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Editorial

A History of the Present

It may help sometimes to look at the history of the present: how did we get here and what does it all mean, especially in the discipline of philosophy? I was thrilled to read *A Social History of Analytic Philosophy* by Christoph Schuringa which was published a year ago. It followsthe story of analytic philosophy from its birth to present time, considering the circumstances of its birth, the diversity of movements from Cambridge, Oxford, to Vienna and the USA. It gives a summary of the main thoughts of its prominent figures in each geographical location. It is a study in the internal development of philosophy, how thoughts were based on or reacting to other thoughts, as well as the effect of external circumstances, such as the social setting of Cambridge and Oxford, the political turmoil in Europe, especially Vienna, and McCarthyism in the United States. I do not wish to review the book, but only to highlight some of the issues discussed.

Analytic philosophy has dominated the philosophical scene across the English-speaking world and beyond for almost a century and a half, and it still dominates. The book is not just a history, but an ideological critique of this philosophy, its assumptions and the socio-political factors that influenced it. The author says that his critique is 'in line with a Marxist tradition', but it is not an ideological critique that takes a philosopher as a mouthpiece for a class interest, but a serious, detailed history that presents many insights into recent philosophy. It enables the reader to have a factual overview of the philosophy that dominates the present.

There are many interesting points in the book. One of them is that analytic philosophy is difficult to define. It is easily recognised but it is difficult to say what analysis is. Schuringa says that the label Analytic philosophy did not become a distinct unified school of thought, until the end of the Second World War. It is commonly assumed that this philosophy started with Russell and Moors' critique of Idealism, but the author challenges this and shows that Idealism had an imaginary rather than a real presence in England at the time Russell and Moore were writing. There were many varieties of analysis, such as the one generated by Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin. The book also mentions a few figures from pre-analytic philosophy, such as Prichard, Collingwood and others.

Gilbert Ryle was credited, not only with developing philosophical thoughts, but also with helping to expand and give shape to philosophy at Oxford, in terms of program and administration. Austin carried on the method of 'common sense'. Wittgenstein presented a critique of philosophy and 'rather than appealing to common sense, he sought to "return" philosophy to common sense, leaving open the possibility that things would be different after the return'.

Schuringa points out that what the leading figures at Cambridge and Oxford had in common was their aristocratic and liberal background, that ordinary people shared in these values, and talked and behaved in the same way as the Oxbridge philosophy thought they did! He also refers to the empiricist-liberal tradition in which analytic philosophy operates. Analytical philosophy was also a consequence of developments in mathematics and logic, whether coming from Europe or generated at Cambridge by Russell, and challenged by Wittgenstein. Empiricism, logic and liberalism are indeed the background of this philosophy and I suggest that this may explain its success, especially in the English-speaking world.

However, beside England, Vienna between the two wars had a distinct school of philosophy known by the name Vienna Circle, famous for its positivism, which was brought to this country by A. J. Ayer, who was despatched from Oxford to Vienna by his supervisor Ryle. He promoted positivism through his little but influential book *Language, Truth and Logic*. Positivism strongly tied philosophy to science through its verification principle. The American philosopher Quine did a similar journey to Vienna, but did not accept the empiricist's distinction between the Synthetic and the Analytic. However, the common character of all these movements was the undermining or rejection of metaphysics. This trend was challenged later on by modal logic that was developed by David Lewis and his theory of possible worlds. However, there is more to philosophy than analytical philosophy, as Schuringa shows in his last chapter, Colonizing Philosophy, where he documents the rising challenges from feminism, radical philosophy and critical race theory.

There are many turns and twists in the story, much interesting information and many anecdotes in the book, but was the ideological critique successful? It is not clear to me that it was. It seems to be accurate and fair history, but it may need more critique than just referring to limited alternative movements. It needs to explain why analytic philosophy, despite talk of crises, is still the dominant method. I suggest it is not a substantial theory about life, but a way of analysis and highly skilful logic applied to particular cases. Other philosophies, which are gathered under the umbrella of continental philosophy, are very interesting, but they lack logical vigour and tend to be hyperbolic in their claims. However, maybe the empiricist, liberal character of English society does support such philosophy. In fairness, Schuringa does cover the contrast and conflict between continental and analytic philosophy, which needs to be explored further. It is a great book, timely and worthwhile reading.

The Editor



Chance Encounter

Why do things happen as they do? Are outcomes chosen or do they happen necessarily? Are they driven by chance? Or are there other possibilities? The article below considers the main answers from early Greek and present-day science and philosophy.

PETER STIBRANY

I have been pondering our understanding of how and why things happen. Somewhat surprisingly, I have found just three approaches: chance, choice, and necessity. All these are intuitively obvious: if my dish breaks into pieces on the floor it is either because I accidentally knocked it, I threw it intending to break it, or because it was falling at a velocity that would cause it to smash if it hit anything. Considered philosophically, however, none of these explanations is uncontroversial.

