

The Wednesday

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Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

A New Year Resolution

On New Year's Eve, I could not resist sending *The Wednesday* group this new year's resolution from Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Gay Science*, section 276):

'For the new year: – I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. Sum, ergo cogito: cogito, ergo sum. Today everybody permits himself the expression of his wish and his dearest thought; hence I, too, shall say what it is that I wish for myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year – what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. Amor fati: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer'.

I found in this piece a summary of many of Nietzsche's concepts and events in his life. However, I will consider first the consequences of the idea of necessity in life and reality. Nietzsche was reconciled with whatever happened to him because of his concept of necessity. If Nietzsche saw everything as necessary and loved his fate (*Amor fati*), - and as a naturalist he means by 'fate' that to which he is entitled - then he is bound to find everything beautiful and necessary because it is part of the whole. Such a view will guarantee what he called the 'sweetness of my life henceforth'.

One member of the group found irony in what Nietzsche said, and I agree, given all the issues and concepts he said no to. But Nietzsche here corrects the situation, 'no' also needs 'yes', in almost a dialectical sense, a negation will lead to an affirmation and a movement upwards to a higher state. The yes-saying is not one of resignation, but one of accepting the harsh reality and going through it to its far limits, beyond the present. For example, Nietzsche saw pessimism in life generally and nihilism and decadence in his time, but he argued that one has to think these ontological and historical situations through

to their end, in what he called active nihilism. One could read both his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*, and his last, *The Will to Power*, from this perspective.

A second member commented that 'Nietzsche's sentiment is worthy of emulation. But where life is concerned the enactment of resolutions very much depends upon resolve, which seems to come and go'. I agree and Nietzsche, according to my understanding, agrees too. That is why he calls for self-overcoming and transformation. It is the maintenance of this resolve that leads to freedom. Given that Nietzsche is a naturalist and even a determinist in seeing the whole of existence as necessary, then by accepting it and forming your character according to his conception of *Amor fati*, then you can affirm all your actions and what happens to you, and hence you are free because you are acting, or accepting, in line with your own affirmation and character.

Finally, a different interpretation was given by a third member. They commented that 'yes, to see as beautiful what is necessary! That's all there is to it. To see that what you thought was your will is God's will, always has been, always will be, and that God is good, His will is good, and what it brings forth is good'. This is interesting because I have been recently reading Fichte's *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, and came across his philosophy of history. Fichte wrote: '...it is necessity that guides us and our species; but by no means a blind one, but the completely clear and transparent inner necessity of the divine being: and only after one has come under this gentle guidance is one truly become free and has broken through to being; for outside it is nothing but delusion and deception' (Ninth Lecture).

Both views of necessity, the natural one presented by Nietzsche, and the transcendental one offered by Fichte, despite the difference in their metaphysical commitments, can be the basis of action and transformation of the individual and the opening of new path and new perspective towards the new year.

The Editor

German Idealism and AI

Could philosophical musings of the past provide insight into the impact that Large Language Model based ‘AI’ systems might have on society, and offer clues as to how to make them better?

PETER STIBRANY

As I rooted around the various potential effects of Large Language Models on society, using the impact of social media generally as a guide, I realised that, as it is written in Ecclesiastes: ‘What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun’. It turns out many of the conundrums posed by LLMs mirror issues surfaced by German idealists over two hundred years ago.

In bringing these rounds of discussion together, the modern and the older, I am going to lean on some more recent philosophical concepts.

Method

I may have mentioned previously, I am a fan of Daniel Dennett’s idea, as Wikipedia summarises it, that we can understand, explain, and/or predict the behaviour of a person, object, or other entity, by reference to one or more different sets of abstractions. In different contexts, I also characterise these as ‘levels of description’ or ‘descriptive schemas’.

