

The *Wednesday*

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

Thoughts for our time

One of the consequences of the Coronavirus epidemic is a re-discovery of the ultimate questions that we have forgotten or ignored for a long time. But the epidemic has been a real reminder of the fragility of life and the need to look again at what life means in the end. It is not surprising that many conferences, journals and study groups have been dedicated to dealing with this. I will mention a few.

My friend and editorial member of *The Wednesday*, Barbara Vellacott, organised in mid-July an online meeting to look at fourteen poems from across the world and history dealing with the essence of life. Questions about life and death are perhaps most properly dealt with in poetry and art. The poems ranged from Milton's 17th century 'Paradise Lost' to Lynn Ungar's 'Pandemic' written a few months ago. These poems record human experiences of life and death, joy and suffering. Life and death hang together as expressed in Rilke's 'Duino Elegies', written over a turbulent decade that spanned the First World War.

What the participants in the day's study said about these poems is that the power of poetry allows us to express our deepest feelings and helps us through this difficult time. Poetry captures what is difficult to express in ordinary conversation. It offers another dimension.

Why are we turning towards poetry and art? *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* is planning to answer this question in a special issue on 'Art and Aesthetics in Pandemic Time'. In its introductory papers it says: 'The contemporary development of technology enables various artistic activities to be undertaken and presented in an attractive form of communication, drawing the attention of a mass audience. Art emerging in this way retains the ability to stimulate and strengthen the experiences and emotions of the audience, affecting its group

sensitivity. It turns out that the relationship between art and contemporary communication techniques and technologies is of great interactive and integrative significance in the social dimension, shaping the culture-forming aspect of "participatory society." It adds that 'The integrative possibilities of art are gaining new, primary importance today, as keys to the survival of local, national, and supranational communities.' It is important to notice that the emphasis here is on the 'participatory society' and not on the detached and oppressive 'society of the spectacle.'

Eidos, the Journal for Philosophy of Culture is inviting philosophy to examine our lives in what it calls 'Philosophy as a Way of Life in a Time of Crises'. It is planning a special issue on this topic, guided by the thought of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot. According to Hadot, the goal of philosophy is to transform its practitioners' lives. He is recalling 'Socrates' question: 'How is it best to live?' The journal also refers to Michel Foucault's 'technologies of the self'.

Eidos raises interesting questions about the role of philosophy in the time of pandemic: What is the role of professional philosophy? Will it offer consolation to individuals and communities? Will it go back to doing philosophy as it had been doing before the crisis or will it change?

I am satisfied that *The Wednesday* magazine and its weekly meetings have adapted well to these changes. We have used Zoom technology to keep the group going and have raised the quality of our debate by inviting speakers from outside Oxford. I am also pleased to say that we recognised a long time ago that philosophy has a wider role to play in the life of individuals and society and cannot be restricted to elitist circles and institutions.

The Editor

The Relations Between Philosophy And Poetry

EDWARD GREENWOOD

The relations between philosophy and poetry are extremely complex. I shall list five categories of relation and proceed to discuss six examples of poetry from the fifth or last of those categories. The first category includes those philosophers whose philosophical vision is an intrinsically poetic one. A metaphysical vision in particular can also be a poetic one. The most striking examples here are Parmenides (circa 490 BC) and Empedocles (450 BC). Parmenides actually set down his vision in hexameters, the poetic form Homer had used in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He is the first philosopher to try to overcome multiplicity and try to grasp everything as a single whole, in short the first monist. He is the ancestor of all the later monistic idealists such as Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Bradley. Like his follower Zeno of the famous paradoxes, he denies the existence of motion and time. His antithesis is Heraclitus (circa 500 BC). Heraclitus does not write in verse, but in prose aphorisms of great literary merit. In both substance and form he anticipates his later admirer and, to some degree, follower, Friedrich Nietzsche. The classical scholar Charles Kahn compared the power of his language to that of the great tragic dramatists Aeschylus and

Sophocles. Sophocles' ode on the nature of human beings in the *Antigone* is itself a piece of profound philosophy as well as of great poetry. Empedocles of Acragas in Sicily wrote in verses of which only fragments survive. He emphasizes the universal duality of Love and Strife. He committed suicide by throwing himself into the crater of Mount Etna. Matthew Arnold composed a verse drama about him in his *Empedocles on Etna* (1849) a poem full of philosophical reflection.

