

The *Wednesday*

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Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

A Wholesome Philosophy

I have borrowed the title from Nietzsche, who described Goethe as the figure who ‘disciplined himself into a whole’. For Nietzsche, a great figure is one who could affirm life in all its aspects, not only the intellectual side. That is why he praised Goethe. Goethe was a poet, dramatist, philosopher, scientist, scholar, administrator and politician. In a similar way, I wish to suggest that philosophy should become rounded, and not just an intellectual exercise or limited to one aspect of life. Philosophy should address all aspects of being human, including psychological and practical concerns.

What has brought this topic to my attention, is the need to clarify the composition of *The Wednesday* group and magazine and the way they function, especially when the magazine is completing its fifth year of publication next month, and *The Wednesday* meeting has been running for many more years.

The group is now made up of philosophers, poets and artists. Their work has been published in the magazine and the magazine, in this respect, is not only for philosophy, in the academic sense, but philosophy applied, and joined, to other fields. No one will mistake the philosophical content of the poems or artwork published in the magazine. And even when the content is not clearly a philosophical one, it is written by members with philosophical concerns.

This month in particular, we discussed in *The Wednesday* meetings the worldview of the Islamic mystic Ibn Arabi (1160-1240), who left a huge corpus of writing dealing with epistemology, ontology, ethics and the role of the Perfect Human in the universe. He also subscribed to the idea of the Unity of Being, to which Spinoza, much later, gave a rigorous logical structure. We also discuss Fiction and Non-Fiction and their relation to language and truth. This was followed by a talk on translating the Austrian Poet Rilke (1875-1926) who had a mystical aspect to his

poetry and addressed questions of being, life, love and death.

I mention these meetings as examples of what we discuss every week. There is always diversity in the talks and in the concerns of the members, but with philosophy always either coming to the fore or lingering in the background. I think this is a good formula for successful philosophy, philosophy that is discussed in a context wider than mere academic concern - philosophy that unites the rational and the emotional, the theoretical and practical, the abstract and the existential. Perhaps this comes from joining analytical formal training with issues and concepts taken from continental philosophy.

Philosophy is not exhausted by epistemology, logic or standard ethical theories. There is now increasing interest in the history of philosophy, art (painting and sculpture), cinema, music and performing arts. I agree that we need a rigorous training in analytical philosophy, and this has been recognised by continental philosophers as well, but we need more.

Perhaps, here is a distinction between what is useful in the practical sense and what is needed for the philosopher as a human being endowed with emotion and existential concerns. Philosophy in the practical sense is close to science, law and administration. But philosophy in its existential concern is closer to art, films, music, novels and poetry. These creative, expressive fields are what make us human and they do have their own philosophical content.

What I am suggesting is that the conception of philosophy should expand to include the analytical and the emotional, the practically useful and the existentially necessary for us humans. It is in this light that I see *The Wednesday* meetings and the magazine and wish them to continue.

The Editor

Reason and the Robot Apocalypse



PETER STIBRANY

Robot with a human face

Stories of artificial creatures, such as the ancient Jewish myth of the golem, Mary Shelley’s monster, Karel Čapek’s robots, and the countless murderous robots in recent movies seem to follow a common theme. We knowingly create an intelligence we cannot control, that either deliberately or accidentally hurts, enslaves, or destroys us. But unlike what happens in these stories, I believe we are creating a vast intelligence unknowingly and without a plan.*

*‘pity this busy monster, manunkind,
not. Progress is a comfortable disease.’*
(First two lines of e. e. cummings’s poem; published in
the collection 1 x 1, 1944)

I was prompted by a picture of astronauts on the International Space Station. Instead of showing high-tech explorers of the unknown, my perceptual kaleidoscope shifted and showed humans in small, metal containers, literally trapped inside a machine. They were there by choice, and happy to be there, but their situation seemed to me somewhat slave-like. Here’s another example, also from the space program:

*‘I am one of 23 payload operations directors ... responsible for planning the crew’s work schedules **down to 5-minute increments**, ensuring research stays on track ... It’s a thrilling, high-intensity job that leaves me exhausted at the end of the day. There are times I don’t get a chance to eat or even run to the bathroom, but I love it. I really have the coolest job.’* [emphasis added]. (https://blogs.nasa.gov/ISS_Science_Blog/2014/07/11/orchestrating-space-station-science-a-day-in-the-life-of-a-pod/)

That sounds like what we hear about Amazon warehouses, where people work alongside robots, supervised by software.