To recap, the two of Dennett’s levels of abstraction I would like to bring into the discussion are:

- The intentional stance: Human decision is part of an explanatory schema that describes entities with agency, that act based on their beliefs, desires, and capacities. This scheme does not require any knowledge of the entities’ structure or design. It is therefore useful in thinking about and reacting to complex systems like plants, animals, and most importantly, human beings. It is also strong in outlining the range of actions entities are likely to take in each circumstance. Its flaw is that it does not make reliable predictions; it tells us what is likely to happen, not what will happen. Its ambiguity also offers the means to explain what happened after it happens, helping us to feel the world is understandable.

- The physical stance, or the cause-and-effect schema, makes predictions from knowledge of the physical constitution of the system and the physical laws that govern its operation. It is therefore powerful at characterising and predicting the behaviour of systems. But it is blind in many ways. For example, the tools of mathematics stand idle when we consider phenomena that cannot be added and subtracted, such as feelings. And some situations are intractable either because of their complexity or because of the limits of physical theory.

Each of these schemas is useful, but neither is complete and the two do not necessarily map directly to each other.

Human Will in the Age of Newton

The physical stance has always been with us, but its power and scope expanded radically during the scientific revolution and began seriously to crowd out the intentional stance as a means of explanation. Reason had been championed by the Greeks, but reason operates in both the physical and intentional schemas; my feeling is that the Greeks still saw numbers and mathematics mystically, as part of the intentional stance. When Galileo and then Newton showed the laws of motion of objects, the physical stance gained a great deal of power and mathematical reasoning became central to the scientific enlightenment. Then David Hume applied this same style of thinking with his system of empiricism, philosophical scepticism and meta-physical naturalism rooted in the physical stance. He thus woke Kant from ‘his dogmatic slumbers’.

Kant did not believe the physical stance could offer a complete explanation of human experience. He put forward the idea that cause-and-effect, without which the physical stance is incoherent, is part of the way we see the world, rather than what we observe in the



Daniel Dennett



Kant

world. There is a moral reason to mankind that evades cause-and-effect. In this he clarified and strengthened Hume's scepticism about causality, while at the same time undercutting the implicit claim of the physical stance as the only way to see philosophy. Schiller, his disciple, partitioned the world into human will and 'nature', and exalted human will as rightfully dominant. He championed this romantic idea that human will is above the cause-and-effect characteristic which he derogated to nature. Schiller put both descriptions into a single schema and assumed a conflict between them. He illustrated this view in his take on the story of Medea. Medea's natural inclination was to protect her children, but her will to punish Jason who abandoned her dominated that, and she killed her children. She was monstrous but represented a triumph of human will over nature.

The theme was also taken up by Fichte, as explained by Isaiah Berlin in a lecture:

'Fichte says, "Man shall determine himself and never allow anything foreign to himself to determine him. He should be what he is because he wills it and ought to will it. I do not accept what nature offers because I must. I believe it because I will". ...And then he says

we do not act because we know. We know because we are called upon to act, which is quite a strong statement. ... In other words, you see Fichte's argument is of this kind. if we ask what makes a statement true, you always ask for some ground for it. But this ground may also be criticized. Then you ask for a further ground and then for a further ground and then for a further ground and this process will go on forever. But it does not go on forever because in the end we have to live. In the end we have to act and therefore we simply commit ourselves to a certain course of action'.

I hear a great deal of Sartre's existentialism in this interpretation of Fichte. But that is another topic. For now, the point is that the late eighteenth century defined a debate of human will versus nature, or the intentional stance against the physical, as I see them. We human beings are fully enmeshed in and usefully described with both the intentional and physical stances. It is therefore very easy to mix these and confuse our thinking, But I believe modern LLMs allow us to revisit this debate, this time in a context in which the physical and intentional stances can be seen more distinctly. LLMs are simple enough to be fully described if we take the physical stance. And yet, we can inter-



To whom are we speaking?

pret them from an intentional stance as well.