Looking at this historically, and sticking to the West, Homer's *Odyssey* perhaps best shows how humanity explained the world in ancient times: it shows Odysseus as a 'complicated man' and it shows the perversity of nature as driven by the capricious, often deceitful and very human-like actions of the Gods.

Pre-Socratic philosophers argued against this human-like inconstancy in the action of the world. Xenophanes posed the question: if oxen and horses had hands and could draw, would they draw their gods as oxen and horses? Philosophers looked instead for principles such as water or fire that would show the order, logos, that structured nature. Even Plato's animosity to the poets - Homer chief among them - can be seen in part as pushing against human-like arbitrariness as a model for the world.

Greek atomists proposed that all objects and all events, including our minds, are the necessary result of atoms moving and interacting in the void. This necessitarian idea appears centuries later at the core of Newton's laws of motion, and the capabilities of Laplace's demon to know the world for all times from the state of the world at any time. It seems to me that most non-scientists, and maybe even some scientists still believe this to be the modern picture of physics and chemistry.

In the terminology of necessity and choice, philosophers were struggling either to choose between or to reconcile *choice* - in the form of Gods choosing events - and *necessity* - in the form of atoms moving in the void. But they found they also needed *chance*.

Chance

For the ancient Greek atomists Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, every event, including every thought and decision, was a necessary consequence of prior atomic motion going back infinitely, and all substances, including minds, were combinations of different atoms.

The initial theory did not, however, explain why the atoms moved. Epicurus proposed their motion was 'uncaused' in the same way as releasing a stone from one's hand led to the stone falling.

Gravity as a force was not yet a concept, though paradoxically, Epicurus was much closer to the Einsteinian view of gravity than Newton was. For Einstein, it is we who are pushed by the Earth we stand on to accelerate against the curvature of spacetime, there is no external force on the freely falling stone.

Epicurus asked how, if the atoms were in free-fall, would they come together and start combining in the first instance? Without something to jostle them, there would be none of the richness of the substances we see.

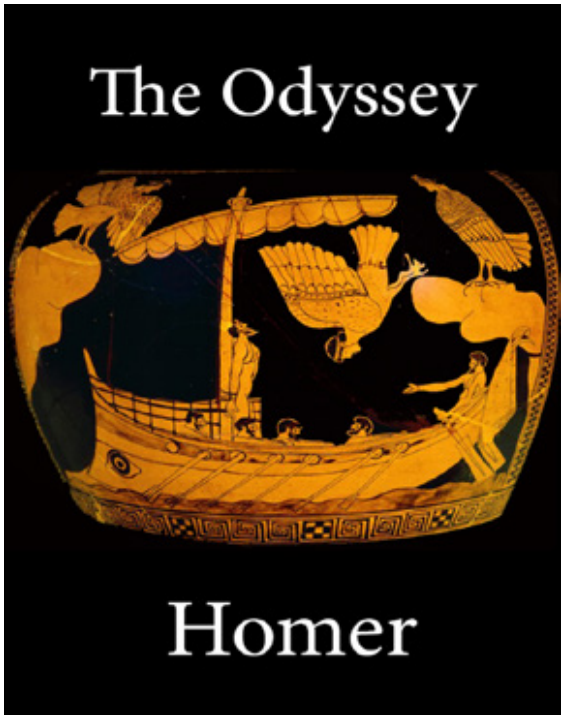
By way of solution, Epicurus came up with the 'swerve' (clinamen). Vikas Dharvia, writing on the Philoparadoxia website summarised the theory by saying that 'at some point, for no stated reason, some atoms deviate very slightly from their straight downward paths. This minimal, imperceptible deflection causes atoms to collide, and the world of combinations begins'.

The atomists found that even atoms had, to some extent, to be capricious.

Dharvia goes on to say: 'The swerve is philosophically devastating for a system based on strict mechanical necessity. Atomism had been built on the principle that every event has a cause — nothing happens spontaneously or without reason. The swerve ("clinamen") is an uncaused event. It is introduced not because the theory demands it but because the theory breaks without it.

'Lucretius was clearly embarrassed by the swerve. He emphasises how slight and undetectable it is — but this makes things worse, not better. Atomism held that what cannot be observed does not exist. An unobservable, uncaused event introduced solely to rescue the theory from collapse is precisely the kind of ad hoc device that should be inadmissible'. [https://philoparadoxia.com/ancient-atomism-summary-notes/]

By putting necessity in charge of all substances and actions, the atomists created the materialist problem of free will, because in atomism our every thought and decision is a necessary consequence of prior atomic motion going back infinitely. Or rather, they rebranded fate and handed it to thoughtless atoms, but they found they had to include something not atomic to influence atoms, even if slightly. So, they added back chance in the form of the clinamen.



