enough to think about it. So, if it does not persist in your mind, the phenomenal experience is not available. Memory is not the only ingredient, but it is a critical ingredient in making experiences accessible.

An experience happening inside the brain but outside of the awareness of a reporting subject raises at least two deep questions:

1. What constitutes the transition from an inert (non-conscious) brain state to a phenomenally conscious brain state? This, I believe, is a restatement of David Chalmers's *hard problem* of consciousness.
2. Who or what is having this unreported phenomenal experience? It's certainly not the being doing the reporting. Does that mean there are two thinkers inside one brain? And if more than one thinker can be there, how many more?

## Dissolving the Hard Problem

The default position of scientists, I believe, is that the more we look into the workings of the brain, the less we will need the idea of subjective or phenomenal experience as an explanatory component of the system. In this way of thinking, the answer to the question of when the transition to phenomenal consciousness takes place is going to be 'that's not a question that makes sense.'

The elimination of this question is how I interpret the position of philosophers such as Daniel Dennett and Patricia and Paul Churchland. Our phenomenal experiences may be whatever they are, but we don't need them to understand what happens in the brain. We will be able to understand thoughts but ignore the idea of a thinker.

This position echoes that of the mathematician and scholar Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749 – 1827) on the need for God to regulate the motions of the planets: *Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là*. ('I had no need of that hypothesis.')

By this argument, neuroscientists will, at some point, identify how brain states transition to become reportably conscious. They will pinpoint how in the brain this consciousness happens, and show what electrochemical events are associated with it.

Now, such a discovery should create an enormous challenge to physics and chemistry. If neuroscientists isolate consciousness to a specific, repeatable physical configuration of chemistry and electromagnetism, how would those sciences go about incorporating this fact of consciousness into their equations and models?

But this seems to me a misreading of what counts as an explanation in science. Science demands a functional description of what consciousness does. So, if everything that happens in the brain can be explained by neurochemistry, then consciousness is a redundant concept. However persistent the illusion to us, the idea that we are a being can be eliminated from the explanatory framework.

By this reading of the situation, the *hard problem* is not a problem because there is nothing left to explain. Its formulation does not make sense. Consciousness becomes then, at best, a different vocabulary for describing what's going on in the brain.

The only way consciousness can avoid reduction and elimination is if it *does* something not ascribable to neurochemistry alone. In this case, it cannot be eliminated, and we can posit it as a new fundamental element of nature - let's call it *being*. I'm tempted to





**Ned Block**

restate this idea more controversially, and say that consciousness is fundamental only if it acts outside of causality; only if there exists free will.

[Note that acting outside of causality does not necessarily mean it violates the laws of physics, because these laws only characterise what is likely to happen, rather than what will certainly happen. But causal closure is a topic all of its own that we can pursue at another time.]

Of course, this does not mean we can know, in a scientific sense, what *being* is. After all, we don't know what *any* of our fundamental particles and forces *are*. We know them only by what they *do*.

This thought that what's important is what a thing does, rather than what it is, strikes me as analogous to what Chris Seddon said about language in a recent Wednesday Group talk: '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.'

What makes *being* unique, among everything else science considers fundamental, is that we manifest *being*, we *are* something. And, to quote Count Korzybski, 'the map is not the territory.'

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein famously said: 'That whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.' So, per Wittgenstein's warning, there may be dragons at the edge of the map. But perhaps the territory itself is more accessible than we fear.

I think there are useful questions related



**John Searle**

to *being* that it is still useful to ponder. For example, if one configuration of electrochemistry in the brain yields reportable consciousness, what do other arrangements of electrochemistry yield? Where does *being* stop?

### **Unreported Being**

Ned Block's idea of *phenomenal consciousness* as independent from *access consciousness* seems revolutionary to me. It posits that a subjective experience can exist independently of being accessible to the verbal subject, the 'I' interacting with the outside world.

This idea is entirely opposed to Daniel Dennett's view, which is that only what we access (barring physical impediments) can count as consciousness; in fact, reporting is what makes it consciousness.

Now, this would be a valid, logical positivist line to take if it were true that there was by definition no way to verify that phenomenal consciousness existed without access consciousness. Fortunately, this is not the case. It's entirely conceivable that neuroscience will reliably identify the neural correlates of consciousness, and then be able to assess whether this consciousness was taking place somewhere in the brain of a subject even though the subject was unaware of it.

Ned Block reckons there is persuasive evidence of this already, even before reliable neural correlates of consciousness have been identified. That's the burden of his message in, among other places, his article 'On a confusion about a function of consciousness' in *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* (1995) 18, 227-287.

If his idea of phenomenal consciousness is right, it leaves a broad scope for answers to the question



Paul and Patricia Churchland

‘where does being stop?’ For example, it allows a monist answer that being does not stop anywhere, that all subjective experience has the same subject; that, in dualist language, there is only one thinker.