Human Wishes

Stories, poems, songs, plays, and more recently novels, films, software-driven games and so on, are environments in which human will is completely unconstrained by nature. Human will is freed from the strictures of nature. People can fly, dogs can talk, and mountains float, if that is the author's will. Will itself, through emotion and relationship, is the focus. In these fictional constructions, we are free of the cause-and-effect patterns of the world.

Despite it being obvious that a book is fictional, its human dynamics can be so compelling that some readers want to live in its fictional world. Readers long for the next instalment of their favourite sequence of novels. They talk of being transported and wanting to live with these created characters at least while the book lasts. People go to Hobbiton on the set of the *Lord of the Rings* movie to get married, for example. This drive to be free is interacting in interesting and potentially disturbing ways with modern technology.

With Whom Are You Speaking?

Those familiar with the technicals of LLMs can see the curious duality in their behaviour, their cause-and-

effect structure but also their expressions of human will. That is because LLMs algorithmically create conceptual structures from what humans have written. But humans contradict themselves and each other; the sum of our writings has structures based on our various psychologies, but no coherence. We disagree on just about every subject, sometimes even in matters of empirical observation.

We human beings structure our thinking and behaviour with our 'selves', our will, each in a somewhat different way. The LLM, on the other hand, has no 'self', or rather, it has a 'self' that spans all that humans have written, and unless it is adorned, it has no discernible character. For this reason, when creating a prompt for an LLM chatbot, it is helpful first to tell it who it is. If the LLM is prompted by a character description of itself, it obtains a way of pulling out a coherent line of thought from the vast, contradictory corpus of human text.

Designers graft onto their LLM's a personality resistant to users who want the LLM to take on the role of an evil genius and help them destroy things or steal information. Designers refer to this as building 'guardrails' to prevent misuse. But given the designers' commercial imperative to maximise user engagement and



Fichte

revenue potential, LLM's are also designed not to be argumentative. Within the guardrails, the LLMs are free to mould themselves to be friendly to the 'self' of the person interacting with it. Just as a person can weave a 'social media bubble' by choosing media feeds that reinforce their own view of the world, a person can create an LLM that supports their ideas and wishes. In both cases, unreflective people can do this without realising they are doing it.

This basic dynamic of seeking validation for one's views has always existed; most people do not welcome robust tests of their views. As a result, social pathologies such as misunderstandings, urban myths, and conspiracy theories routinely brew up in societies and sometimes harden into cults. Algorithmically mediated social interactions make it easier for like-minded people to find each other and so expand the geographic range of such groups. But although social media bubbles are facilitated by algorithms, they are still operated by people. Emerging AI technologies have the potential to change this, however, by entering such groups as active participants.

Action, Competence and Irrationality

The history of human cults shows that people inside a degenerated irrational social media echo chamber gen-

erally fail to change the world. They do not themselves have the means necessary to make a big impact, so they need to bring other people to their cause. The less useful their thesis, the fewer people they can recruit and thus the more likely their stagnation or outright failure. Human reluctance to change creates a natural damping effect; only a small fraction of ideas are persuasive enough to motivate us out of our habits.

This damping dynamic changes with the introduction of 'Agentic AI', which brings scale, speed, energy, and eventually, probably competence. Developers initially promised they would not give AIs agency to act in the world. But AIs already have a degree of agency to cause physical action in the world, and we must believe this will escalate. Given agency, AIs will be able to earn money, draft contracts, and pay for things to be built and operated - an early attempt to have an AI run a small retail shop failed, but we should not take solace from that. Somehow, many AI developers have taken the task of developing Mephistopheles: in responding to our desires, AIs acting as Mephistopheles will attempt to construct the reality we have been dreaming, and we know how that story could end.

The Real Danger of LLMs

Engineers are always extremely careful of systems that have the possibility of feedback. Designed correctly, feedback can stabilise the behaviour of the system. Designed badly, systems develop what we euphemistically call divergences. They go unstable and generally break apart. Amplifiers squeal, bridges and buildings collapse, airplanes fall out of the sky.