The second category moves not from the philosophers to the poets, but from the poets to the philosophers. This is the category of the poet who takes the work of a philosopher and expounds it in verse. The great example here is the Latin poet Lucretius (90 to 55 BC) with his poem *De Rerum Natura On The Nature of Things*. In it he puts forward the materialist atomic philosophy of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341 to 271 BC). Epicurus is not an atheist, but he thinks that if there are gods they do not concern themselves with us. He makes one of the most powerful assaults on religion ever made. He attacks it on psychological grounds, seeing it as the product of fear, in particular the fear of death. This he tries to counter



Bradley

with the consideration: 'Where we are death is not, and where death is we are not.' This and his other arguments famously failed to convince the poet Philip Larkin who attacked them in his poem 'Aubade'. Lucretius also attacked the irrational cruelty to which the fear that produces religious belief and practice leads, in particular the practice of human sacrifice. The Spanish born American philosopher George Santayana wrote a fine essay on Lucretius in his book *Three Philosophical Poets*. The other poets he discusses are Dante and Goethe, so we have a representative of antiquity, of the middle ages and of modernity. Another example of a poet who in effect expresses the views of a philosopher is Alexander Pope whose *Essay on Man* versifies the optimism of Leibniz's rationalist philosophy.

The third category includes poets who write poems about a particular philosopher. My example here is Wallace Stevens's poem 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome' which is about the elderly Santayana's last days as a guest hospitalized in a convent in the Via San Stefano in Rome.

The fourth category involves a philosopher leaning, so to speak, on a poet by claiming the poet's work implicitly validates his philosophy. Heidegger's relation to the poetry of Hölderlin is a good example of this.

The fifth category - and it is the one to which all the poems I shall discuss belong - is the one in which the poet expresses either a particular philosophic theme or topos or a certain kind of philosophic attitude. Poem 26 of AE Housman's *More Poems* 'Good creatures do you love your lives' expresses the position of the solipsist. The dichotomy of the optimist and pessimist world views is relevant here. Wordsworth seems to try to hold the balance between the two while Giacomo Leopardi and Thomas Hardy are thorough pessimists. Nietzsche tries to transcend the dichotomy in the midnight song in book 3 of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a poem which Gustav Mahler set to music in his third symphony.

The six particular poems I propose to discuss all come from the first part of the fifth category, namely poems which treat of a particular perennial



Lucretius

philosophical theme or topos or puzzle. Let us take the puzzle of individuation, of what makes me me, so to speak. Borrowing Leibniz's expression, we can call this the topos of the *principium individuationis*. The problem cannot rise for a monist like Parmenides who thinks there is only one substance. For Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* there are universal substances such as wood or gold and individual substances such as Socrates. But the question arises as to what makes Socrates Socrates? The first of the two poems on this puzzle which I shall discuss is a love poem by the Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi. The beloved is the wandering dervish Shamsi-Tabriz and Rumi's collection is called *The Diwan Shamsi-Tabriz*. The poem imaginatively posits lover and loved one as a unity, though Rumi is in Iraq and Shamsi-Tabriz is in Khorasan in Persia. This would mystically violate the a-priori truth that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time, for that is what being identical would mean. We shall see that, in fact, Rumi does not violate the principle. The poem runs: 'Happy the moment when we are seated in the palace, thou and I, /With two forms and two figures, but one soul, thou and I.' In short only the minds, not the bodies of the lovers are united.

Philosophy and Literature

The principium *individuationis* is not violated. In the poem *En Una Noche Oscura* by the Spanish mystic San Juan de La Cruz the poet seems to claim it has been so transcended in the wonderful line ‘Amada en el Amado transformada’ ‘The beloved transformed into the lover’. However, the word ‘form’ has of course a special meaning because of scholastic philosophy in which ‘form’ can individuate. There is no claim that the bodies of the lovers literally become one in that they occupy the same space. Their bodies closely embrace but remain separate.

