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Editorial

Limits of Interpretation

Philosophical texts are necessarily open for interpretation. Some of these interpretations go beyond what the original texts are saying or what their authors intended. I wrote on a similar problem in a previous editorial, and I recognised then an important advantage in missing the original intention of the writer, in that it often allows a creative reconstruction, and may lead to novel ideas. However, I came recently to realise that there are limits to interpretations, depending on the type of interpretation and classification of the original text. I started to make a distinction between philosophical reconstruction and historical accuracy, what belongs to philosophy and what belongs to the history of ideas. This is the idea that I wish to elaborate on here.

Often you come across interpretations that you have the feeling, or the evidence, that they have violated the original text. For example, interpreting classical texts such as those by Plato in the opposite spirit of Plato's other writings. In these interpretations, Plato becomes the philosopher of particulars, change and mortality, rather than Forms, permanence and immortality. Similarly, the same has been done with texts by Nietzsche, whether to turn him into a Fascist or the opposite. All this may be philosophically open for a debate, but historically and textually could be on the wrong track. Nietzsche wrote in a preface to *Ecce Homo*: 'Listen to me! For I am thus and thus. Do not, after all, confound me with what I am not'. Michael Tanner in his short, but good book on Nietzsche, commented on this saying: 'In the century since he wrote that, few of his readers, fewer still of those who have heard about him, have done nothing else'. You can apply this to many more philosophers.

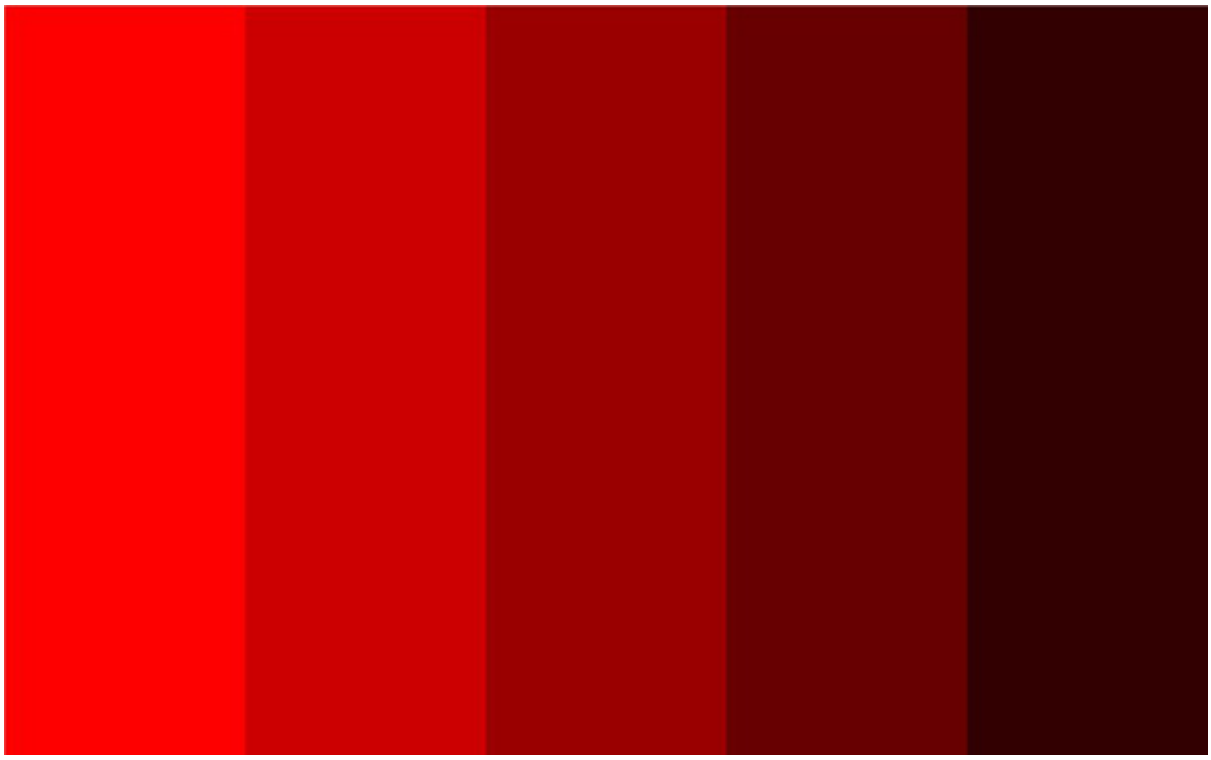
I accept that the ideas of a philosopher, once made known through writing or lecturing, are not his property anymore. They are part of the canon of philosophy and they are open to development and interpretation. They move from his personal history into philosophy. They are no longer part of the biography of the single philosopher but part of the republic of ideas. However, there is a limit to this move from individuality to universality, and there comes a point when we do not recognise these thoughts as belonging to the philosopher they are attributed to, for example some of the philosophers dealt with by Deleuze. Is Deleuze's reading of Leibniz or Nietzsche reliable as a source of learning about these philosophers, or do they speak more of Deleuze himself and his thoughts?