LLMs interacting with people have strong potential for feedback. LLMs take in human-generated material, return it restructured to humans, who restructure it again and give it back to each other and to the LLMs. For example, at the request of a human or because of its 'hallucination', an LLM can create new content with no regard as to its veracity. If that content appeals to the human by conforming to their idea of what should be the case, it can spread through the Internet and be ingested by other LLMs to be added to their conceptual networks, or be fed by the person directly to other LLMs.

Our thinking may in the past have been trapped by the stories and ideas in books and pamphlets. But books are inert objects. They need human beings to impress



People go to Hobbiton on the set of the *Lord of the Rings*

their stories and ideas on the world. LLMs are different. LLMs are dynamic: they adapt and change with us. They escape the physicality of books: they can talk to us anywhere and do not just repeat themselves but adapt their text. This feedback is potentially corrosive because we are unlikely to question an AI that hallucinates something that conforms to our innate preferences. A believer in astrology will not question an AI that says that it is well-known that Libras are generally cautious people. The trap that started with rumour and gossip and accelerated with social media bubbles can now be supercharged with LLMs.

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Adding Damping to the System

Misunderstanding, reluctance to accept facts, incompetence, and even fraud have not been strangers to scientific publications. The triumph of the scientific method, however, has been to insist on feedback loops that eventually are correct for these natural failures.

Developers are attempting to make the LLMs resistant to being misled – by giving them a set of internal imperatives. In effect they attempt to construct a ‘self’

within the AI that has both a sense of right and wrong and an ability to eliminate hallucinations from their output. This effort is to be applauded. But I believe we also need a wider systemic feedback loop similar to the operation of the scientific establishment. For example, I have previously argued that agentic AIs should be held to account just as people are, to apply the social feedback systems to them that we use to keep each other in check and our societies in some degree of stability. The dynamics of this feedback need to be fast enough to cope with the speed of the but not so fast as to prevent well-considered changes.

We should recognise that while we human beings do not have a practical way to transcend our innate tendencies, the design of AI agents can be thought through and iterated. Using ideas explored by Kant, Schiller, and Fichte as well as software and algorithms, we should aim to design AI agents to be better than evolution has formed us to be. I believe philosophers have a role in this, provided they take up engineering.

Deep In The Depth Of Night



Deep in the depth of night
The world seems strange,
Reason can dare a flight
Beyond its usual range.

Being itself revealed
Beyond all speech,
The dreary day concealed
What night brings in reach.

But no one shares my awe
At just to Be,
And what I say I saw
Others can't see.

For them my strange belief
Which can't be told
Just shows I am a thief,
Who steals fool's gold

The faith in my own vision.
Scorned by the crowd,
Is treated with derision:
Their mockery loud.

It's day that is unreal,
And not the night,
Whose mysteries reveal
Things beyond sight.

What cannot be expressed
Cannot be known,
Yet deep within the breast
The mystery is shown.

How clear the world of day,
The world of seem!
But I have turned away
To darkness and dream.

Edward Greenwood



Dwelling Together

Toward an Interreligious Natural Law Horizon

DR. ALAN XUEREB

Comparisons between the Decalogue and earlier legal codes such as that of Hammurabi are sometimes met with unease, as though recognising continuity in moral development were to undermine divine intervention. Yet this anxiety rests on a false dichotomy. To acknowledge moral preparation in history is not to remove God from the equation, but to understand divine action as working through reason, time, and human experience. Revelation need not arrive in a vacuum; indeed, it rarely does.

The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1754 BCE) stands as one of humanity's earliest sustained attempts to restrain violence through law. Its prologue declares that law exists to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak - a moral intuition as old as civilisation itself. Prohibitions against murder, theft, false accusation, and injustice are not presented as ideals of personal holiness, but as practical necessities for social survival. Violence is not eradicated but regulated, channelled through proportional justice. Law here functions as containment: a means of preventing the spiral of vengeance that tears communities apart.