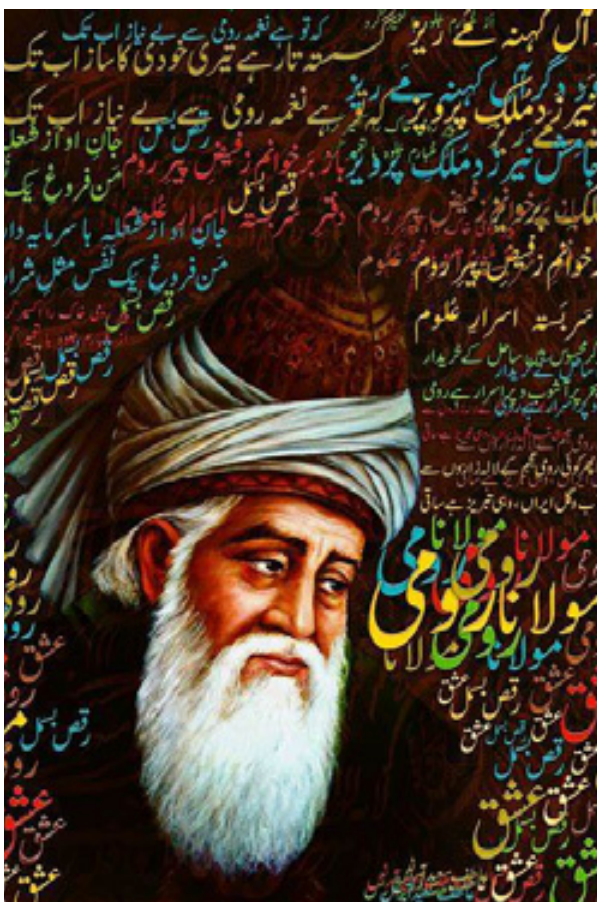
In my third poem dealing with this topos Andrew Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’ Marvell goes much further. He deliberately enunciates a paradox. He wants to transcend the *principium individuationis* while acknowledging at the same time that to do so is impossible. Marvell lived in a mathematical century, the age of Newton. Thomas Hobbes, as his friend John Aubrey reports in his *Brief Lives*, had been bowled over when

he opened Euclid at the age of forty and Spinoza notoriously cast his *Ethics* in the geometrical manner with axioms and deductions. Marvell’s poem contains such a considerable amount of geometrical exposition that it is often thought to be just an exercise in cleverness. However, there is also something about it which makes it seem much more than merely showing off. Not surprisingly a real unhappy love affair has been posited. It would be nice to think, for example, that the lovers might have been on opposite sides in the Civil War. Sadly, however we only know the legal externals of Marvell’s life and something of his political and religious views, but nothing at all of his intimate personal life,

Marvell even brings in what we would now call physics as well as abstract geometry when he tells us that to achieve the union the lovers want would be like squashing the two poles of the earth together. Here refined abstract reasoning and acute physical force are juxtaposed.

The poem concludes: ‘As lines so Loves oblique may well / Themselves in every angle greet / But ours so truly Parallel, / Though infinite can never meet. / Therefore the Love which us doth bind, But Fate so enviously debars, / Is the conjunction of the Mind, / And opposition of the Stars.’

We now move from the Baroque period to the second generation of the Romantic poets which of course includes Percy Shelley who, as a boy, had been a great admirer of Wordsworth. Shelley’s poem ‘Hymn To Intellectual Beauty’ was written in the summer of 1816 when Shelley and His wife Mary and their friend Byron were on Lake Geneva. It was at this time Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. Shelley’s poem is written in a high style which uses a lofty diction and a complex stanza form in which the lines of the twelve-line stanzas vary in syllable length from 12 syllables to ten syllables to eight syllables. The rhyme scheme of each stanza is *abbaaccbeeff*. The philosophical theme is that of a Platonism which celebrates the abstract Platonic form of Intellectual Beauty which cannot be seen as it is in itself. We can only see its shadow which haunts us as a dream admonishing us with various truths about human life, such as its mutability and its propensity to ‘vain endeavour’.



Rumi



Wallace Stevens



Shelley

Shelley also alludes to the hollowness of our youthful admirations. Had not the revolutionary Wordsworth turned counter-revolutionary and Tory? What gives the poem a lot of its strangeness and interest is that it is an unstable compound between idealistic and unearthly Platonism (the spirit of Intellectual Beauty is an inconstant visitor from another sphere) and a militant materialism stemming from the French Enlightenment. Shelley, unlike his revered Plato, was a militant materialist and atheist. The spirit is to inspire Shelley to a political activism which will free humanity 'from its dark slavery' and imbue him with the power 'to love all human kind', philanthropy in short.

We now move to the century's close and Thomas Hardy's pessimistic contemplation of the past century which makes a startling contrast to Shelley's optimistic hopefulness. Whereas Shelley's atheism anticipates Nietzsche in its sense that the death of the Christian God is seen as a blessing because it emancipates us from a moral tyrant, Hardy seems much more down to earth. According to his biographer Michael Millgate he disclaimed any influence from such German pessimists as Schopenhauer, saying that his views had been formed before he became aware of them.