Although the distinction I am making runs across the board, it seems to work differently in the two traditions of philosophy, analytical and continental philosophy. I used to think that the difference arises from the richness of continental philosophy and the kind of questions that it deals with, but I came to think that the difference is between the conceptual clarity that distinguishes analytical philosophy and the clouded vision that marks lots of continental writings and the issues they deal with. Concepts are general and well defined, but philosophy that is close to experience is seldom far from such clarity. This does not make continental philosophy less attractive or intellectually sound, on the contrary it makes it rich, for example in Nietzsche's work, but the questions of continental philosophy introduce an additional layer of complexity, such as the Deconstruction of Derrida or the Being of Heidegger. Language becomes particularised to these philosophers and their writings. They invent concepts that require you to think in a different vocabulary.

What could be done with these texts? Perhaps, the first thing is to make them clear, especially when they are written in a different language and they are not available to the general reader, that will be part of history of ideas and biography, that such and such philosopher wrote such and such works. But philosophy is not happy with just a translation or reproducing of these works. They call for creative interpretation to become philosophical. The richer the original text the more possibility and interesting their interpretations.

Perhaps the matter of interpretation depends on the personal qualities and moral character of the interpreter: does he want to mislead and become dishonest? Is he allowing his prejudices to control him and his interpretation? Often you find that a philosopher who is against metaphysics present a philosopher who is primarily interested in metaphysics as purified from his metaphysics, or highlighting the work and ideas that suit the interpreter and refuse to comment on other works that do not. You find the same trend with teaching philosophy where, for example, Plato's works of a metaphysical nature, such as *Timaeus*, are ignored in favour of his more epistemological and ethical works. The problem becomes significant when the matter concerns foundational texts in philosophy. Readers refer to these texts to support their points of view, and it is important that they get close to the spirit of the original texts and their authors.

The Editor



Shades of red

On Vagueness

Vagueness is a problem not only in philosophy, but also in daily life. It manifests in language and behaviour, and it happens in numerous situations. The article below discusses different aspects of vagueness and situations in which it occurs.

CHRIS SEDDON

Vagueness takes different forms. One particularly fundamental form arises from the fact that we cannot know exactly how we will use an idea in every possible situation. In that sense, the idea itself is vague, whether it is expressed in words or merely exhibited in our behaviour.

Colours, for example, are notoriously vague. We may for example be quite clear that certain shades are definitely red, but disagree or even be unsure ourselves whether other shades are too purple or too orange to be regarded as red.

This article focuses on vagueness that might be regarded as unavoidable rather than deliberate. For example, red is more vague than crimson, in the sense that anything crimson is necessarily red but not vice versa. We may still choose to specify red rather than crimson or scarlet when we do not wish to express a more precise preference. However, we cannot entirely avoid the vagueness inherent in specifying some colour. Instead of red, we may choose to specify a more precise range of light frequencies, although we may not wish to be that precise. But even that will not be an absolutely precise idea: it appears that colours are not merely a matter of light frequency; and even if they were, time and hence frequency cannot be measured precisely; furthermore, we now know that historically we have not understood the nature of light and time in every situation, so it seems likely in all humility that we still do not. Even mathematics relies on the fundamental idea of logical negation - the idea that some things are not true - so even mathematics is subject to the vagueness inherent in that idea.

A pair of chairs on the island of Vatersay in the Outer Hebrides

Colours, time and negation are not the only examples of vague ideas. What is a chair, for example? Does it stop being a chair and become a stool as soon as it rests only on one leg? How wide can it be before it becomes a bench? Why is the driver's seat in a car not a chair? If it were just a question of having no legs, would an armchair without castors be a chair? When is a cushion part of a chair and when is it an accessory? How many parts can be replaced before a chair becomes a different chair?

In this sense, vagueness is the rule rather than the exception. It characterises not only our everyday ideas, but also the comparatively more precise ideas of science and even the much more precise ideas of mathematics. It is not merely a feature of language either: it can apply even when ideas are not expressed in words but merely exhibited in behaviour, so it is a feature of the ideas themselves. For example, just as we can infer from somebody's behaviour whether they can distinguish crimson from scarlet, so we can observe whether they reliably and consistently distinguish between reddish orange and orangey red. This is not to say that every idea is exhibited in behaviour. It would be difficult, for example, to discern the abstract ideas of philosophy in a person's behaviour apart from their comments in a philosophical discussion, but if they literally played no part at all in their behaviour it would draw into question whether their words really expressed any ideas. Hence this form of vagueness cannot be completely explained as an inconsistent use of words, or a loose connection between words and the ideas they express. An explanation of this fundamental form of vagueness must therefore be based not on language but on ideas, which may be expressed in language or exhibited in behaviour.