### Being, Things, and Labels

To dig into the foundations of this idea, I’d like to use as an example the law of identity. According to *Wikipedia*, the ‘law of identity states that each thing is identical with itself.’ I also like the version of this credited to Parmenides: ‘What is, *is*.’

Logicians translate the law of identity into the formal proposition that  $A = A$ , without making explicit some serious implications of that translation.

The critical step in this formalisation, for me, is the transformation of *what is* into the symbol (or more simply, label) *A*. If I understand Ned Block’s ideas correctly, the procedure is not unlike transforming phenomenal consciousness into access consciousness. This step changes the statement fundamentally, because you can do things with labels that you cannot do with *things that are*. For example, you can duplicate a label identically. But you cannot replicate a thing identically. Manufactured items, like iPhones, for example, can indeed be close to identical to each other as they are produced in their millions. But they aren’t wholly identical due to minute variations in the manufacturing process. More importantly, they can’t occupy the same point in space at the same time. They couple to the rest of the universe differently. Their contingencies are different.

Labels, however, do not exist in space. You can have as many as you like, all identical in every way. That

means you can make an identical copy of *A* and equate the two copies, giving  $A = A$ .

You can also subtract *A* from itself and get zero. But you can’t delete a thing-in-itself without violating the law of conservation of mass-energy. According to physics, you can transform things, within limits, but you can’t get rid of anything. This links with Parmenides’s full thought about being: ‘What is, *is*; what is not, *is not*.’ Physically, you can’t have *nothing*.

[I’m using relatively loose terminology. Parmenides’s *being* is monist. You can’t split *being* up and disappear some of it. In real life, our cognitive faculties select parts of *what is* and label them as separate things. If we perceive these things transform enough to violate the definition of the label we’ve put on them, we say the things are now either changed or gone.

I’ll continue to refer to things as though they were separate, but really, we should think of them all as *being*. The question of how we come to perceive many different things in a monist universe is a separate topic.]

More interestingly, you can equate by definition a label with a different label, setting  $A = B$  for example. This ability of labels to be the same as different labels makes all of mathematics possible. However, this equality is impossible with things, because nothing can be something other than itself.

You can add  $1 + 1$  and get two, for example. That’s because the one’s are identical. But what do you get when you put an apple and a banana on a table?



David Chalmers



Daniel Dennett

You get an apple and a banana on a table. If you replace the physical fruit with the label ‘fruit’ in each case, then you have two identical labels, and you can say you have two fruits. But physically, in terms of things, you have an apple and a banana. The purpose of focusing on the differences between labels and *being* is that we all routinely fall into believing labels are a good way to talk about *being*. For example, here is an excerpt from the SEP entry on existence monism:

*To properly characterize existence monism, one should first introduce a predicate ‘C’ that denotes the property of being a concrete object. (The notion of being a concrete object is natural and useful, so this should be clear enough to work with.) Then one can introduce the formula:*

*Existence monism:  $\exists x ( Cx \ \& \ \forall y ( Cy \rightarrow x = y ) )$*

There is no way to understand the monism of Parmenides from this statement. It misleads at every step.

## Intentionality

These observations about things-in-themselves and their labels connects to a theory of mind through the idea of *intentionality*.

When a thing is labelled, an additional piece of information has to be kept somewhere external to the label, namely the relationship the label bears to the thing it is marking. Labels create representation and relationship.

For example, the same mathematical structure can describe multiple physical situations. We always have to keep in mind what all the variables in the

equations stand for. Does  $1 / R^2$  refer to the change in the strength of Earth’s gravitational field with the distance from the centre of the Earth? Or does it relate to the reduction with distance in the strength of a radio-frequency signal?

My thought is that in commonly-held theories of mind, this missing piece of information is called *intentionality*. According to the SEP ‘In philosophy, intentionality is the power of minds and mental states to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs.’ In other words, intentionality is the ability of the mind to contain representations of things outside of itself. And this creates a problem, namely how it is that a lump of matter can be about something other than itself.

Intentionality comes about from the idea of representation, from labels standing for things. It models our mind as a symbolic information-processing machine. It models thought as a set of electrochemical events and processes, as labels and their interactions, and ignores the thinker. It ignores *being*.

The shortcomings of using labels in place of *being* in our theory of mind means we will only achieve a limited understanding of consciousness. Intentionality creates what John Searle has framed as the problem of going ‘from syntax to semantics.’

Things-in-themselves don’t have the problem of intentionality, because they are about themselves. *Being* is about itself.

We need a *being* theory of mind.