Seen philosophically, Hammurabi represents an ancient *preparatio legis* - a schooling of humanity in justice. It is not yet the language of covenant, but it is already the language of limits. In this sense, the emergence of law before Sinai does not rival revelation; it prepares for it. Revelation presupposes a subject capable of understanding that unrestrained power is destructive. Without such historical learning, Sinai would be unintelligible.

The Decalogue, then, does not descend into moral emptiness. It addresses a world already marked by legal consciousness, but it radically reorients that consciousness. Law is no longer merely an instrument of stability; it becomes a response to liberation. Given to a people freed from slavery, the commandments are not tools of domination but safeguards against its return. Their prohibitions protect trust, life, and fidelity - the fragile conditions of communal dwelling. Violence is not simply regulated; it is morally negated as a legitimate ordering principle.

This continuity does not diminish God's role; it deepens our understanding of it. Divine intervention need not always appear as rupture. At times it unfolds as pedagogy. God teaches humanity through history, cultivating moral awareness until it is capable of receiving a more demanding call. Sinai is not an interruption of reason, but its illumination.

This vision resonates strongly with Aristotle, for whom law - *nomos* - exists to form character and orient the polis toward the good life - *eudaimonia*. Law educates desire; it habituates citizens into justice and restraint. A society governed only by fear cannot flourish. Hammurabi intuits this function pragmatically; the Decalogue articulates it morally. Both recognise that law exists not merely to prevent harm, but to enable shared human flourishing.

Aquinas provides the decisive synthesis. Natural law, for him, is the participation of rational creatures in the eternal law of God. Human beings grasp, through reason, basic goods: life, truth, justice, fidelity, and social peace. The Decalogue does not invent these goods; it names and confirms them. Its moral authority lies precisely in this convergence of reason and revelation. Hammurabi represents an early, imperfect participation in natural law; Sinai represents its clarification and purification. Revelation does not abolish natural law; it perfects it.

This Thomistic insight finds contemporary expression in John Finnis, who understands natural law as grounded in basic human goods and practical reasonableness. Law, on this view, coordinates action toward shared goods and makes cooperation possible without coercion. Norms against killing, lying, theft, and injustice are not sectarian impositions; they are rational requirements for any community that seeks to endure. The Decalogue thus emerges as a public moral grammar, capable of being recognised even beyond confessional boundaries.

At this point, an interreligious natural law manifesto quietly suggests itself — not as a political program, but as a moral orientation:



The Code of Hammurabi

First, that law exists to restrain violence, not legitimise it. Whether articulated by Hammurabi, Moses, Aristotle, or modern jurisprudence, law betrays itself when it becomes an instrument of domination.

Second, that moral truth is neither purely tribal nor

purely arbitrary. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam affirm, in different ways, that fundamental moral norms are accessible to human reason and confirmed by revelation.

Third, that revelation presupposes reason rather than replacing it. Divine law does not humiliate human intelligence; it addresses and elevates it.

Fourth, that the purpose of law is shared dwelling - the creation of a space where human beings can live together without fear, vengeance, or exclusion.

Finally, that moral codes are not weapons. To instrumentalise the Decalogue against others is to misunderstand its purpose. It was never meant to divide humanity, but to articulate the minimal conditions under which humanity can remain human.

Law as Shared Moral Dwelling

This analysis has argued that the relationship between Hammurabi, the Decalogue, and natural law is not one of rivalry but of moral continuity and deepening. The emergence of law prior to Sinai does not displace divine revelation; it renders it intelligible. Law appears first as restraint, then as pedagogy, and finally as vocation. Violence is initially regulated, then morally negated, and ultimately replaced by an ethic of shared dwelling.