Vagueness and Intentional Actions

Ideas have their origin in our need to understand intentional actions. A person's intentional actions are those which are explained by supposing that they have certain beliefs and desires. More specifically, by supposing that they desire some outcome, which they believe their action may achieve given the current situation and relevant causal factors. We attribute such beliefs and desires to people, based iteratively on observations of intentional actions and ultimately on our own instinctive understanding of people's instinctive beliefs and desires. For example, if we see someone knock on a door, we may infer their motives based on our understanding of people and doors in general and that person and that door in particular. In doing so we ascribe specific and general beliefs and desires to that person. Such explanations of a person's behaviour

Being in Love

are necessarily predictive. We do not merely report the action, we hypothesise a cause. Such hypotheses generalise from the current action to similar actions in similar situations. Thus, we ascribe not only specific beliefs and desires, but also the abstract ideas underlying those generalisations. For example, in explaining why someone knocked at a door we may well ascribe to them the idea of a door. Ideas, and the ways in which they combine to form beliefs and desires, have their origin in our instinctive need to understand intentional actions.

These combinations of ideas to form beliefs and desires, which are necessary to explain intentional action, are conceptual structures which explain behaviour even if they are not put into words. Language is a way to help us consider what may or may not be true or desirable, through the use of shared vocabulary (which links signs to ideas) and grammar (which links ways of combining signs to ways of combining ideas). The structure of our language reflects the structure of our thoughts. In particular, our vocabulary represents the final nodes in our conceptual structures, and our grammar represents the ways in which such nodes are connected.

For example, to generalise the idea that Chris loves Dolly from the present to the future, we need the idea of love, of Chris, and of Dolly, as well as the idea of present and future. Using an operational grammar we can combine these ideas to form the idea of loving Dolly, and hence the idea of Chris loving Dolly. These ideas are vague in the sense that, although we know in some situations what counts as Chris, what counts as Dolly, and what counts as love, in other situations we may not be so sure.

We need an account of conceptual structures that makes sense of our ability to understand the full range of ideas from completely undefined, through comparatively vague, to theoretically precise. This cannot be achieved by pretending that vagueness does not exist. It cannot be achieved by replacing vague terms with precise degrees of tolerance, because such tolerances will introduce their own vagueness. It cannot be achieved by hypothesising degrees of truth because it is at the level of abstract ideas that vagueness is introduced, and at that level that it needs to be understood. Instead of regarding practically vague ideas as primitives completely divorced from theoretically precise ideas, it is more consistent to regard them as indeterminate sets of precise ideas.

Central to this account is the idea of a variable. Words in our vocabulary represent final nodes in our conceptual structures. These nodes are variables in the sense that they may stand for any number of ideas. In a generalized operational grammar, every operand of an operation is interpreted for any interpretation of any variables declared for that operation that fits the type of that

A game of Chess

declaration. The role that these variables play therefore depends upon the operator of the operation for which they are declared: a generalised conjunction will assert all its operands for every value of its declared variables; a generalised disjunction will assert only some of them for some value; a generalised negation will deny that any of its operands satisfy any of its variables, and so on.

This idea of a variable pervades modern logic and programming languages, although usually they are only declared by specific operators called quantifiers, and complemented by the opposing idea of a constant. Constants are supposed to stand for just one idea. A theoretically precise idea is one which combines within a given grammar with other theoretically precise ideas to form theoretically precise propositions. Generalising about such theoretically precise ideas is important in mathematics but impractical for any specific definition, even within mathematics. Thus it is more accurate to regard all terms as representing variables, often with implicit quantifiers.

Thus, the pre-existing ideas that we bring to a conceptual structure are represented by our pre-existing vocabulary. The key to understanding pervasive vagueness is that the terms in our vocabulary stand not for single precise ideas but for indeterminate sets of theoretically precise ideas within an implicit disjunction. For example, imagine that somebody says a chess piece is in the centre of the board. The idea of the centre of a chess board is vague. Even if we suppose that the piece is placed properly within one of the squares - and ignore the vagueness around that supposition - there are four squares in the middle of a chess board. Hence this aspect of the vagueness can be accounted for by supposing that the claim is that the piece is in one of those four squares. This means that the idea of a square at the centre of a chess board is mapped in our conceptual vocabulary to each of the squares d4, d5, e4, and e5. Instead of each node or word in our vocabulary denoting one specific idea, it denotes - in the simplified terms of this example - four specific ideas. The original claim that the chess piece is in the centre of the board comprises an implicit disjunction that the chess piece is in d4, d5, e4, or e5.