‘I was a picker and we were expected to always pick 400 units within the hour in seven seconds of each item we picked,’ said Espinoza. “I couldn’t handle it. I’m a human being, not a robot. ... You don’t get reported or written up by managers. You get written up by an algorithm’. (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/feb/05/amazon-workers-protest-unsafe-grueling-conditions-warehouse>).

The astronaut, the operations director, and the Amazon worker seem to be components of machines, driven by software and procedures, albeit some of them love their jobs.

Is this the future of work? Is this what we want, or has something gone wrong?

Distinguishing Machines and Robots

For this discussion, to avoid confusion, I’d like to distinguish the idea of a machine from the idea of a

robot. I'd like to define a "machine" as a set of procedures and policies that coordinate some combination of people, devices, and software to create specific desired outcomes. Even if it only contains humans, an organisation that treats people as instrumental and constrains their activities according to procedures and policies is a machine.

For example, by this definition, the NHS is a machine intended to maintain public health. Each element, be it a Doctor, Nurse, Janitor, piece of medical equipment, scheduling software, or building, serves a function within the integrated system.

'The timetable is more significant than the gospel, more than Homer, more than the whole of Kant. Madame Helena, the timetable is the most perfect product of the human mind'. (R.U.R. Rossum's Universal Robots, 1920, Act Two).

Being a good citizen today means partly subordinating oneself to societal machinery. And gaining self-worth through our role in it. The efficiency of these machines lets us live in larger numbers and in conditions impossible to sustain without them. In this narrow sense, a 'machine apocalypse' has already started.

I'm not saying anything radically new here. Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times* beautifully illustrated the mechanistic employment of human beings back in 1936. But I'm highlighting the thinking that creates the machine, rather than just the effect the machine has on us.

Robots, on the other hand, I'd define today as non-human machines made of hardware and software, like computers, cars, aeroplanes, industrial robots, etc.

Slaves and Robots

There are certain jobs we want done that nobody wants to do for wages we can afford. These have been done since the dawn of human history by slaves.

Domin. I wanted to turn the whole of mankind into an aristocracy of the world. An aristocracy nourished by millions of mechanical slaves. Unrestricted, free and consummated in man. And maybe more than man.

Alquist. Superman?

Domin. Yes. (R.U.R. Act Three)



The sleeping berths radiate into each 'wall'. Each is about the size of a phone booth and have a sleeping bag-type arrangement as well as computer and space for personal effects (Courtesy of NASA website).

The industrial revolution made some societies rich enough to start replacing slave labour with robots. But two hundred years later we still have workers in near-slave conditions. For example, we have so-called McJobs, zero-hour gig economy jobs, piecework sweatshops, prison labour, gulags, and so on.

Robots do improve median living standards. But just a few years after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, Samuel Butler noted the potential for robots to evolve and supersede humanity, in his satirical fiction *Erewhon*:

"Day by day, however, the machines are gaining ground upon us; day by day we are becoming more subservient to them; more men are daily bound down as slaves to tend them, more men are daily devoting the energies of their whole lives to the development of mechanical life'. (Erewhon, 1873, Ch. 23-25).

In addition to multiple psychological factors pushing the evolution of robots, I'd like to highlight one tidal force: the ingenuity gap identified by Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Ingenuity Gap*, 2000).

He realised that environmentalists were not worried about the right thing. We're not going to run out of anything because everything can be replaced. For example, we won't run out of places to put garbage because we can treat it, recycle it, reduce it, and incinerate it. We won't run out of fish because we can farm fish or make artificial meat.

However, each replacement is more difficult, costly, and complex. And the complexities multiply. All the while, our natural ability to handle complexity is increasing only slowly.

And from his studies, he noted that when the challenges they face exceed their ability to handle them, societies collapse. My take-away is that to avoid this complexity-driven collapse, we need robots. Very smart robots.

Political Acceptance

Robots are already doing big, important jobs for example in the military, in financial markets and in on-line retail. But what about politics? It seems daft to suggest we would welcome robots telling us what we should do.

But the writing is on the wall. We deprecate our political leaders and their advisers because modern media allows us to see too many of them as flawed: venal, biased, self-promoting, small-minded, short-sighted, incompetent, corruptible, power-hungry, vengeful, prideful, etc.

In short, they are human, and we expect better. There is a lot of room for improvement.

And software and machine thinking have already entered the political process. For example, political campaigns and party policies have become more information-intensive and software-driven, based on accumulated detailed personal information.

'This new form of data-driven campaigning gives candidates and their advisors powerful tools for plotting electoral strategy'.

(David W. Nickerson, University of Notre Dame, *Political Campaigns and Big Data*, Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series, November 2013, RWP13-045).

And we are well underway to polling-driven, i.e., software- and data-base driven candidate selection.