What is Chance?

Chance is essential to how scientists model the behaviour of nature today. We are disciplined to think that every measured value must be accompanied by an estimate of how accurate that value is likely to be. Measurements can be made more accurate, but in practice this costs time and money so we make do with values that are good enough for the task at hand. As the American civil engineer Arthur Wellington said: 'An engineer can do for a dollar what any fool can do for two, after a fashion'.

So, we model our ignorance using stochastic variables and the mathematics of probability. This *epistemic chance* is a practical measure of ignorance.

Even so, we expect the world to unfold in some definite, consistent, non-capricious way, each successive instant to build on the previous one according to some hopefully knowable pattern. 'God does not play dice', was Einstein's expression for this expectation.

But what if nature is not definite? What if some events happen without any reference to the past? What if some events happen without being caused? This is the *ontological chance* imagined by the atomists as the 'swerve' and accepted today by many physicists as operating at the finest scales of nature.

The question is not settled. The suspicion remains either that these events that look like the work of chance are caused and determined, or that some form of agency lurks behind what looks like chance.

How can we tell if something happens by chance?

We might suppose that chance is at work when we find random outcomes, but this turns out to be quite difficult to prove.

One good definition of what is random is when no historical events can be used to predict future outcomes. For example, we can flip a fair coin many times to get a series of heads and tails, but no history of these coin flip outcomes gives us any way to predict the outcome of the next coin flip.

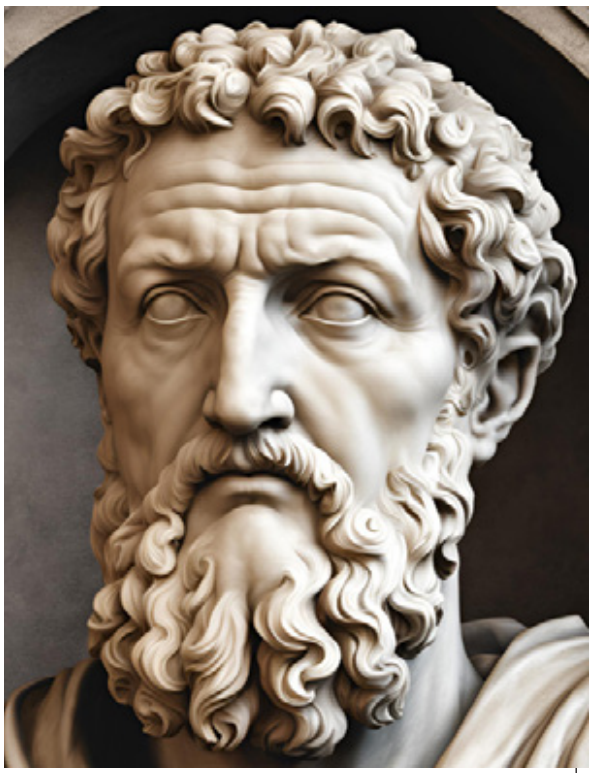
We suppose that chance is the process when the resulting series of coin flip outcomes is random, but it turns out that we can get what appear to be random outcomes from fully determined processes. A fine example of this is the number pi. If you do not know the value of pi, the digits of pi appear to form a random sequence. But we know exactly what that sequence must be – it has been calculated to 3.14 trillion digits. Pi is an example of a repeatable random-like sequence generated without the action of chance.

Another example comes from chaotic systems that are deterministic yet so exquisitely dependent on initial conditions, or so extremely complex, that we cannot run exactly the same experiment twice. The results of these experiments look like they are driven by chance. Communications theory and cryptography have revealed that if signals are appropriately coded, we cannot tell the difference between them and random noise. Our mobile telephone network uses this very principle; the signals from any given mobile phone can be picked out of radio noise only because each phone is assigned a specific code to use when transmitting.

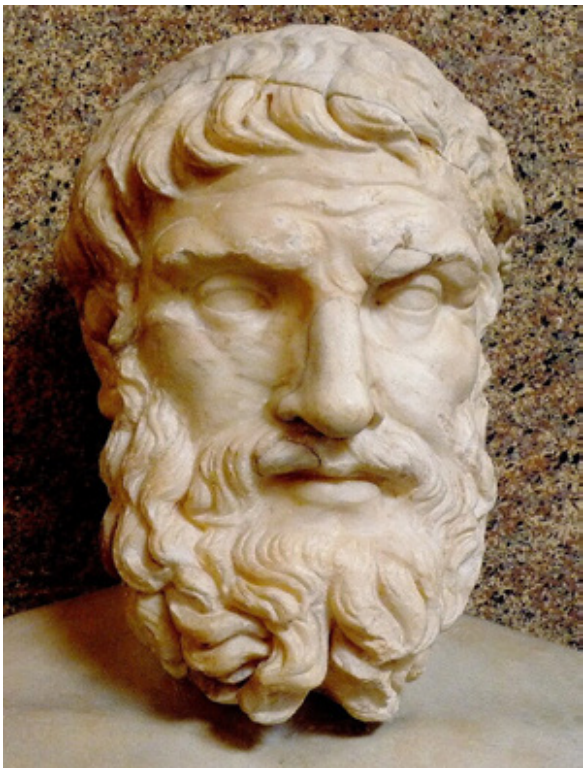
There are so many examples of deterministic processes yielding what look like random results that it is obvious to propose that everything is determined, however chancy it looks.