# Living Sisyphus's Life

ALAN XUEREB

In Greek mythology Sisyphus was the king of Ephyra (now known as Corinth). He was castigated for his self-aggrandising slyness and treachery by being forced to trundle an immense boulder up a hill only for it to roll down when it nears the peak, repeating this action for eternity. (Sung S. J. (2014). What if the rock of Sisyphus became lighter? *Korean Journal of Orthodontics*, 44(2), 51).

The myth of Sisyphus has become famous, and the subject of many scholarly works, including Camus's philosophical essay on existentialism (*The Myth of Sisyphus*; Penguin Books, 1975). Camus tells us that discovering the absurdity of life is like being aware of ourselves living Sisyphus's life. From this point of view, he suggests two choices. One is to escape the absurdity by committing suicide, and the other is to find the meaning of life through the expenditure of effort, mirroring Sisyphus's sincere labour.

According to Frederick Karl (his 1991 book *Franz Kafka: Representative Man*, p.2, 'The man who struggled to reach the heights only to be thrown down to the depths embodied all of Kafka's aspirations; and he remained himself, alone, solitary.' However, there is hope for the solitary individual. This oil on canvas symbolises the repetitiveness of our routine in life and that the hope of true escape from it is in beauty. The kind of beauty found in art, literature and architecture.



## ‘Sisyphus’

By Alan Xuereb



Oil on canvas (80cm x 80 cm)

## Song of the Water Spirit

Not the raging sea or a turbid heart –

I give you a shimmering river  
where reeds ooze bells of rain,  
their crystals promise light,  
heal your hands carrying years  
of yearning and offerings.

The moon, wrapped in a shroud,  
has her reflections  
shiver with grief, when I plant shadows  
and fill the baskets with silvery fish,  
as the pebbles groan in a vale of tears.

I lend you starlight  
to reach the ocean, build  
a lighthouse from oyster shells  
out of the integrity of water  
to fathom the ebbing and flowing sea.

For death is a strange world,  
that enchants the young  
with its hidden door.  
Bells of the dead are ringing  
vibrate in your blood, drown your dreams –





Listen how the tears rain down  
onto a twilight world.  
I let you sink to the bottom,  
bear the burden with all human beings,  
infuse new life, and open the door for you

to enter night, stars, moon ...

### Truth, Beauty and Writing: two caveats



CHRIS NORRIS

The prudence that restrains us from venturing too far ahead in a sentence is usually only an agent of social control, and so of stupefaction.

Scepticism is called for in face of the frequently raised objection that a text, a formulation, are 'too beautiful'. Respect for the matter expressed, or even for suffering, can easily rationalize mere resentment against a writer unable to bear the traces, in the reified form of language, of the degradation inflicted on humanity . . . . The writer ought not to acknowledge any distinction between beautiful and adequate expression.

T.W. Adorno, 'Memento', in *Minima Moralia*, trans. Jephcott

Two points on which they're perfectly agreed,  
Those bourgeois philistines: that no  
Concern with beauty send  
Their thoughts askew,  
And that each sentence end  
Before the complications go  
Too far for those with little time to read.

Both vetoes say: much better not proceed  
On that too risky path and show  
You're seeking to transcend  
What prose can do,  
Or willing to suspend  
The import till sub-clauses grow  
Beyond the sharpest reader's uptake speed.