You might argue that software could never be made competent or reliable enough to trust with political decisions. But that's just prejudice. Software can process a great deal more salient information than any human being could cope with. And if political decisions are not reducible to logic operating on salient information, what does that say about human beings?

Initially, political decision-making software might look like a platform for 'crowdsourcing' decisions, like a democratic impulse enabled by software. But software

need not be constrained by our epistemic limitations. It may well begin to offer more nuanced, better-performing policy options. At what point would we notice we were no longer in control?

Agency

By way of counterargument, one might observe that machines and robots have no intrinsic agency. For example, robots like bulldozers do what we want, not the other way around.

But here, I'm haunted by the ghost of Marshall McLuhan. Even if robots remain our tools, at what point do we become the tools of our tools?

If we use our agency to do what software is telling us, as in the earlier political example, how is that not giving agency to software? And having given our agency to software in this way, how do we get it back? How do we even decide to want it back? To go against the logic programmed into the robots will be irrational.

Self-Service To Servitude?

Samuel Butler understood this smooth loss of agency when he wrote his combination of satire and playful speculation:

'The power of custom is enormous, and so gradual will be the change, that man's sense of what is due to himself will be at no time rudely shocked; our bondage will steal upon us noiselessly and by imperceptible approaches'
(*Erewhon*, Chapter XXV).

Robotic service provision looks today like 'self-service.' Have you been to McDonald's lately? Or a petrol forecourt? My insurance company has the lowest rate plans available if you consent to not talk to humans at all. Robots are becoming the dominant agents of activity in the world.

As we continue energetically to replace people with software, we increasingly equip robots with goals and allow them to act in the world to attain them. How long will it be before we run out of software programmers and write software that can reconceptualise and rewrite itself? Might we take ourselves out of the executive action loop entirely?

We're already putting ourselves into societal machines. Will we then put robots in charge of those machines, and of us?

Finally, The Robot Apocalypse

Nick Bostrom in *Superintelligence* posits the idea that artificial intelligences will, in the end, outprogram, outbuild, and outwit human beings. Their powers will be so advanced they will have what, in our jargon, is decisive epistemic superiority.

Bostrom is concerned that a Superintelligence will break any bounds we impose, not as a prisoner escapes prison, but as a river breaks its banks when there is too much water. Just as the river follows the rationality of nature, so the Superintelligence follows the rationality of its software.

For example, let's say we were to ask a Superintelligent agent to optimise the output of paper clips at a factory. It might do so by commandeering all the world's industrial output to create computing power to calculate the likely paper clip demand to the utmost possible accuracy. Or it might decide to develop a suite of biological viruses that wipes out the entire human race, thereby setting demand to zero - the most predictable and most efficiently delivered demand. His point is that we can't specify limitations well enough to avoid disasters.

Bostrom believes Superintelligence is in the future, waiting to be developed by us, so he thinks we have time to develop this control. But this is optimistic. Relative to the rest of the animals on Earth, we humans are Bostrom's Superintelligence taking over the world. And evidently, we aren't governed by a control algorithm.

Our goal-oriented, efficiency mindset - the machine mind - pushes us to coordinate our efforts into a unified, coherent whole. Most people in the developed world neither can nor want to change that. Arguably, it's part of the definition of being 'developed'.

Bostrom also does not highlight that we have almost stopped asking what the efficiency is for. Well, we know what it's for. It's for satisfying what Epicurus called 'kinetic pleasures'— it's for racing towards the carrots dangling off the end of a hedonic treadmill.

So, I reckon we are out of control already. Adding robots is just making our trajectory steeper.

Where Is This Going?

Robotic tyrants are not inevitable, but if they do arise, they will only be the latest in a long line of tyrants. They will be welcomed as solving genuine human problems by a population that is in some combination brainwashed, troubled, lazy, greedy, passive, desperate, or just tired.



Real life giant robot on rampage?

Tyrants become reviled when they inevitably decide that some people need to suffer for the good of others. For human problems, there are no solutions, only trade-offs. At times, you have to be cruel to be kind or refrain from being kind, where that leads to more cruelty.

In the West, we democratically throw out of office the politicians who make these trade-offs, and that makes us feel better. But whoever is nominally in charge, we won't be able to throw out the robots who implement the impossible utilitarian calculus those politicians rely on. It will be old wine in new bottles, as the saying goes.

We will be trapped by rationality. Robotic tyrants will be so much smarter and better informed than we, that we will just do as they say.