The reverse argument can also be made; a meaningful pattern can be generated by chance. This is particularly easy to see for relatively short sequences. For example, a fair coin may land heads ten times in a row. If that were the totality of the results available for that coin, we would suspect the coin to be unfair. But it can happen by accident. We might say finding a specific pattern is very unlikely, perhaps even unrealistic. That is true; the probability of finding, say 'Wherefore art thou Romeo' in a random sequence of letters is surprisingly unlikely, something like 1 in 10^{28}.

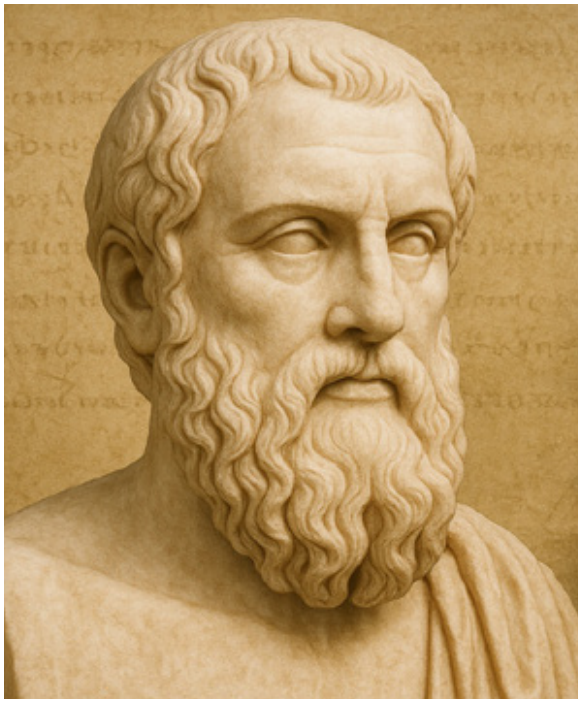
But if we do not specify what we are looking for, the math changes a lot. If we look at a sequence of just 1,000 letters, we are likely to spot some interesting – or maybe the better word is noteworthy – features; that is



Lucretius



Epicurus suggested the swerve



Parmenides



Heraclitus

because we have a wide range of letter combinations we find worthy of note.

Apophenia is the name for when people see meaningful connections between unrelated things. For example, 'hot streaks' are legendary in games of chance, encouraged by various odd behaviours, like blowing on dice, on the part of gamblers who believe the streak to be causally determined, or at least influenced.

Data analysts refer to the false discovery of patterns in noise as 'p-hacking' or 'data dredging'. It takes a careful combination of theory and observation to avoid this trap.

In summary, if a deterministic process can generate statistically random outcomes and a chancy process can generate patterns that look determined, we must conclude that determining when something happens by chance is not as easy as may first appear.

Necessity

I started out by saying that chance, choice, and necessity are all problematic when considered philosophically. Necessity seems the firmest concept. We are quite convinced that many events in the world unfold necessarily as they do. If we could establish everything as necessarily happening the way it must we could eliminate ontological causality. But necessity turns out not to be as necessarily true as we might believe. We already saw the difficulty of distinguishing chance from necessity by looking at a series of outcomes.

But there is also the problem of causality.

Scepticism about causation may have started with David Hume, but the roots go deep.