Of course the comparatively more specific idea of a chess piece being in one specific square is also still vague. Our account implies it too will be comprised of more specific alternatives. We will not want and do not need to specify all those alternatives. Logically it is sufficient to recall that every conceptual structure and every statement can be interpreted as a disjunction of theoretically precise ideas, allowing general ideas about theoretically precise ideas of logic and mathematics to be meaningfully applied to the practically vague ideas of contingent thought.

A new child breathing

Experience

Arguably, when we ask what is experience, we are essentially asking why we are here and what does it all mean.

WILLIAM BISHOP

There are different levels and types of experience. From a physical viewpoint experience is the effect of a cause that 'impinges' on an entity, making an *impression*. All that impresses itself is experience to which an entity can respond by reflex, instinct, or thoughtful reflection. A response to an external cause allows an entity to relate to the environment. Experience is continuous and a response can be conscious or unconscious. Awareness or knowledge of the experience requires consciousness and memory for retention. A person's life is affected by 'events' but the quality and depth of the experience depends on the sensibility and sensitivity of the person.

The Senses

Inner cognitive senses related to the head (daytime consciousness) include:
(1) Sound - hearing; (2) Speech - word; (3) Thought - concept; (4) Ego - the sense to perceive another ego.
Senses for the outer world related to the rhythmic system (feeling - dream consciousness) are (5) Sight; (6) Smell; (7) Taste; (8) Warmth.
Inner bodily senses related to metabolism (will - sleep consciousness) are
(9) Balance; (10) Touch; (11) Movement; (12) Life.

A newborn child gasps for breath and establishes an in-breathing/out-breathing rhythm. This is overlaid with a heart-pulse rhythm where the rhythmic relationship is 1:4. Pressure from the breathing process causes the cerebral-spinal fluid to the brain to rise and fall and so *rhythms of life* are established in the body as a foundation to support consciousness. The sense organs provide the body with a refined form of breathing. The ego-consciousness (I-being) as recipient of experience is the bearer of knowledge.

Levels Of Experience

A human being has experience at different ontological levels: (1) the physical body, (2) the vegetative life-body, (3) the psychological level, (4) the level of the spirit or I-being. At the level of being of the soul (psychological level) a response happens in *feeling*, *intellectual*

Children from different cultures

reflection, and the *will*. Impressions 'imprinted' in memory enable accumulation of experience, and such accumulation over a lifetime can lead to wisdom. Intellectual reflection is a state of self-consciousness (of the I-being) where consciousness is aware of itself. Conscious experience is 'felt-knowledge' of an event that impinges on a receptive subject. Feeling and 'touch' play a prominent role in experience. Typically the dynamic is: event – experience – reaction.

Significance Of Experience

For a being dependent on the subject-object division in perception, *experience* is the *inner counterpart* to *external phenomena*, where the inner experience 'embodies' creative developmental potential. A newborn child may have universal human characteristics to begin with but it is then exposed to environmental factors unique to it in terms of geography, culture, prevailing worldview. This influences a person's attitude to life and perspective on knowledge. Plato suggested that the newborn comes with memories of experiences and knowledge from a previous life, while John Locke thought that the newborn came as a 'clean slate' ready to be written upon. Contemporary understanding accepts that the newborn comes with a constitutional framework ready to accept and process experience. People in a particular culture will be exposed to experiences quite different from other cultures. This can create conflict between perspectives on the world and life. Similarly different personal experiences and constitutions can create difficulty in comprehending another's viewpoint. People with different temperaments can also find difficulty in comprehending or even wishing to comprehend another's point of view. The significance of *personal experience* raises the question of the law of karma playing into life as the principle of moral cause and effect. A person's response to experience is crucial in forming character, which in turn relates to destiny as the fruit of experience.

Knowledge And Experience

What is named can be experienced as an experience but not the name or concept in itself, which represents theoretical knowledge. For example take the word: *kindness*. Use of the word implies the reality of the experience but the reality has to be experienced for it to be *real experience*. Politicians regularly deceive by use of words to imply realities but which lack the *concrete experience*. These are 'empty words'. It is possible to participate in an idea as knowledge, but the concept represents only theory or the potentiality for the actual experience. This is an important point for it is easy to delude oneself that one has experienced something which one has heard about as information. So-called religious experience can come into this category, although genuine experience in this area is unsuited to scientific verification.