Moreover, Hardy was influenced by the humanist and humanitarian Positivist movement led by such figures as George Eliot and Frederic Harrison, the latter a friend of Hardy's. This movement also influenced Hardy's gifted friend the Liberal John Morley who wrote the biography of Gladstone and who was one of only two members of the Asquith government who presciently voted in cabinet against our entry into the Great War, opposing the short sightedness of Lloyd George and Churchill. My fifth poem is Hardy's 'God's Funeral' which was submitted to the *Fortnightly Review* at the end of 1910.

My sixth and last poem is 'Among School Children', a poem by WB Yeats from *The Tower* 1928. Yeats, who had used Irish myth in his early Celtic Twilight poems, and had dabbled in the spiritualist movement of Blavatsky had also been deeply influenced by the naturalist and atheist philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche whom he read as English translations appeared in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Yeats's friend and early biographer Joseph Hone speaks of Yeats saying his eyes had grown tired from reading so much Nietzsche. Yeats was a wonderful phrase maker and he called Nietzsche 'that strong enchanter.'

Water Burial

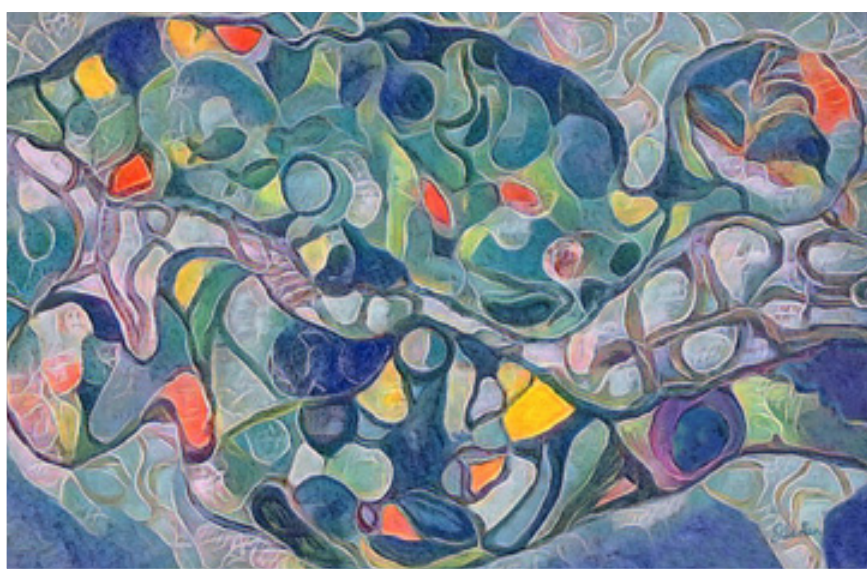
The morning after, a dark night
had passed along with lack of sleep and worry,
the ocean called; its long scream broke the dawn.
Along the shore the waves began to hurry.

As soon as silence fell and settled down,
out of the clouds an early morning light
illuminated fish, rippled by sighs,
arose, spread out, as growing on its own.

The sunrays painted seaweed in disguise,
some golden strands of hair, across two shapes,
their knees, two waxing moons stretched out
into the clouded borders of the thighs.

With feet elongated in a dappled shade,
and bellies resting in a hollowed core,
fruit long since ripened in a summer's breeze,
then ripped by winds to perish and to fade.

At noon the sun threw light as sharp as knives.
The ocean whispered not to harm its prey,
demanding fish to swim away and hide,
but left a lonely shark to guard and stay.



Poems and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Zoom



CHRIS NORRIS

Eyes meet yet who's to know who looks at whom?
No intersect beyond the camera's eye.
All contact distanced in the time of Zoom.

A glance exchanged is too much to presume.
Though sight-lines cross the look goes whizzing by.
Eyes meet yet who's to know who looks at whom?

Those moments in the online waiting-room
Give notice: normal optics won't apply.
All contact distanced in the time of Zoom.

Lean slightly forward and know your face will loom
On every screen, perspective all awry.
Eyes meet yet who's to know who looks at whom?

We yearn to quit this solitary doom
And scan our screens as faces multiply:
All contact distanced in the time of Zoom.

The lockdown lengthens while the networks boom.
Spaced out as ever, but you have to try.
Eyes meet yet who's to know who looks at whom?
All contact distanced in the time of Zoom.



Casper David Friedrich and his Romantic Art

Reports of the Wednesday Meetings Held During July

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 1st July

Written by RAHIM HASSAN and PAUL COCKBURN

We enjoyed an interesting talk by the art historian and poet Colin Pink. His talk was about the art of the German landscape painter Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840) and his relationship to the early German Romantics. Friedrich is the artist who exemplified the relationship of art to Romanticism. He reflected his times through his art: spirituality as against materialism, imaginative grasp of reality and the Absolute rather than the strict rationality of the Enlightenment, respect for nature as against the selfish use of nature, revolutionary tendencies of his age against reactionary politics, patriotism against occupation of his country by the French, liberalism against despotism.