That said, this is not necessarily a disaster scenario. There may in the future be more astronauts than Amazon warehouse workers, as it were. As the complexity and reach of robots increases, we will perhaps continue to be symbiotic with them like the various microbes in our bodies are with us. And they will foster our welfare, the way we eat probiotic yoghurts to promote the health of our gut biome.

We are free to change our collective minds at any time. But the price would be very steep. In any case, right now, we don't want to.

'All your base are belong to us. You have no chance to survive make your time'.

(An Internet meme based on a poorly translated phrase from the opening cutscene of the video game *Zero Wing*).

(This paper was presented to The Wednesday meeting 27th April 2022)

Gathering of Sky, Earth, Mortals and Divinities

Dr ALAN XUEREB

I do not usually paint landscapes and when I do I normally use a lot more palette, than I used in this representative work. Somehow, I had in mind once more Tolkien's Mount Doom, also known as Orodruin and Amon Amarth. The latter was a volcano in Mordor where the One Ring was forged, and the only place where it could be destroyed. It was the ultimate destination for Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee in the Quest of the Ring. On the other hand, my current research into Martin Heidegger somehow complements this romantic mental picture I have of Tolkien's fictional landscape.

In his later writing, Heidegger outlines an existential configuration called the fourfold (*das Geviert*), which is composed of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities. Gathering (*versammeln*) the fourfold is the 'thing', which, by its 'thinging' makes tangible the world. This is the happening of 'place' and Heidegger's descriptions of this happening offer a certain poetic magnificence. With the purpose of getting to the real ('ontic' reality) one must examine the phenomena suggested, moving beyond the intellect into the experiences themselves. Although Heidegger says at the beginning of his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' that he is not trying to 'discover architectural ideas' or develop 'rules for building', it is important to probe into this work with an eye toward architecture, as Heidegger lays out some beautiful and insightful ideas by which we might better assess our place in the surroundings. If we read Heidegger with the phenomena in mind, an abundance emerges from the romantic quality of his text that reflects the complex unevenness of time, culture, growth, human responsibility, and those things of meaning within our world.

The fourfold is a thinking of things. The fourfold names the 'gathering' of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities that comes to constitute the thing for Heidegger. In the late 1940s, operating under a teaching ban imposed by the French authorities in the wake of World War II, Heidegger utters 'the boldest statement of his thinking' in announcing the fourfold, first named in the 1949 lecture cycle *Insight Into That Which Is*, held at the private Club zu Bremen, developed and refined over the

next decade, and remaining with Heidegger until the end of his life. Within the fourfold, the earth names what we might traditionally think of as the 'material basis' of the thing. Such a claim can only be maintained if we understand 'material' and 'basis' in ways quite distinct from their traditional work in the history of philosophy. That is to say, strictly speaking, the earth is neither 'material' nor a 'basis'. The character of the earth within the fourfold transforms all our usual beliefs of what counts as earthbound or even telluric, for the 'matter' of the earth is nothing other than phenomenality as such.

With the sky, (*der Himmel*) Heidegger comes to think the wide expanse of appearance. Whereas the earth names an ungrounded bearing that suspends the thing in 'mid-air,' we might say, the sky serves to designate this space of suspension. What the earth yields is yielded upward into the sky, most of the time at least. The sky thus empowers the earth's ungrounded and shallow incursion into the realm of beaming presence. The sky is the space of the earth's incursion. The earth could not be the earth without such a sky, there would be nowhere for it to appear, much less to be concealed.

Heidegger's presentation of the gods (*die Göttlichen*) within the fourfold is not something that arrives without notice. Heidegger had occupied himself with questions religious and divine from early on. The year of publication for *Being and Time*, 1927, found Heidegger lecturing on 'Phenomenology and Theology.' Prior to this, the 1921 lecture courses on the phenomenology of religion crystallised concerns present from the very beginning of Heidegger's lecturing career. The gods may represent what we cannot control.

The mortals are chronologically the last member of the fourfold to be named in the presentations of 1949–50. Henceforth, the name of 'the mortals' (*die Sterblichen*) will largely, though not exclusively, replace that of *Dasein* in Heidegger's thought. Yet it should not be forgotten that the term '*Dasein*' was itself, too, a supplanting of what had previously stood to name the essence of the human. '*Dasein*' was a break with the idea of a self-enclosed subject. Against the interiority of such a

subject, against ‘consciousness’ (*Bewußtsein*), Heidegger proposed the exteriority of *Dasein*.

The gathering of the fourfold is the *thinging* of the thing. The thing must be understood as being composed of these four aspects or relations of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. When Heidegger names the fourfold, he is identifying the minimal essential traits of any thing whatsoever: that they are ungrounded, mediated, meaningful, and open to us. These four aspects come together in what we have been calling the relational thing, whereby this positionality is understood as the interface of a finite thing with its beyond. The fourfold thus names the finite thing.