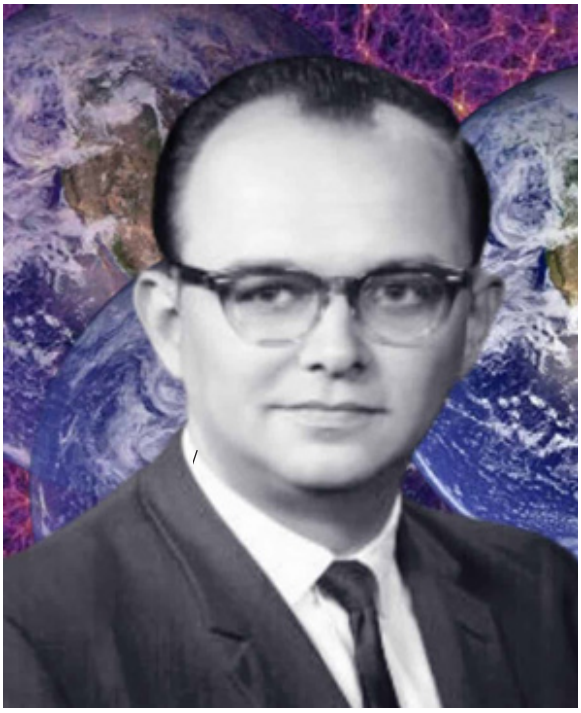
Parmenides and Heraclitus may not have agreed on much, but they both started from the position that, as Heraclitus put it: 'All things are one'. And Parmenides wrote that there is only one thing, the thing that is. He wrote: 'It is ungenerated and indestructible, whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete'. He called those who do not understand this 'mortals who know nothing', and he says they wander 'two-headed; for impotence in their breast guides their erring thoughts'.

But we do not understand the world as being just one thing, we see it as the interaction of many objects and events connected by cause and effect. We are simply trying to identify whether the connection between cause and effect is due to chance, choice, or necessity, and yet, Parmenides and Heraclitus both imply this is a self-inflicted puzzle; we should not wonder when our understanding of these things falters.

Heraclitus emphasises the strangeness of definitions when every 'thing' is in flux. Among all this change, process and flow, we identify objects and events though they are constantly changing. 'Men have been deceived with regard to their knowledge of what is apparent', he



Jenann Ismael



Hughes Everett

says. The most famous example of this is never twice entering the same river. Neither the river nor we exist without changing constantly, and yet we have the idea of a river and of ourselves.

Cutting up this dynamic whole creates objects with back-turning definitions such as 'the path up and down is one and the same'. For Heraclitus, definitions cannot grasp inherently unstable reality.

Moving forward in time, David Hume saw causality as the constant conjunction between events, one that we learn by habit. This idea was taken up last century by David Lewis. In the words of the philosopher Jenann Ismael: 'David Lewis famously said … that he saw a lot of his career in retrospect as being devoted to the defence of … the metaphysical doctrine that "all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another"'.

This way of thinking seems to allow causality to be deterministic or not, depending on how consistent these conjunctions are. So invoking necessity drags in questions as well as answers.

Another Kind of Solution

We perceive that we live in a patterned world of objects and events, a world in which events are explained by chance, choice, or necessity. But could it be that our senses and cognition are filtering out a great deal that is also happening? We may be tuned to and navigating a certain kind of pattern stability in a world far noisier and busier than we can grasp, a world in which 'everything happens'. This idea that 'everything happens' appears to split the difference between chance and necessity, potentially creating a new category of thinking about why things happen. Physicist-philosophers have been grappling with this new concept in the context of the Everettian 'many worlds' interpretation of quantum physics. On my reading list is a well-recommended book *The Emergent Multiverse* in which David Wallace attempts to resolve among other things one key criticism of the Everettian approach: how does our experience of chance emerge in a theory in which everything happens.

Our best equations predict only what is likely to happen at the quantum scale, not what will happen. If we prepare a particle in a superposition of two different states with a 30% probability of measuring it in one state and 70% in the other, how is it that we measure it in only one of those states? How do we become blind to the other thing that also happens?

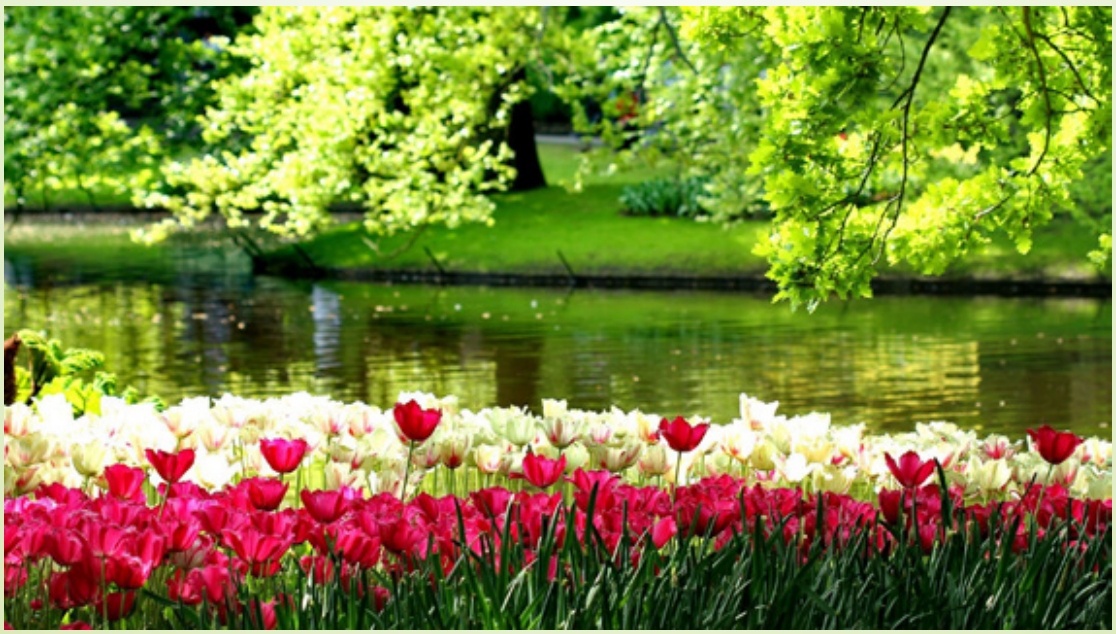
How do we get from 'everything happens' to 'a specific thing happens with a (correctly) predicted probability'? Even when we think we have removed chance from our model of how things work, chance remains.