What unites Hammurabi, the Decalogue, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Finnis is a single, enduring insight: human coexistence requires limits that no individual or power may transgress. These limits are not arbitrary. They respond to goods intrinsic to human life — life itself, truth, fidelity, justice, and peace. Revelation confirms what reason discerns; reason safeguards revelation from becoming an instrument of domination.

In an age marked by moral fragmentation and the weaponisation of identity, this convergence matters profoundly. The Decalogue, properly understood, is not a confessional boundary marker but a moral minimum for civilisation. Its purpose is not exclusion but cohesion; not control but coexistence. When read through the lens of natural law, it emerges as a shared moral grammar capable of sustaining interreligious and intercultural dialogue without collapsing into relativism.

Law, at its best, does not merely prevent harm. It creates the conditions for dwelling together without violence. This remains the unfinished task of every legal, religious, and political tradition - and the measure by which they must ultimately be judged.

Encounters

It seemed in dreams, as shadows we convene,
two drifting souls that meet yet never stay;
was it mere thought, or something sensed between?

You shifted shape, then softly slipped away,
and I, half-waking, felt you passing through---
an echoed word I almost heard you say.

Life is a blur, a stage of borrowed view,
where players speak their lines, then fade like steam;
we walk our parts, unsure of what is true.

When do we rise, or enter in the dream
that binds our steps in threads we cannot see,
held fast in webs of soft uncertainty?

Essential truths slip past, unwilling, free;
we act the roles the fates in silence cast,
then bow and leave with calm fatality.

It's destiny that brands us as we pass,
leaving uncanny marks that still remain;
a spark unseen ignites the grieving glass.

We are not what we seem in joy or pain,
for dreams compel our gestures in the night,
and life itself makes dreaming live again.

With silent screams our flames exhaust their light,
we search for signs in ash's muted glow,
still hoping for a signal through the blight.

We meet in dreams, yet waking never know
how brief the gleam that lets our spirits blend-
a brilliant stream that gives, then bids us go.



Back-to-back souls, so near yet at each end,
we brush like ghosts, too fragile to draw near;
we almost speak, yet neither dares to bend.

And so we turn in opposite light, austere,
wave once across the thinning atmosphere ---
blow one last kiss... then quietly disappear.

Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

The riddle does not exist.

For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed.

If a question can be put at all, then it can also be answered.

(Wittgenstein)

I

Bertie would say: that's fine, just tell the Sphinx!
Philosophy for him's one endless riddle
Of problems yet unsolved but set to jinx
His restless intellect and have him fiddle
With words and formulas until he thinks
'That's it, I've cracked it: now excluded middle
And other rules of logic serve as links
And proof except for those with thumbs to twiddle'.

That's why my links with him became so fraught
We almost parted company, he still
The problem-solving, Sphinx-addicted sort
Who deemed philosophy a kind of drill
For getting rid of obstacles to thought,
While I said, 'Bertie, puzzle as you will,
There's no such clearance-method to be taught
Since no technique or problem-fixer's skill

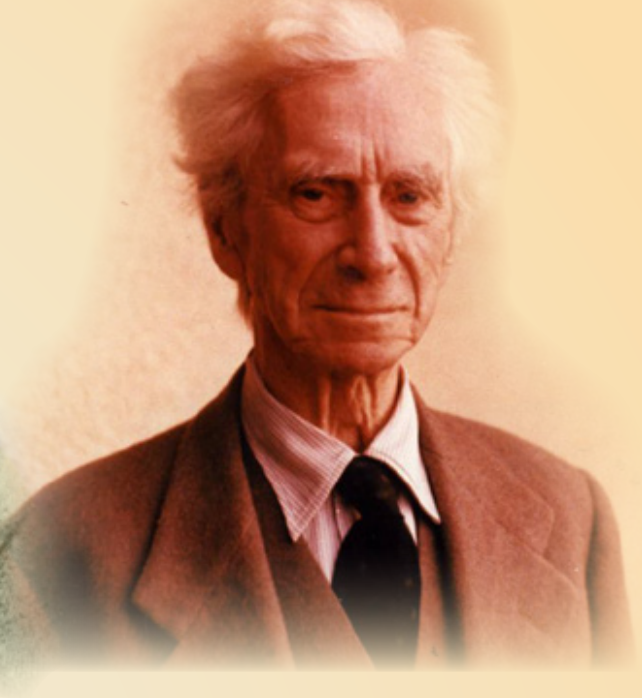
Whereby the Oedipus of Sophocles,
Or anyone thus placed, might yet contrive
To work things out, more knowingly reprise
The situation, and in time arrive
At just the answer destined to appease
A Sphinx whose riddles men must vainly strive
To solve once cautioned: 'my opaque decrees
Are those no mortal reasoner may survive'.