Adorno

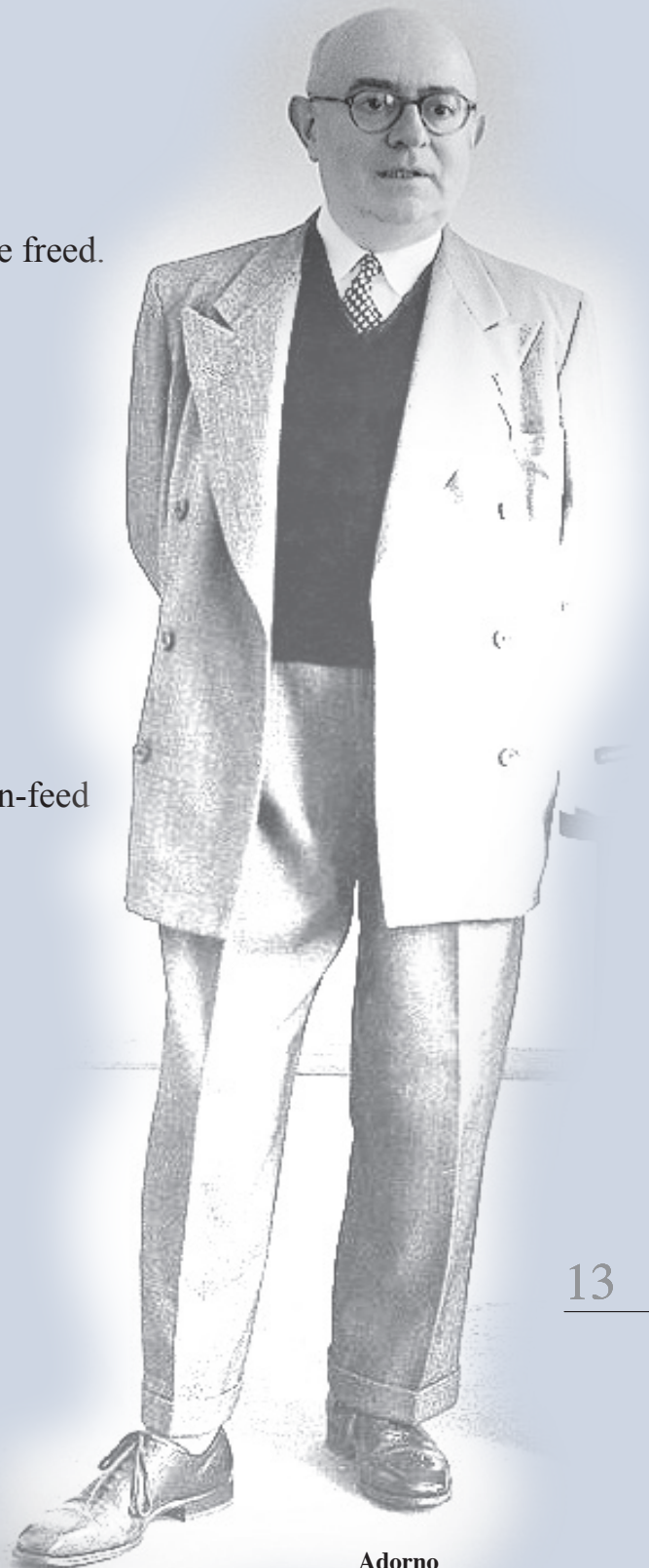


The gist: how such indulgences may lead  
To brain-fatigue, as they best know  
Who'll rally to defend  
The reader who  
Declares himself no friend  
To complex sentences that slow  
Thought down or lyric flights from good sense freed.

It's servile minds and servile lives they breed,  
Those rules that tell us what we owe  
To readers who depend  
On getting through  
Without the call to spend  
Their precious time on texts that throw  
Them way off track, frustration guaranteed.

I've told my Frankfurt colleagues: don't spoon-feed  
Your readers, set the bar too low,  
Or have them comprehend  
No more than you  
Expect should they attend  
Just on-and-off and thus bestow  
Fit honors on your undemanding screed.

Be clear: it's strength and probity you need  
In writing, not the overflow  
Of lyric feelings penned  
In tried and true  
Verse-fashion, nor the blend  
Of formless thought with rococo  
Prose flourishes to aid the case you plead.



**Adorno**

## Poetry

Think back: recall that worst of times when we'd  
A word-drunk, language-mangling foe  
Whose every threat we'd fend  
Off just by due  
Care not to boost the trend  
That made each excess word a blow  
Struck first that meanings, then that flesh should bleed.

Yet don't be fooled: the write-for-dummies creed  
Is the same one that bids us stow  
Our grievances, amend  
Our terms and sue  
For peace rather than bend  
Our wills and syntax like a bow  
Stretched taut to breaking-point in word and deed.



The Frankfurt School

# Causal Closure and the Mind

*Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2019*

**PAUL COCKBURN**

Peter Stibrany gave a talk on causal closure. He started with Paul Feyerabend who wrote that science proceeds irrationally. Rationality does not push scientists into new areas, it is creativity and the imagination that creates new scientific knowledge.

Causal closure is linked to physicalism. It says that there are only physical causes, and mental states are epiphenomenal. The mind is not linked to causality. Dualism allows for both mental and physical states, but it is not clear how they interact. If we study how people behave, we can postulate psychological reasons for their behaviour which are more powerful than physicalist explanations. There can also be aesthetic or emotional causes for our behaviour. In a crude sense lifting a cup of tea to your mouth is a physical event, but there is also a mental motive for having a cup of tea.

In science we can work out the details of an existing paradigm, or we can speculate and invent entirely new theories. To do this we need to be open-minded. It can also be very difficult in a social sense to go against the establishment. Perhaps we need to go against the status quo and strike out on our own. There is also a problem with statistical events. Unusual events can be ignored essentially because they are small in number, but they can have far-reaching consequences. You can be blind to low number effects. Mathematical laws generally apply to the big numbers and predictions, but some systems such as the weather are difficult to predict.

There are sometimes plural narratives, and multiple causes for a particular event. There is also a distinction some make between objects and events. Events link into a narrative theory, while objects are stable.



**Peter Stibrany**

## *The Wednesday*

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