Experience And Being

Knowledge arises in beings through experience. The distinction between knowledge and experience is that it is possible to have abstract knowledge or information but if it is to become experience it has to be ingested in such a way that it makes an 'impression'. The link between knowledge, experience and being surfaces when knowledge in the intellect is felt in the soul and thereby becomes experience that touches the will. Whitehead's *Process Philosophy* brings out the significant role that experience plays in life where input from the environment is experienced by an entity that develops in response to the experience. When knowledge becomes experience it informs the will. Human beings are constituted in such a way that we are not identical with the 'world process' (the creative flow of life) so in order to have knowledge we insert our ego (I-being) into this flowing process through our thinking faculty, which connects concept with percept. Knowledge is grasped as experience by the ego, which is our individual link to Being.

A child under the age of three feels itself at one with the outside world. It refers to itself by its name as if it were an object among objects in the outside world. Around the age of three the child refers to itself as 'I'. At this point the ego has emerged, separating self (as subject) from 'not-self' (an external object). This separation between 'I' and 'not-I' gives the possibility of knowledge and experience whereby an *ideal* concept (obtained through intuition) is applied to a percept obtained through the senses. The *mental image* that arises from this unification of concept with percept constitutes *knowledge* and can be retained in memory. The *thinking* process applies an appropriate *concept* and then *feeling* accompanies the concept with a *tonal mood*. The concept provides understanding while feeling facilitates experience and judgment associated with the *will*. The mental image is the conscious representation of the experience of what has been perceived; and the totality of one's mental images will be the totality of one's experience, which in turn influences one's response to life. Thinking can also relate mental images to each other to develop ideas. Such thinking can be regarded as a level of experience leading to the development of *ideal experience* as knowledge.

Intuition supplies the concept and the 'I' (ego) is taken up within the thinking process. When the mental image of our 'I' becomes a percept for the higher 'I' (Self) then the Self can experience thinking as a living process identical to the *becoming process* of the world. This experience of living within thinking is ecological and dynamically relational. Such an experience of perceptual thinking will differ dramatically from the dualistic subject-object mode of perception where the *subjective-ideal* experiences itself as separate from the *objective-real* world.

Masaru Emoto

Cultivated Experience

Experience can be cultivated. An apprenticeship is organized to equip a person with particular skills through educational experience. A theatrical drama is a contrived event, but when a tragedy is performed it has the potential to achieve a cathartic experience. Reading a novel supplies *vicarious experience* which nonetheless can also be an intensely empathetic experience. Creative art and works of imagination can extend and enrich experience through vicarious participation. Here the borderline is slender between knowledge of an experience and the actual experience. In this respect ideas can be regarded superficially or become *inner experience.* Phenomenology recognizes both the distinction and the connection between knowledge and experience. Observation of a plant during the whole of its annual development gives a picture of the plant as a whole, with the status of knowledge. Will and feeling are necessary to participate, to experience the mental-image: a stretch of water is a concept but to swim in it is to experience the water.

Panpsychism

Panpsychism suggests that Being is accessed according to the level of consciousness of the participant. This provides our world of reality, which is partial in relation to the potential depth of the totality. In relation to this,

Thinking Process

water has been shown to retain memory of experiences to which it has been subjected: the construction of a snowflake takes on form related to the forces it is exposed to in its descent as a water drop to its frozen crystalized state on earth. This is echoed by the crystal forms preserved in frozen water droplets obtained by the Japanese researcher Masaru Emoto, where clear crystal forms are retained in pure water but where distortion of visual form registers the proportion of pollution to which the water has been subjected. This subtle alteration in form reveals that experience has impressed itself directly into the form, like a mental image, revealing visual evidence of an entity's response to experience. This highlights the question of the difference between a 'thing' and the 'gestural nature' of a substance – the dilemma posed by the fixity of objects and the fluidity of life which time resolves.

Earth and its informing cosmos appear to continuously interact, producing a dynamic 'world process', where each being and event can affect others so as to constitute an ecosystem where all entities and energies interrelate and affect each other. In this sense Earth is a being-in-itself constituted by multiple interactions like that of the living body made up by multiple cells and levels of organization. Such connection helps to explain the link between a concept of an atom bomb, its production, and use, and the consequent means of death, devastation, environmental pollution and related ramifications. This is an extreme example of a connection between knowledge and experience at different levels; but at a subtle level all experience is interactive. Therefore the quality of our own experience, which we project into the world, has relevance and consequences not only for us individually but for the totality.

Object Thinking

We participate in the world and are not essentially separate from it. New experience becomes incorporated into an existing framework retaining our previous experiences. Since the time of considering the world to be composed of discrete entities called atoms, *'object thinking'* has governed the way in which experience is interpreted so that reality is understood to be composed of separate distinct entities related in a machine-like way. This mechanistic thinking is taken for granted now. Logic and fixed definitions based on the noun suit this 'object thinking'. However, quantum mechanics has fragmented the solidity of the discrete object, transforming the *object* into a *centre of relationships* with dynamic gesture and flow, resembling organic life rather than mineral fixity. It is unsurprising therefore that Whitehead called '*Process* philosophy' *organic*. This is important because the conceptual framework that we bring to our experience imposes the means of its interpretation.