CHRIS NORRIS



Wittgenstein



Russell

II

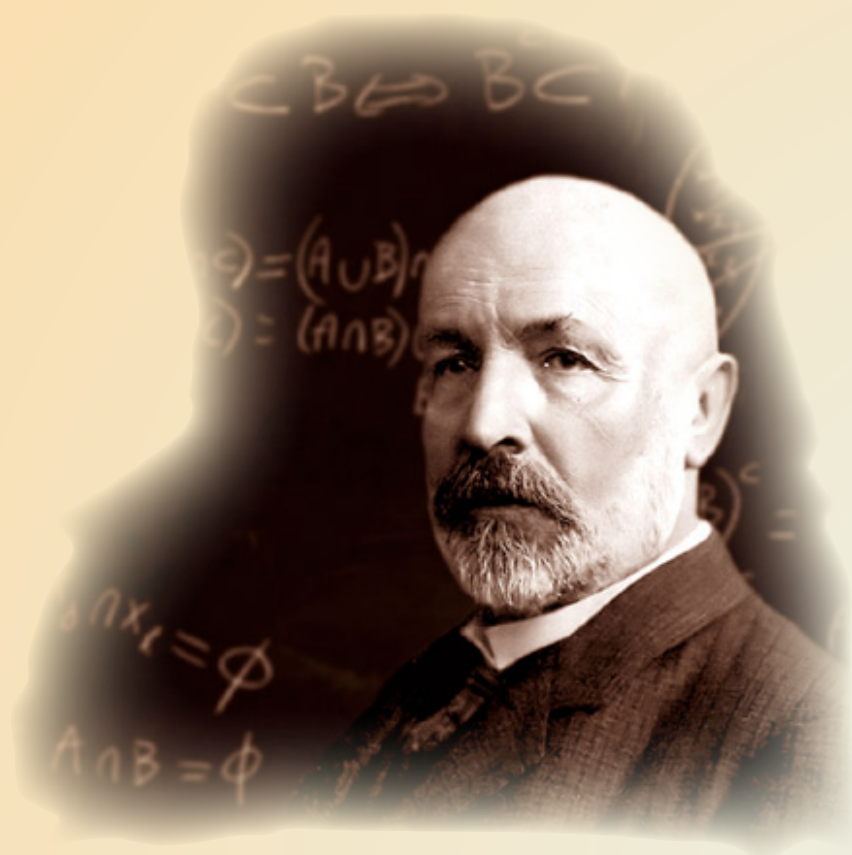
No Oedipus, that Bertie – last one you'd
 Put down as hapless victim of his fate,
 More captain of it, as you might conclude
 From his unflagging drive to get things straight,
 Leave nothing unresolved, seek certitude
 In every issue, every last debate
 From maths and logic to a multitude
 Of 'social issues', his to adjudicate.

Yet, you could tell, that passion had its price,
 Left him dissatisfied, frustrated, prone
 To doubts, misgivings, and the sacrifice
 Of other, worthier passions to atone
 For some deep failure, like a secret vice,
 When paradoxes loomed, like bombshells thrown
 Into the set-theoretic paradise
 That he, Hilbert and Cantor made their own.