Born in Greifswald on the Baltic Sea 1774, Friedrich is of a similar generation to the early Romantic artists and poets. He was influenced by the theologian Kosegarten who taught that God is revealed in nature and who encouraged worship in a natural setting. Some of this was reflected in Friedrich's paintings, especially 'Procession at Dawn' and 'Cross in the Mountains'. But he found spirituality in landscape generally, as can be seen in his depiction of a 'Woman in Morning Light' and 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon'.

The period Friedrich lived in had conflicting philosophical perspectives. The Idealists (Kant, Fichte and Schelling), followed by Hegel, were systems builders, with an insistence on presenting the whole truth. But the younger romantic generation rejected this

totalising approach and considered philosophy as partial and fragmentary, with no foundation and no power of capturing the Absolute. The Romantics adopted the style of a fragmentary, perspectival approach: we never come to the truth but we continually seek it. Friedrich, in his pair of paintings 'View from the Artist's Studio', took this idea to present a landscape through a window but from two different angles to represent shifting perspectives.

During the Napoleonic occupation of Germany, Friedrich, together with other artists and poets, took a patriotic stand and started to incorporate nationalistic images into his paintings: old graves and stones, as well as showing the hostility of the German landscape to the occupiers.

Friedrich was interested in Kant's idea of the sublime. There are two kinds of sublime: mathematical and dynamic. They both are a thrilling challenge to the human mind. The mathematical sublime represents the sheer expanse of nature where the human imagination has the never-ending task of trying to capture the enormity of nature, say a very high mountain or an expansive sea. The dynamic sublime represents the power of nature, as when watching the eruption of a volcano or the unleashing of a storm. There is a sense of excitement and fear. But Kant thought the dynamic sublime awakens in us the human dignity to withstand danger and show our moral worth. The example given is 'Chalk Cliffs on Rügen'.



Woman in Morning Light

But Kant also presented the idea of beauty where nature fits our imagination and gives us a sense of serene pleasure. This may be related to the spiritual feeling we have in front of many of Friedrich's landscape paintings, such as 'Woman in the Morning Mist' and 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon'.

Friedrich emphasises nature and shows the desire of humans to be engaged with it. The figures are shown in many of his paintings with their backs to the viewer, most notably in his masterpiece 'Wanderer Above the Mists'. Nature is always shown in its vastness and the human is sometimes humbled by being depicted as a very small figure in the landscape, as in the painting 'Monk by the Sea'. Nature has some permanence about it but humans come and go and so does all that they make to conquer nature, as can be seen in his painting 'The Stages of Life'.

Friedrich's technique of 'Rückenfigur', painting a person from behind while they look at a view, encourages the viewer to place themselves in the position of the person looking at the view, while also understanding it as a view governed by human perception. This is insightful and clever, and perhaps makes us think of unconscious psychic forces, but it could also be considered strange: artists usually paint the living face of the person turned towards them, with eyes, lips, mouth etc. giving us an animated experience.

Friedrich saw success in his life but also some disappointment and perhaps ended up feeling bitter about life. He had a number of strokes later in life although he kept on painting. Some of his paintings are dark and threatening, such as 'Seashore by Moonlight' drawn late in his life, and 'Evening Walk at Dusk' and maybe that is connected with his disappointments and temperament.

Intersubjectivity and Language: Davidson and Buber

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 8th July

The way we interact with each other and the role of language in every human encounter and exchange was selected as a topic for this meeting. Johan Siebers, the director of the Bloch Centre for German Thought at London University and the founder of the German Philosophy Seminar, gave us a presentation based on a paper he co-authored, entitled 'I Interpret You: Davidson and Buber'.

Davidson and Buber belong to two different traditions. Davidson is an analytical philosopher, who studied under Quine. Buber is a Continental Jewish theologian and a mystic. They were both concerned with the idea of communication and both think that language is based on intersubjectivity, it is a dialogue, a direct concrete encounter between two people. Davidson's analysis is concerned with how language works, Buber goes beyond the empirical to reality as a whole.

Davidson and Buber conceptualise communication from two perspective. For Davidson, it is the idea that the interlocutors interpret each other by a process that Davidson calls 'radical interpretation'. It is radical in the sense that it doesn't appeal to

a notion of meaning that is independent of the two participants and it doesn't assume that there are rules or conventions that determine meaning. Rules are not constitutive of meaning but they are regulative. Language is a condition for having a convention and not the other way round.