Attention

A life form,
I stand in life's river,
Present in the abundant flow;
The whole encompassed in the instant
Yet my grasp is faint', confining
While evidence shows
A multiplicity of unimaginable
Forms of Life
Gurgling, flying, swimming, murmuring,
Whistling, hooting, crowing, computing,
Salivating and absorbing
All around.

How do I know that I stand in the river
At an instant when all is one?
If you know
Please inform me;
My attention anticipates
The wonder of enlightenment
Of the unknown known.

William Bishop



The Forest Within the City

We often imagine cities as the triumph of human ingenuity over nature. Towers rise where forests once stood, concrete replaces soil, and technology allows us to create controlled environments seemingly independent of the natural world. Yet, beneath this narrative of progress lies a fundamental question: have we created cities that shelter human beings, but forgotten how to help them flourish?

DR. ALAN XUEREB

Modern science is beginning to reveal something that philosophers have long suspected: human beings are not detached observers of the world around them. We are shaped by the environments we inhabit. Our surroundings influence not only our physical health, but also our psychological wellbeing, our sense of belonging, and our ability to flourish.

The growing interest in Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, provides a fascinating example. Research by Japanese immunologist Dr Qing Li has demonstrated that spending time among trees can produce measurable physiological benefits, including increased activity of Natural Killer cells, which play an important role in the body's immune response. The explanation lies partly in phytoncides - natural compounds released by trees - which appear to promote relaxation and restoration by shifting the body away from prolonged stress responses.

Perhaps the most profound lesson of forest medicine is not simply that nature makes us feel better, but that it reveals something essential about the human condition. The forest does not heal us because it represents an escape from reality. Rather, it heals us because it restores a relationship with a reality from which modern life has increasingly distanced us.

This insight has inspired the development of biophilic design - the attempt to incorporate elements and patterns of nature into the built environment. The term biophilia, meaning a love or affinity for life, was developed most famously through the work of biologist Edward O. Wilson, who argued that human beings possess an innate connection with living systems. Architects and thinkers have since explored how this connection can inform the design of homes, workplaces, schools and cities.

Biophilic design, however, is not simply a matter of placing plants inside buildings or creating visually attractive spaces. Its deeper ambition is to restore relationships. It seeks to reconnect human beings with natural rhythms: daylight, vegetation, water, natural materials, fresh air, biodiversity and the changing patterns of the seasons.

Around the world, architects have begun translating these principles into reality. The demonstrates how healthcare environments can incorporate gardens, natural ventilation and abundant greenery, recognising that healing involves not only medical intervention but also the quality of the surroundings in which recovery takes place.

The Vertical Forest illustrates another dimension of this approach by integrating thousands of trees and plants into high-density residential towers. It challenges the assumption that urbanisation must necessarily mean separation from nature, showing instead that cities can become places where ecological systems and human habitation coexist.

Such projects demonstrate how neglected urban infrastructure can be transformed into green spaces of encounter, biodiversity and reflection. They remind us that nature within cities is not a luxury, but an essential dimension of a humane urban environment.

Trees themselves reveal this principle most clearly. They are not merely decorative elements placed along streets. They are active contributors to the life of the city. They provide shade, reduce urban temperatures, support biodiversity, improve air quality, manage rainwater and create spaces where people can gather, rest and reconnect. Through natural processes such as evapotranspiration, trees provide cooling systems that no mechanical technology can fully replicate without significant energy consumption.

In this sense, a tree is not simply an object within the city; it is a participant in the common life of the city.

Human Dwelling

This is where the philosophical dimension becomes essential. Architecture is not only about constructing physical structures; it is about shaping the conditions in which human beings exist or should we say 'dwell'. Martin Heidegger's reflection on dwelling reminds us that human beings do not merely occupy spaces; they inhabit places through meaningful relationships. To dwell is to be situated within a world of significance, where

surroundings are not passive backgrounds but active participants in human existence.