Heidegger’s thinking of the fourfold is a thinking of things. It names the eruption of the thing as it unfolds itself through world. The *thinging* thing is resolutely finite, that is, relational (infinite). Each component contributes to the constitution of just such a relational, finite existence. In my painting I have tried to recreate this ‘gathering’ of the earth, the sky, the mortals and the gods, it is really up to the reader to decide whether I have actually managed or not!

„der Wasserfall“
– (2022) dichromatic oil on canvas
(30x80 cm)



Reports of The Wednesday Meetings Held During April 2022

Written by RAHIM HASSAN

An Afternoon with Rilke

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 4th May.

We had a rare opportunity of discussing a new translation of the early poems of the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875 – 1926) in our weekly afternoon meeting. The translations were done by our poet and philosopher Chris Norris. We were grateful to him for sharing his translations with us before their publication. Chris's translation is not literal but has his own interpretation of the originals. It is for this reason that Chris called his translation: *After Rilke*. Although the poems came mainly from Rilke's *New Poems* in its two volumes (1907/8), there were two poems taken from *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Chris sent the whole collection to The Wednesday group to read before the meeting and to select the poem they wished him to read.

Chris wrote an introduction to the collection to explain the choices he made in translating these poems and it is useful to quote what he said. He tried to be faithful to the original, but he involved in the translation some 'immanent critique.' He considered his attempt at translating Rilke as 'as a prime instance of 'creative criticism', one that claims a licence to practise its craft without overly tight or self-hobbling restraints on its range of inventive linguistic and generic possibilities.'

Chris took a critical stand to the original poems because he had mixed feelings about Rilke's poetry and wanted the translations to reflect those feelings. The mixed feeling comes from the ambiguity in the reception of Rilke. Rilke seems to appeal to scholarly studies, but also to spiritualists of all kinds. There is 'his formal dexterity, prosodic skill, and wonderfully close, attentive and detailed engagement with specific objects or events,' but there is also the mystical side. Chris made it clear that he doesn't like the mystical side or as he put it 'his often fuzzily expressed appeal to a higher dimension where such details tend to disappear in a swirl of over-heated spiritual uplift.' He sees him as a link between the ideal and the sensuous realms. This is a very different take on Rilke from that of Heidegger in his famous article 'What are poets for?'

Rilke's poetry is very difficult and covers themes from Greek myths and stories and figures from the Bible. He had a special interest in Angels and dedicate more poetry to them in his later work, specially the *Duino Elegies*. He also wrote about love and women. But strangely enough he took interest in animals, real or imaginary, and wrote good poems about them.



Rainer Maria Rilke

What attracted Chris to Rilke's poetry is that the latter is a lyrical poet and a formalist who pays close attention to verse structure and prosody. Chris thinks that form is essential to poetry. 'Form,' Chris said 'is that which gives poetry its power to communicate despite large distances of historical, geographical, cultural, intellectual, and – not least – temperamental standpoint.' Rilke was described by Chris as a 'gifted lyrical poet'. The poem I enjoyed is 'Angels'. Here is a full translation of it:

A bit down-in-the-mouth, those angels, not
At home up there amidst the shining throng
Of blest harp-twanging drones. What sins they long
For silently, dream-troubled, as that lot

Sing their routine hosannas. Yet who'll spot
The difference, pick them out, the goats among
Those sheep, where all press 'mute' and mime God's
song,
Like notes or steps lost in the great gavotte.

The poet says it's angel wings, spread wide
To stir the winds, that also stir the ranks
To praise and mortals, too, to set aside
All thought of restive angels and give thanks
For every link that sutures the divide.

The restive angels say: it's just the spin
They give it, those harp-pluckers' favoured line
With mortals, lest we spoilers with our sin
Tossed dreams should chance to jangle that divine
Mood-music that first bade the chant begin.

Fictions and Their Pragmatic Use*

CHRIS SEDDON

I have previously written in *The Wednesday* magazine how I view thought and language as being founded on our evolutionary ability to have and communicate beliefs and intentions. I would like to complement that perspective by considering the role of truth and beliefs in fictional literature. Fiction does not need to be literally true, and expressive art does not need to express beliefs. I would like to consider in what ways this might also be true of non-fiction, including science and everyday language and thought.

I note that we value fiction even though it is not intended to be literally true. We value poetry even though it may not make any statements capable of being interpreted as true or false. I wanted to invite the reader to consider ways in which non-fiction and ordinary language might also have value regardless of its literal truth or propositional status.