The interpretation process is based on a principle of charity. It assumes that the other has the same capacities as we have and we attribute to the other a set of beliefs and desires. The mental content is not prior to language but formed by it. There is also a sharing in the world that is inhabited by the two. The process of interpretation is not one of imposing on the other but rather co-operation and this is intersubjectivity.

Buber takes language to be working at two levels, the I-Thou and the I-It. Basically the I-Thou is the original relationship with Being (God) and with wholeness. It also includes every encounter in life. The I-Thou is beyond the empirical and beyond language. It is a direct concrete encounter that doesn't need a language. Applied to the encounter with others, it is a whole encounter and not a partial one.

The I-It represent a degenerate relationship of the I-Thou and we may call it 'instrumental'. It is when we are enclosed in the particularities of the encounter and we don't see what make such a relationship possible, the relationship of the I-Thou. This is a mystical vision where the 'I' gets absorbed into the Thou. Buber however retreated from this position and criticised the mystical trends of 'unification' with God or the 'absorption' into God.

Davidson and Buber look at subjectivity in different but perhaps complementary ways. For Davidson, it is interpretive, but for Buber, it involves the intersubjective and is intimate. However, Davidson's theory doesn't have ethical content, although it turns out that ethical commitment does require interpretation. Buber's philosophy on the other hand has ethical consequences.



Johan Siebers

Third Anniversary of *The Wednesday*

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 15th July

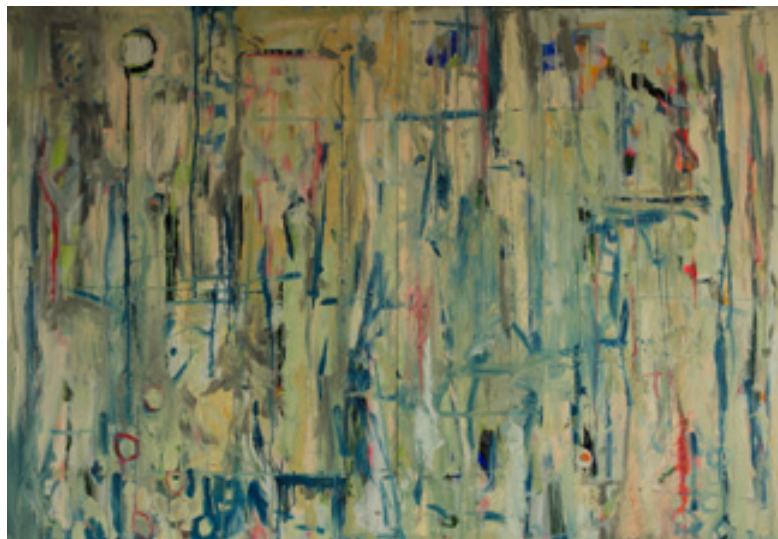
The *Wednesday* celebrated its third anniversary in this meeting with poetry readings, short talks and a few comments by the participants. We were particularly pleased that our youngest member, Ranjini Ghosh, was able to join us from Lucknow in India via Zoom.

The Wednesday was an initiative by Rahim Hassan who thought of the idea on a holiday in Wales. Coming back, he wrote the group an e-mail and asked them to discuss it the following Wednesday. He went ahead with the plan for the magazine which was intended initially to be a newsletter. But after the experimental zero issue, he decided to make it a fuller weekly magazine of 16 pages and registered it with the British Library. Soon the magazine was opened up to contributors from outside the group and the magazine was on its way to continuity and success.

The magazine was supposed to support the Wednesday meetings. These meetings were founded around 2005 in Borders Bookshop and after the closure of Borders the group met in different cafes and bookshops. It was in the Albion-Beatnik Bookstore in Oxford that *The Wednesday* was born. We are indebted to the proprietor Dennis Harrison for his help and advice. The magazine helped to improve the quality of the meetings and generate a spirit of purpose and solidarity.

The Wednesday was collected in printed books. There are now eight volumes and two more are to be published soon. A website was also created (www.thewednesdayoxford.com) and all current and past issues are displayed there. An index of all the articles in the magazine is also available on the website.

The third anniversary of the magazine saw the participation of six poets (Chris Norris, Edward Greenwood, David BurrIDGE, William Bishop, Chris and Margaret Gaal. Val Norris joined her husband Chris in singing one of his poems.) A



Artwork by Mike England

number of speakers talked about *The Wednesday* and what it meant to them. Rahim Hassan and Paul Cockburn highlighted some of the history of the magazine. Ranjini Ghosh said she is 'eternally grateful' for the publishing of her essays in the magazine. She published her high-quality essay on the 'Two Concepts of Freedom' in issue 4 of the magazine when she was seventeen. She is now doing her first degree in political science at a prestigious university in India.