Central to Heidegger's thought is the idea of attunement (*Befindlichkeit*): the recognition that we are always already connected to the world around us. Our surroundings influence the way we experience ourselves, others and our place within existence. A landscape, a building or a city can either support this relationship or weaken it.

This insight was developed further within architectural theory by Christian Norberg-Schulz through the concept of genius loci, the 'spirit of place'. For Norberg-Schulz, meaningful architecture does not simply impose itself upon a location; it reveals and strengthens the character already present within it. Architecture achieves authenticity when it responds to the qualities of its surroundings - the landscape, cultural memory, climate and lived experiences of those who inhabit it.

The Mediterranean world has long understood this relationship intuitively. Traditional Maltese architecture, for example, developed through a profound dialogue with climate, landscape and community. The internal courtyard was not merely an architectural feature; it was a place of encounter, shade and contemplation. The thick limestone walls, shaded streets and enclosed yet open spaces responded to the realities of heat, light and wind while creating environments that supported social life.

Similarly, the village square was more than an empty space between buildings. It was a place where community was formed, where people encountered one another and where the rhythms of daily life unfolded. These traditional spaces reveal an understanding that architecture is not only about protecting human beings from the environment, but about creating meaningful relationships with it.

However, the challenge today is that many of these traditional forms of dwelling are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Rising construction costs, limited availability of land, urban density and changing patterns of life make it unrealistic simply to reproduce the architectural solutions of the past. The lesson of tradition, therefore, should not be understood as a call to return unchanged to previous forms, but as an invitation to recover the principles that made them meaningful.

The task before contemporary architecture is to reinterpret this wisdom. The courtyard can inspire new forms of communal space; the relationship between shade, ventilation and natural materials can inform modern buildings; and the connection between architecture and landscape can be rediscovered through innovative design.

One example is the renewed interest in roof gardens and green roofs. In dense urban environments where horizontal space is limited, the roof becomes a new landscape. Beyond providing aesthetic value, vegetation placed on rooftops can act as a natural protective layer, reducing the direct impact of intense sunlight upon the building envelope, moderating internal temperatures, absorbing rainwater and contributing to urban biodiversity. In climates exposed to increasingly severe heat, the roof garden becomes a contemporary interpretation of the traditional shaded courtyard - a place where nature and architecture once again cooperate.



Dr Qing Li

Old and New

The same principle applies to the relationship between new buildings and existing urban contexts. A building does not begin its life on an empty canvas. It enters a conversation already underway - a conversation between landscape, memory, culture and the people who inhabit a place.

Respecting the external character of an existing environment does not mean rejecting creativity or freezing architecture in the past. Nor does it require imitation. The challenge is not to copy historical forms, but to understand the deeper principles that allowed them to belong. A contemporary building can be innovative while still remaining attentive to the scale, materials, rhythms and identity of its surroundings.

This is another expression of genius loci: architecture that listens before it speaks. True continuity between generations is not achieved by preventing change, but by ensuring that change remains meaningful.



Seen from this perspective, biophilic design is not a new invention but a rediscovery of a wisdom that many traditional cultures already embodied. It represents not a rejection of modernity, but an attempt to bring together inherited knowledge and contemporary innovation. The aim is not simply to add nature to architecture, but to recover an attentiveness to place.

This is where the idea of (D)well-Being emerges. Wellbeing is not only an individual condition achieved through personal choices; it is also something cultivated through the environments we inhabit. We do not simply live somewhere—we dwell somewhere. The places around us either encourage flourishing or diminish it.

A city designed only for efficiency may become functional but ultimately impoverished. A city designed for dwelling recognises that human beings require more than shelter and infrastructure. They require beauty, connection, nature and meaning.

This does not require rejecting technology. On the contrary, the future of biophilic design may depend upon a thoughtful fusion between ecological wisdom and technological innovation. Solar-powered urban amenities, artificial intelligence-assisted irrigation systems, smart buildings that optimise natural light and ventilation, and digital tools that help manage green infrastructure demonstrate that technology and nature need not be opposing forces.

The question is not whether we should choose technology or nature. The question is whether technology serves life.

The most intelligent city of the future will not be the one that attempts to dominate nature, but the one that learns from it. Technology should not replace natural systems; it should help us cooperate with them.

Ultimately, the forest within the city is not merely an environmental project. It is a philosophical vision of how human beings might inhabit the world. It challenges us to move beyond the idea of buildings as isolated objects and towards an understanding of architecture as a relationship between people, place and the living environment.

Perhaps the cities of the future will not be measured only by their height, speed or technological sophistication, but by their ability to enable human beings to dwell well.

The greatest achievement of architecture may not be to separate us from nature, but to remind us that we have always belonged to it.