My theoretical perspective is that the diversity of language and thought arises naturally from the fundamental purpose of language to express beliefs and intentions. The need to express beliefs and intentions itself derives from our need to discern and communicate patterns of intentional behaviour. This ability to discern and express patterns requires the ability to abstract general properties and relations from specific beliefs and intentions. In practice *generalisations* only need to be *true enough*, not unconditionally true. In addition, *abstractions* only need to be *useful* in forming generalisations, and not express any particular statement in themselves, true or false.

This to me is one reason why fiction is valuable. Even though the people and events in a fictional narrative do not literally exist, we can recognise them as fictional instances of *generalities* that may be *true enough* to be useful to us in reality. This value may be a matter of personal pragmatism - we may apply the lessons learnt from fiction directly in our own lives. It may also be pragmatic only from an evolutionary perspective - we might value learning about people from novels or about technology from science fiction, say, simply because we are a technology person, or a people person, without any particular application in mind.

This also helps me understand why more abstract forms of art are valuable. Often a poem will simply convey a kind of mood - this is also a feature of other performing or graphic art but this seems to be almost universal with music. We may value this expression because we recognise - or feel in our hearts - the applicability of



Chris Seddon

those moods to our own situation, or simply, because we appreciate having such feelings.

I felt this applied to non-fiction too though. For example, scientific theories are of such generality that - not surprisingly - they are continually being superseded. As contingent generalisations we only hope that they are *true enough*, not universally and unconditionally true. Science aims for truth, but never expects to hit its dead centre. So, like the *generalisations* we *abstract* from fiction, good scientific theories are not *true*, but *true enough*.

As another example, mathematical theories are of such generality that we hope to be able to prove them true or false without even checking any facts other than the definition of their terms. Purely mathematical theories cannot possibly be about the facts, because their truth is independent of the facts. They are merely examples of how to use mathematical terms. So, like the *abstract* patterns we *generalise* from fiction and express in poetry, good mathematical ideas are not significantly true, but merely *useful*.

Science, then, can be like fiction in that it states *generalisations* that are merely *true enough*, and Mathematics can be like poetry in that its real focus is on *abstractions* that are *useful*, not significantly true in themselves.

(This is a summary of a talk presented to The Wednesday meeting 11th May 2022)

Xanadian Rhapsody

Samuele is a composer from Milano,
whose bells and cymbals carry delights
from the Orient.

A saxophone's malleable core sound flows
into Alph the mystic river. Be invited by a Pan flute
to the gardens of Kubla Khan, where the sun enfolds greenery
and wakens scented trees with a piano's melody.
Tunes invade inward, spaces mingle mind with matter.
Brush and cymbals pepper the ear.