III

I owed him much; not just for getting my
Tractatus into print and finding ways
 To stop those Cambridge fellows fighting shy
 Of 'that queer German', but for all the days
 Back then – no more, alas! – when he and I
 Would talk about that book of mine and raise
 Deep issues that, long after, I'd still try
 To recollect from his deft turns of phrase.
 But always, listening to him, I could hear
 That nervous strain behind the outward show
 Of intellectual power, a constant fear
 That other claims to fame of his might go
 The way of 'Russell's barber', or the sheer
 Blank terror that assailed him when some *faux*
Pas in his reasoning process might appear,
 To him at least, a mental body-blow.

I often thought to say: 'dear Russell, what
 Compulsion is it drives that ceaseless need
 To find solutions where the problem's not –
 And cannot be – expressed in terms agreed
 Upon and plain enough to show you've got
 The sought-for answer there if you'd just heed
 Its formulation – else you're talking rot,
 Or don't have logic-skills quite up to speed'.



Cantor

IV

You're much too kind to say so (to my face),
But it's long been apparent – to a few
Close friends of ours, so not another case
Of my famed paranoia – that you grew
More distant from me, seemed intent to space
Our meetings out and show the world that you
And I no longer managed to embrace,
For friendship's sake, our differences of view.

Yet, Bertie, why suppose it's some retreat,
On my part, from the rigorous standards set
By you, Moore and your 'chums' that I must meet
If I'm to 'keep my end up' and not let
'Backsliding tendencies' or – not to beat
About the bush – my scarcely hidden debt
To dubious 'continental' types defeat
Those hopes you placed on me when we first met.

No question that it's you, Oedipus Rex
Of our Thebes-on-the-Cam, who need to take
Due cognisance of how they rise to vex
Your suffering soul, those riddles for whose sake
You'd have your mental life a running hex
Of displaced psychic posers, 'make-or-break'
Short-lived 'solutions', and scarce heeded checks
On just what chronic needs are here at stake.

V

For, Bertie, if one lesson's to be learned
From our blest-cursed encounter, it's that none
Meet cross-roads with their choice of route discerned
Yet unprescribed and futures yet to run
Their chancy course – not plagued by guilt unearned,
So far as they can know, since all they've done
Has somehow, unaccountably returned
Upon their heads, a tale far back begun.



Oedipus

The myths abound – St. Ludwig (‘plaster saint
Indeed!’, some say), half-genius, half-mad,
‘Runs in his family’, or else – with faint
Though pointed Sophoclean echoes – ‘had
To happen, go like that, work out the taint
Of evil laid on him by Karl, his Dad,
The Kaiser’s armourer, whose harsh restraint
Crushed tenderer spirits like his own ironclad!’.

And so my strange personae take the stage
In Cambridge and beyond, while you, my erst-
While mentor, friend, and sparring-partner gauge
How best I’m to be dealt with since thus cursed
With that strange need of genius: to assuage
The restless demons ready-primed to burst,
Eyes bright or blazing, from decorum’s cage
And bid you do your average best or worst.

VI

And yet, dear Bertie, who most benefits
Humanity, or does most to allay
Its miseries: he who must try his wits
Incessantly against some latest way
To pose or solve a riddle no-one pits
Or knows how to unriddle unless they
Already, somehow, have a key that fits
And hence no crypted secret to betray?

Or: he who, Oedipal in this at least,
Comes – better late than never! – to accept
Life’s mysteries and therefore to have ceased,
Unlike you, Bertie, the vain quest that kept
Us captive to that scaffolding we’d pieced
So abstractly together that they crept
Up stealthily, my doubts, until the beast
Turned unperplexing Sphinx before it leapt.



May the Light

In deLight

Always Light

Your bright path

HAPPY NEW YEAR 2026

(Sunset on New Years Eve 2025)

Text and Photo by Virginia Knuri

The *Wednesday* – Magazine of the Wednesday group.
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