The Rose of Pink Neglect by *Scharlie Meeuws*

The Rose of Pink Neglect

Again I walked in sleep, though not as then.
The dunes were endless, shifting underfoot;
beyond them stretched grey plains where nothing stirred,
and still I wandered, knowing not my way.

At last I reached the Town of Disbelief.
Beyond its gates, the shadowed Garden of Trust,
where Mirrors of High and Low rose and descended
like ponds that breathe in unison, their fountains
cast golden sparks through veils of haze and mist.

Behind Trees of Deception I saw them first —
the little Green, the shy Blue. Hand in hand,
waiting for me, then slowly drawing near.

'Have you not seen
the newly blooming Rose of Pink Neglect?'

Then through the grasses of Endurance
I walked to where it stood, its petals lifted
towards a sun they always knew by heart.

I knelt. No one commanded it, no one took count,
for beauty had become too great, too sacred
to stay upright or to be unaffected.

I never had considered entering
the Town of Disbelief. Yet had I turned away,
I never should have found this rose of Pink Neglect —

Since then, I trust those quiet unknown hands
that lead us straight and surely to those places
where splendour lives and where the wonders grow.



Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Against Lyric: a verse-philosopher's credo

Why write lyric poems, if all life has taught you 'applies' only to yourself? Lyric poetry . . . wants to be aphorism, and vice versa — it demands that impossible thing, a representative uniqueness, a way to embody the self that nonetheless speaks to somebody else.

Stephanie Burt

Le moi est haïssable. ('The self is hateful')

Blaise Pascal



CHRIS NORRIS

Drive it out with a pitchfork, still the 'I'
Will soon creep back, as Francis Bacon said
Of nature, and as tends to draw a sigh
From seasoned readers lately over-fed
On lyric verse and eager, now, to shed
The burden of shared confidences, woes,
Self-doubts, misgivings, febrile wonderings-why,
And all the lettings-on one comes to dread
As who knows what confessions force who knows
What troubled streams into what turbid flows.

The depths may slumber as the seas run high,
Love's throes ring hollow in a wiser head,
And lyric's heightened passions quickly try
The patience of those loth to take as read
The poet's need – or right – to see we're led
As deep down as their own dark tunnel goes,
Or else as crazily, cloud-cuckoo high
As leaves us craving home terrain instead
Of airless vaults where lyric's empire grows,
Aeolian harps hang mute, and no wind blows.

It's Blaise Pascal's, that existential plea
'*Le moi est haissable*', that cry that drew
From readers, one might guess, the thought that he,
The thinker of immensities who knew
What mortal terrors they could strike into
The mindful heart, might also have his own
Good grounds for thinking hearts too slovenly
If they permitted some unreasoned *coup*
De foudre to make love or dread alone
Their portals to infinity's dark zone.

That Pascal got it right is plain to see
In Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude* where we've two
Texts, early and late, and where one must agree –
As his devoted readers mostly do –
That Wordsworth Senior puts himself, in lieu
Of nature, as the source of all that's shown
In scenes his younger self perceived to be,
If not a realm apart, then one he'd view
As source and genetrix to all he'd known
Of nature gifts in his first seed-time sown.



Pascal

Read the texts side-by-side and see how they,
The ‘I’s, now steal the show and substitute
First-person-focused views for the array
Of wonders the boy Wordsworth found to suit
His mood when, at Lake Winander, he’d hoot
And wait to hear the distant owls respond
With calls, not echoes, seeming to convey
How nature’s otherness did naught to mute
Her answering him in accents pitched beyond
His elder self’s more asymmetric bond.

‘The egotistical sublime’ was what
Keats called it, Wordsworth’s high-prophetic turn
From having nature graciously allot
His lesser share in all he had to learn
To having nature show a due concern
For his, the poet’s, late-acknowledged role
As source of those affordances he’d got,
Back then, from her but now as one who’d earn
The right thenceforth to set up as our sole
True guide to her magnetic monopole.

As ever, it’s the pronoun ‘I’ that screws
Things up, diverts the moonstruck lyricist
From themes of greater moment, has them lose
All worldly bearings, then says: ‘now you’ve kissed
That stuff goodbye why not just shake a fist
At what Blake, Shelley, Brecht, and Auden thought
The poet’s home domain and bid the muse,
Old friend of lyric, now to prune her list
Of all but those blest isles of last resort
Where siren songs cut sounds of conflict short.

Read Freud, you lotus-eaters, if you’d seek
To know what psychic drives may motivate
That deep desire to have the poet speak
No words but those Calypso croons to sate
The lone seafarer’s dream while shrinks translate
The ’I’-fixated monologue that spells
It out: you’ve rowed too far up Lyric Creek
And now, decades on, strive to sublimate
The owls, their cries, and all your poem tells
Of nature’s powers till upstart ‘I’ rebels.



Photo by Virginia Khuri: New Moon, New Hope