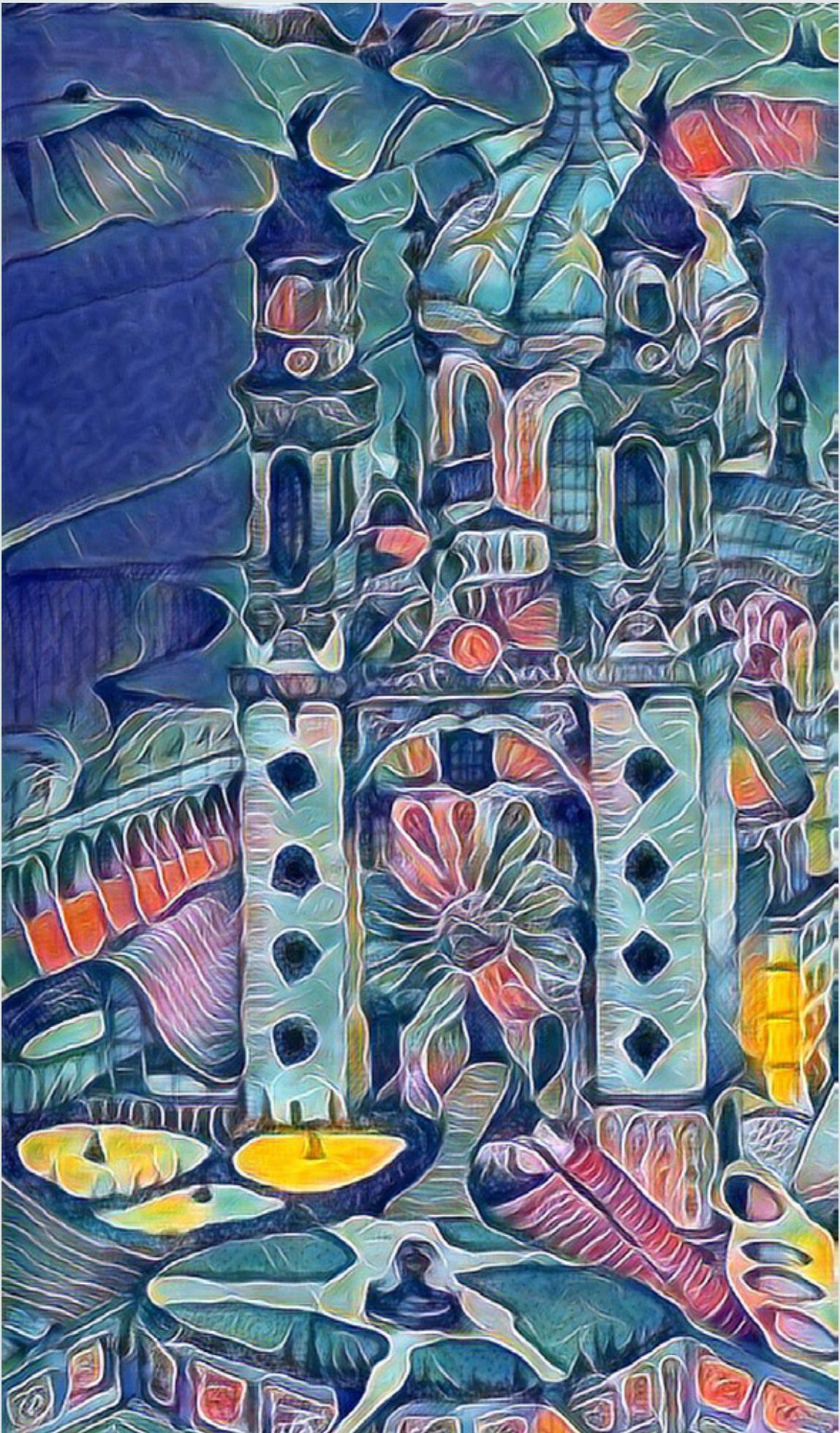
The counterpoint of a saxophone stretches a waning moon.
Bustling noises of percussion erupt in volcanic power,
while octaves jump up, step by step.
Swaying drum beats pulsate and palpitate the moving river.
Superseded by timbales, Mount Abora rises in the sound of a harp.

A world of harmonies assembles a poet's paradise, freeing it
from the chasm theme provoked by the pounding piano,
until the saxophone resonates in a sequence of notes
fuelling an eruption of war memories.
Unease is aroused by music: Beware! Beware!
Close your eyes with holy dread!

A flood of strings brings tension to a climax, then - silence.
Sounds are sky-borne. Percussion gets softer.
The last four bars are repeated and fade out.
Diminuendo. Piano, pianissimo.
Paradise goes on forever.

That is how Samuele tells his story.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*



The Dog

A

A picture-world, up there – that’s all he needs,
Those head-up looks, enough to keep in mind
Except when, close by, something secret feeds
His sense of otherness, of canine kind

As image-captive, like the being whose
Strange presence, though sub-canine and
remote,
Makes his world insecure. So he imbues
Its image with some traits that would denote

‘A bit like us’, and yet next minute turns
His face up, switches on that mute appeal,
And thereby shows how hopelessly he yearns
For Being’s privilege: to bring his meal.

(Rilke-translated by Chris Norris)



B

The Dog’s Riposte (CN to Rilke)

Or so you’d have it, like the head-in-air
Philosophers who’d pretty much repeat
That biblical refrain: the beasts are there
To serve us, help us, save our puny feet

On harsh terrain, take loads we couldn’t bear,
Or – failing that – be killed for pelt or meat,
Thus showing: ‘human’ = they who share
At table, ‘animal’ the stuff they eat.

12



CHRIS NORRIS

But then there's those, like you, who wouldn't care
For such crude sentiments yet still compete
For subtler, poet-suited themes to air
That difference, find new boundaries to beat,

Come up with novel theories to declare,
Of dogs especially, that one should treat
Them well, respect their sentience, and spare
Them needless suffering but not retreat

Beyond the human pale and thus admit
The creatures to our table. Many ways
Around they've gone to make it seem legit,
That old face-saving move, but each betrays

The same desire: to have one creature sit
In judgement, make humanity the test
Of who gets in, choose attributes that fit
Our human aptitudes, and deem the rest

Unable, since non-human, to acquit
Themselves in speech or reasoning as best
Belongs to man alone. So you submit
Your case in that dog-poem, one expressed

With Rilkean tact and feelings exquisite
Yet still with humankind the 'glory, jest,
And riddle' of a world devised to split
Dog-life from yours and see dog dispossessed.