The Wednesday meetings which are now carried out via Zoom received interesting comments. Rob Zinkov admired the open-mindedness of those in the group, their wide interests and their conviviality. He thought the magazine had a timeless quality, and was of a high standard. Chris Seddon talked about his interest in Logic and how the meetings and the magazine gave him a space to explain his views. The artist Mike England who couldn't make the anniversary celebration sent a heart-felt note detailing his interest in the magazine and the group. He wrote: 'What these meetings have revealed to me in regard to my painting is that they somehow put my work in a clearer context for me.'

Thanks to all those who supported *The Wednesday* and made it a viable project.

Patriotism in an Uncertain World

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 22nd July

We had again welcomed John Holroyd to speak to the group. He talked to us last year about his book *Judging Religion* but his topic this time was the main philosophical theories of patriotism. He began with ‘strong’ patriotism, viewed as a virtue by Alasdair MacIntyre, who believes in communitarianism. MacIntyre emphasizes that morality is inevitably community based. However, patriotism is linked to nationalism, why cannot the community we owe our loyalty to be a global one, rather than our particular country?

Amartya Sen believes in a more pluralistic identity which will create stronger communities. We are not just citizens of a country, we can owe our loyalty to our religion, tribe, family or a global community.

Ethical patriotism is concerned with ensuring the country we belong to lives up to certain moral requirements. The example John gave was of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran priest who in 1939 was in America. He chose to go back to Germany, to be in it during its ‘worst time’, to try and ensure the country lives up to a moral code. This behavior is linked to a morality that says we are indebted to our country, it gives us an education, security, basic human rights, and we should return what we have received.

Moderate patriotism is more pragmatic, it holds that morality is not completely derived from our own community. We should be concerned with global concerns as well as with local matters. Ernest Gellner argued that the nation state grew in the 19th century because it developed congruently with the industrial revolution. Now however with the digital revolution and the growth of a global social media it could be that the days of the nation state are numbered. Young people are finding their cultural identity in many new and different ways, a process helped by the new social technology. We also need a global response to the global warming crisis, which requires nations to unite and take

ecological action together. The coronavirus epidemic also shows us closer global co-operation is needed.

However, the last few years have shown a sharp rise in nationalism and populist politics. Wars and global unrest, the persecution of minorities, even slavery (in its modern form) are probably increasing worldwide. Patriotism is perhaps the last refuge of the scoundrel, much evil is still being done in its name.

In our discussion it was suggested that nationalism for a small country, say Wales or Scotland, could be beneficial in terms of joining larger entities not based on nationalism, such as the European Union. While there is talk about dissolving nationalism into a larger political and economic unit, we also witness the revival of nationalism in many parts of the world and even colonialism. The picture is not clear cut at the moment and there is considerable uncertainty in world politics. However, there is also the possibility of a post nation-state world in the future, which we also discussed in the meeting.



John Holroyd

Iris Murdoch and the Imagination

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 29th July

Fauzia Rahman, a former medical doctor and a philosopher, gave us a very interesting talk on 'Iris Murdoch and the Imagination'. It was a wide-ranging talk about the imagination in the ethical thinking of Murdoch (1919-1999), contrasted with the main figures in the history of philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Hume, Kant, Nietzsche and Sartre. The aim was to show that the imagination is important for ethical thinking and that it should be distinguished from fantasy. More precisely, there are two kinds of imagination, good imagination and bad imagination. The first is other-oriented imagination and the latter is self-oriented imagination. Fauzia also wanted to show, based on Murdoch's work, that morality is about personal action rather than universal rules. But Murdoch is not saying that ethics are a subjective matter:

'Are we not certain that there is a "true direction" towards better conduct, that goodness "really matters", and does not that certainty about a standard suggest an idea of permanence which cannot be reduced to psychological or any other set of empirical terms?'

Murdoch also distinguishes between the logical view of the working of the mind, picked up in scientific description, and the historical view of the mind, which is related to persons, their history and how they live. It is in the social sphere rather than logical deduction that the imagination plays a major role. Kant noticed the role of imagination in perception and Hume psychologised it in terms of the laws of association. But Hume also noticed the importance of habits and customs in moral thinking.