Object thinking sees a *thing* as having no interior life. No ground is allowed for feeling, morality and the sacred. On the other hand to think in an organic manner is to recognize gesture and fluid relationships within a whole containing the parts. This ecological thinking leads to experiencing life as dynamic and relational, where wonder, respect, and love may enter experience. If our perceptual frame of reference is not entirely restricted to the materialist perspective and concepts are *sense-free* (prior to application to a sense-percept) and the bearer of knowledge (the 'I') is borne within the thinking (which connects concept with percept) then knowing means experiencing the ideas (within Nature). Knowing means experiencing, so that during the process of knowing the knower is inside the being of things. In this respect sense-free thinking can commune with ideas as portals to a spiritual world (for many the 'known unknown'). Such is the monist conception where 'beingness' is a state of flux between the sense-perceptible and the supersensible world with experience at its heart.

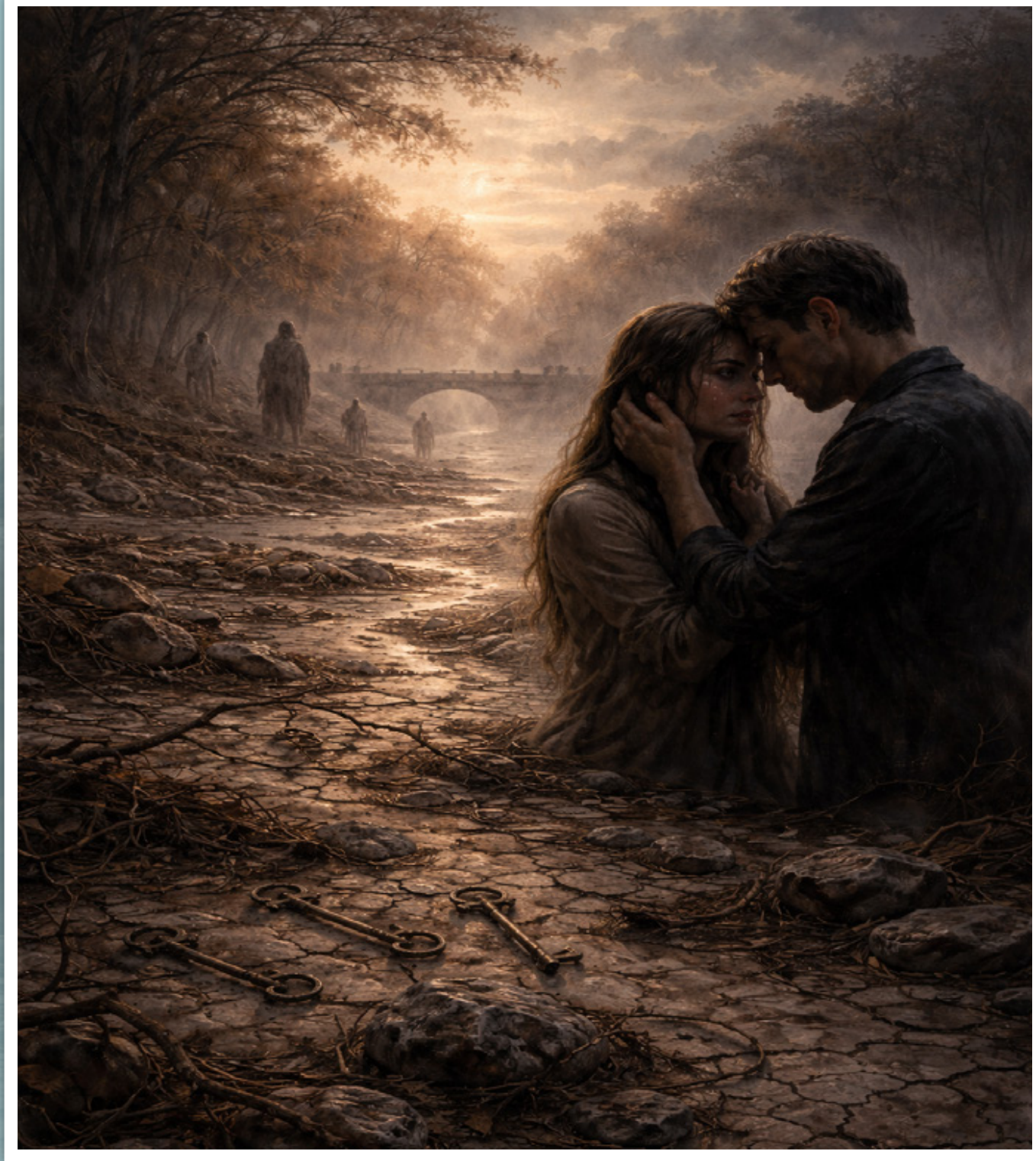
Where the keys are few

Once I took your face into my hand.
Sunshine hit your eyes and showed me tears.
Unknown ways led to a far-off land
under over-flowing river spheres,

like some ground submerged, and to endure -
bareness showing, did it understand?
Yet no being moved this silent land
in that moment, hesitant, unsure.