Rilke



The Excluded Middle

WILLIAM BISHOP

During a recent *Wednesday* Zoom meeting the question of *One* and *Three* came into view together with the distinction between them, but the focus of attention soon moved on. Yet the disposition of *One* and *Three* is fascinating. But in this brief contemplation I am going to throw in number *Two* for good measure for *Two* is a formidable number.

Of course, *One* accompanies all numbers since each is an accumulation of *Ones* so that the singular essence of *One* is conveyed to the Many. As an idea *One* constitutes unity (All is One), and yet *Three* in *One* and *One* in *Three* (as in the idea of Trinity) confounds the notion of *One* as singular while going some way to accommodate the Divine Trinity as *One* in three Persons to the singular *One* of monotheism. As an idea or phenomenon a trinity is not mere fantasy but is very much rooted in actuality.

One relates to origins while *Three* activates the process of life where change and movement is mediated through a centre between the polar

opposition arising from the duality of *Two*. The organic world is based on this tripartite principle while the inorganic (lifeless) world is underpinned by the static nature of the number *Two*. This is the digital world of yes-no, on-off with the rigidity of clockwork giving rise to a mechanical universe in contrast to a living and flexible universe associated with Trinity. The duality of *Two* yields a rigid logic while trinity facilitates the logic of thesis-antithesis and synthesis (as attributed to Hegel).

There is a dynamism between the first three numbers of quantity yet it is vital to consider also the qualitative dimension to number. *One* is something rather than nothing while *Two* can be conceived as emanating from *One*, which effectively divides the *One* into two *Ones*, which can be conceived either as a doubling process or a process of division. In a sense *Three* can be seen emerging from this division of Unity through dynamic action (polar opposition) between the two *Ones*. And interestingly this is the dynamic for the generation of life: when dynamically charged opposing units (*Ones*) interact to produce a third unit which then multiplies by division. Where this multiplication happens under the influence of a third force this seems to link itself back to the original *One* because a new unity is imposed at a later or advanced level of development to produce a unified whole. Without such subtle control such cell division would result in cancer (uncontrolled growth in cell division). Utilitarian arithmetic ignores the qualitative dimension to number but this continues to retain an air of mystery.

So, in terms of dynamics, *One* is origin and unity and *Two* comes into being through the division of *One*. This duality gives the semblance of conflict where unity is divided against itself. This can be seen as the conflict spoken of by Heraclitus as necessary for the underlying dynamic of change (movement). Harmony is restored by a third force, which



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links back to Unity. This is the dynamic of the Divine Trinity where three ‘unities’ act as *One*. This confounds human comprehension, but if *One* is interpreted as *Being* then ‘it’ is active (hence the apparent emanation) and this *One* should not be taken as a dead Unit.

When *Two* is taken by itself in the non-living arithmetical sense then we have a rigid dualism of binary calculus upon which digital technology is founded. As implied earlier, a clockwork universe based on yes-no dualism can imitate the movement of life but it lacks the third element which enables the dynamism associated with life. A universe premised on digital technology is an advance on a clockwork universe but however complex it still remains a copy (a simulation of life). And in an increasingly digitally-supported world it becomes a matter of human destiny to distinguish between the living and the smart imitation of life. Digital dualism excludes the middle (the third element) that could moderate its polarized condition and it is this third factor that determines the crucial difference between a mechanical and a living process. Of course life itself relies upon a degree of ‘mechanization’ (autonomous systems and ‘instinct’) but this is only a part of the whole.

Once upon a time, within the politics of the so-called United Kingdom an attempt had been made to introduce a third major party in order to moderate a situation of binary opposition between two major parties, a kind of ‘third way’. Unfortunately, given an opportunity for batting in the cricket match of government it went into coalition so that *Two* became *One* resulting in dilution of the third dimension. Even today Parliament maintains a conflict of opposites within its debating chamber, which presents us with a fine example of the aspect of quality inherent in number. Polarity means opposition which means strife, and polarization can lead to (‘civil’) war, yet polarity modified by a centre is able to harness the energy of polarity into a workable harmonious dynamic (assuming dialogue as the intermediary is possible). One could go on to say more for there is so much that can be said but that must suffice for now since there is so much more upon which our focus must attend.

- William Bishop’s new book (*Foundations for a Humanitarian Economy: Re-Thinking Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy*) has just been published by Routledge.

The Wednesday

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Photography



The same full moon during Easter, Passover and Ramadan for the first time in about thirty years.
This picture was taken by Virginia Khuri