For Murdoch, the imagination is not limited to the process of perception as it is free and creative. In a way, it is akin to the moral law which is also described as spontaneous and free. To be moral agents we need to be imaginative so that we can



Iris Murdoch

see our situation from a different perspective and with a new attitude. If we take a hostile stand to someone that will affect our perception of them, but if we take a more sympathetic view the situation will look different. Language plays an important role in reflecting our attitude which is communicated by a linguistic process. Our ethical stand is revisable, and Murdoch seems to hold a view that we are good by nature but we are corrupted by the world we inhabit. We have to purify ourselves continually and that requires imagination.

Imagination, as Murdoch points out, is not neutral, there is good and bad imagining. 'It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation from fantasy consists.' To become compassionate, we look for help from the idea of love but also from good art. We go through a healing process or purification to become good by a reorientation of desire from selfishness to selflessness. As Murdoch put it in her book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: 'The good man is *liberated* from selfish fantasy, can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envisage and desire what is truly valuable.'

Poetry

The Problem of Time

CHRIS GAAL

If only I had time
I feel sure I could write
A definitive treatise on time.

Oh my, it would be so fine,
a Nobel Prize
would surely be mine!

Trouble is, as Parmenides
and Zeno found,
finding time is a tricky business.

They gave up in the end,
wrote it off
as a fool's errand;

Something that could not be
really there at all,
like the postmodernist God

Or the postmodernist Universe.
Well, it's like the lottery;
one can only try to win so many times

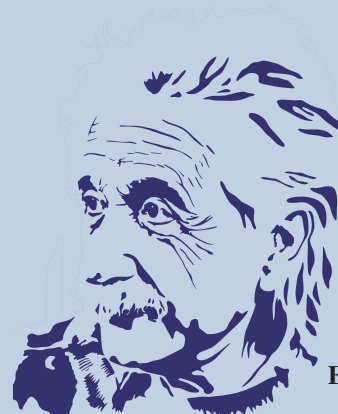
Before losing faith in its attainability.
You just can't pin time down
like a butterfly in a display case.



Newton



Einstein



While even a butterfly in a display case
goes on living its own death
in time.

Haven't we all had the experience
of that happy moment,
feeling at last we have hold of some time

Only to find it vanishing
in front of
our exasperated gaze?

Just the same with Newtonian physics; all
absolutely convinced they had nailed time
to an infinite series of timeless points.
Till Einstein. He got relatively close
but to avoid disgrace
was forced to turn time into space.

So paradox remains to be resolved.
Science continues to weave
its glorious coat of many symbols

Much, perhaps, as Ptolemaic astronomers
wove their baroque cloth of epicycles
to try to make their schemes believable

And to delicately hide
the withered flanks
of their aged ontology.

So, from time to time,
I still see, in my own dazzling moment,
My waiting opportunity for immortality.

Sadly, like all moments, it doesn't last.
I doubt I will ever find time enough
to develop my revolutionary thesis.

Perhaps I could simplify
and make it shorter.....?
But I guess I shouldn't oughta.

The Wednesday

Editor: Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

Copyright © Rahim Hassan

Website:

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

Editorial Board

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

Chris Seddon

Correspondences & buying

The Wednesday books:

c/o The Secretary,
12, Yarnells Hill,
Oxford, OX2 9BD

*We have published eight
cumulative volumes of the
weekly issues. To obtain
your copy of anyone of the
cumulative volumes, please
send a signed cheque with your
name and address on the back
£15 for each volume
inside the UK*

*or £18 for readers
outside the UK:*

*Please make your cheque out to
'The Wednesday Magazine'*

or pay online

Account Number:

24042417

Sort Code:

09-01-29

Angles Of Argument



Debate prepared in the cafe's windowless downstairs.
We crowded in armed with our beliefs to be tabled.
A heavy intellectual laid down his papers.
He promised to be succinct, lifting our eyes to his sky.
Declared all logic to be a triangle, arguing a baseline,
with 90 degree lift-off gave pure reason, needing 45 degrees
to achieve completion. To which we mumbled: *can't be right!*
Coffee sipped interruptions commenced.
Some stumbled through bibliographies
Others banged their practised thoughts down.
What about *isosceles* was the shout, or even *equilateral*.
Someone muttered: *Random scalene*. Then slipped out.
All carefully noted for magazine posterity.

Now in this lockdown world no time for chatter.
We zoom to the table to seek the truth,
in a line-up of assertions and remembered bits,
on shoved together papers laying on shelves,
waiting to be delivered in a perfect precis - one day.
Each angle of argument is marched through – one by one,
Before the leaving key is pressed and *Pythagoras* is gone.

David Burridge