These mind-places, into which we go
dragging us still further into feelings
of locked heart rooms, where the keys are few.
Strength and weakness - how can there be healing?
How to show to anyone what's due?

Any lover, known as much we could,
or the friend who never understood -
all those souls who disappeared in smoke,
each in silence in disguising cloak -
what loss stayed in dried-out riverbeds?



Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Growth, Deficit, and the Common Good

This short essay challenges the prevailing tendency to interpret economic growth, surplus, and deficit purely through technical or fiscal lenses. Drawing on the traditions of Civil Economy, Aristotelian political thought, and contemporary natural law theory, it argues that economic indicators cannot be adequately assessed apart from the common good they are meant to serve. Engaging the work of Luigino Bruni, Stefano Zamagni, John Finnis, and Karl Polanyi, the paper reinterprets surplus and deficit as signs of deeper moral and social orientations rather than neutral outcomes of efficiency. Through concrete reflections on firms, labour markets, finance, consumption, and public policy, it proposes an account of economic life embedded in social relations and directed toward human flourishing. Ultimately, it asks whether modern economies remain instruments of the common good or have become self-enclosed systems that define their own ends.

DR. ALAN **XUEREB**

There are moments in economic life when what appears as a technical adjustment discloses something more fundamental. A movement from surplus to deficit, for instance, is typically read in fiscal terms — a matter of balances, cycles, and policy responses. Yet it may also be approached more philosophically: as a prompt to reconsider what an economy is for, and how it relates to the common good.

Modern economic thought has largely converged on a thin anthropology. The individual appears as a rational maximiser of preferences; the market as a neutral mechanism for coordinating choices. Within such a framework, success is measured by expansion — of output, consumption, and efficiency. And yet, as Aristotle reminds us, 'the polis exists not only for the sake of living, but for living well'. The economy, as an integral part of that order, cannot be indifferent to the quality of the life it sustains.

It is precisely this richer horizon that Civil Economy seeks to recover. Drawing on a civic humanist tradition, Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni argue that markets are not sustained by contracts alone, but by reciprocity, trust, and what they term gratuitousness. These are not marginal ethical add-ons; they are constitutive of economic life itself. Where they are eroded, the system may continue to function, but it does so in a progressively brittle and extractive manner.

From this perspective, even the language of surplus and deficit can be reinterpreted. A surplus may signal fiscal prudence, but it does not necessarily indicate a flourishing social order. Conversely, a deficit may reflect necessary investment or external shocks, but it may also point to deeper imbalances — between production and meaning, efficiency and justice, individual gain and shared goods. The point is not to moralise fiscal categories, but to recognise that they do not exhaust the evaluative field.

Here, the work of John Finnis is instructive. For Finnis, the common good is not reducible to aggregate welfare or distributive outcomes. It refers, rather, to the set of conditions that enable members of a community to participate in basic human goods — knowledge, friendship, practical reasonableness, and others — in a way that is mutually supportive. Economic institutions, on this view, are not external to the common good; they are among its primary vehicles.

If this is so, then the question becomes more concrete: what would an economy oriented towards the common good look like in practice?

Consider first the structure of the firm. In a purely instrumental model, the firm exists to maximise shareholder value; labour is a cost, and relationships are subordinate to efficiency. Yet alternative forms already exist. Cooperative enterprises, for instance, distribute ownership among workers, aligning incentives with participation and shared responsibility. Similarly, family-owned businesses often operate on longer time horizons, where reputation, trust, and continuity outweigh short-term gain. These are not marginal anomalies; they are examples of economic life structured around relational goods.

Or consider the labour market. A system driven exclusively by flexibility and cost minimisation may produce efficiency, but at the cost of precariousness

Stefano Zamagni

Luigino Bruni

and fragmentation. By contrast, models that invest in stable employment, vocational formation, and workplace dignity contribute not only to productivity, but to the development of persons. Work, in this sense, is not merely a means of income, but a site of human flourishing — a participation in the common good.

A third example may be found in the financial system. Finance, at its best, allocates capital to productive and socially valuable ends. Yet when detached from the real economy, it risks becoming speculative and extractive. Ethical banking initiatives, social impact investing, and community finance institutions attempt to reconnect financial activity with tangible social purposes — to re-embed capital within a network of responsibility.

Even consumption, often treated as the endpoint of economic activity, takes on a different character under this lens. Consumer choices are not merely expressions of preference; they are acts that sustain or undermine certain forms of production and social organisation. The growing interest in fair trade, local production, and sustainable goods reflects an implicit recognition that economic participation carries ethical weight.

At the level of public policy, the implications are equally significant. Infrastructure, education, healthcare, and environmental protection are not simply expenditures to be balanced against revenue; they are investments in the very conditions that make a common life possible. A deficit incurred to sustain these goods may, in certain circumstances, be more consistent with the common good than a surplus achieved at their expense.

The insights of Karl Polanyi remain pertinent here: 'the economy is embedded in social relations'. When this embeddedness is inverted - when social life is reorganised around the imperatives of the market - dislocation follows. Trust erodes, institutions weaken, and the very preconditions of cooperation are undermined. The deeper issue, then, is not whether economies should grow, contract, or stabilise at any given moment. It is whether they remain intelligible as part of a broader moral and social order. For an economy is never merely a system of exchange; it is an expression of how a society understands the relationship between persons, goods, and ends.

There is, however, a further risk that demands attention. When growth becomes both the means and the end, the system begins to take on the character of a self-fuelled paradigm — one that justifies itself by its own expansion, and measures its success by criteria it alone defines. In such a configuration, critique becomes difficult, not because the system is flawless, but because its internal logic absorbs and neutralises external standards.

It is precisely here that the insights of John Finnis regain their force. If the common good consists in the real conditions that enable human flourishing, then no economic model can be self-validating. It must remain open to evaluation in light of goods that transcend it — goods that cannot be reduced to output, efficiency, or accumulation.

The question that follows is deceptively simple: are our economic practices oriented towards the common good, or have they become ends in themselves? The answer will not be found in fiscal indicators alone. It lies, rather, in the quality of the relationships and forms of life that those indicators both reflect and shape. For if an economy becomes self-fuelling, it risks becoming self-enclosed. And what is self-enclosed, however dynamic it may appear, ultimately ceases to serve, and begins instead to define the horizon of human possibility.

Thoughts from Pessoa

Fernando Pessoa

And I, I myself, am the centre that exists only because the geometry of the abyss demands it; I am the nothing around which all this spins.

For me life is an inn where I must stay until the carriage from the abyss calls to collect me.

God gave the sea the danger and the abyss, but it was in it that He mirrored the sky.

Fernando Pessoa,
The Book of Disquiet

1

They err who take the phrase '*mise-en-abîme*',
That old motif from heraldry, to bear
The sense 'abyssal', as so many do.

For he, loose-tagged 'Pessoa', may yet dream
That I, sufficiently escutcheoned, share
My life with them, my alter egos, who,

Like me, latch on to the heraldic theme
For selfhood's sake, and tell themselves that they're
First-person captains of a shipboard crew

That may include, as one more of the team,
Fernando of that ilk, who'd so far err
As to believe his coat of arms the cue

For some self-heralded change of regime
Whereby, from his cast-manager's armchair,
That jumped-up demiurge could mount his coup.

CHRIS **NORRIS**

2

It's where those thinkers go astray who deem
Mise-en-abîme the very trick to snare
Abyss free-fallers and thereby accrue

The sense of mastery that brings a gleam
To any eye whose optics crave the *clair-*
Oscur of tourist drops into the blue

That halt where iterations seriatim
At lessening scale grow indistinct and spare
Those with no head for it, the view

That I, nonce-name 'Pessoa', often seem
To coincide with yet could never swear
That I'd some right to, as distinct from you,

Since selves can switch, migrate, or go off-stream
And, as the abyss opens, prove 'elsewhere'
The perfect alibi yet strongest clue

To its demise, that I-deceiving scheme
That found its answer to the self's last prayer
By having 'abîme' fix their gaze in lieu.

Note:
The idea for this poem came from Paul Webb who mentioned in passing that the enigmatic Portuguese writer Ferdinand Pessoa had strongly objected to proposed spelling reforms that would, among other things, replace the letter y (as in 'abyss') with the letter 'î', as in 'en abîme'. It turned out, through Paul's further researches, that the objection was voiced not by Pessoa but by Teixeira de Pascoaes, though both took aim at the 1911 proposal on primarily aesthetic and etymological-semantic grounds. Thus: '[t]o replace the y with an i is to offend against the rules of aesthetics. In the word abysmo, it is the shape of the y that confers depth, darkness, mystery . . . To write it with a Latin i is to close the mouth of the abyss, to transform it into a banal surface' (Paul's translation).

Since he was so much preoccupied with the abyssal – with the human self and its infinite, endlessly elusive depths – I chose to retain Pessoa as the spokesman for this nowadays heterodox Cratylist viewpoint.

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