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show their hand. pages 38, 44

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The Impossible Issue

The classical Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi has once again hit the nail on the head: ideas arise and make their rounds, they are articulated, accepted or rejected by a variety of thinkers. His poem above is a small part of a long argument about putting philosophical ideas into perspective. Ultimately, Zhuangzi recommends rising above them altogether by trusting your own instincts.

‘Western’ philosophers may be forgiven for not agreeing or disagreeing with Zhuangzi. His style and conceptual framework are unfamiliar. After all, what exactly is he even saying? And even if we can figure it out, is this philosophy? I have come across this kind of scepticism millions of times. It ranges from a totally justified, healthy critical doubt to irrational, almost hostile rejection. For example, I once met a philosophy graduate educated in the Western analytical tradition who told me that non-Western philosophy was always “ugh!” Whatever this meant, it clearly wasn’t an expression of appreciation. Said philosopher eventually went on to write a popular book about world philosophies, so I guess he must have either changed his mind or recognised that currently there may be commercial potential in this pursuit.

Since my own background is in Chinese philosophy – my PhD was on the philosophical system of a 20th Century Confucian philosopher called Tang Junyi – I’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about how to communicate between different traditions of thought and how to encourage their representatives to communicate with each other. I’ve tried hermeneutics and comparative philosophy and my conclusion is that it is a pretty impossible task. I was never satisfied with the results. Tang Junyi himself cut to the core of what is wrong with comparative philosophy by pointing out that we will find whatever we’re looking for: if we look for differences we will find differences, if we look for similarities, then that’s what we will come up with. Frustrating but true.

Another problem is that our understanding of ‘philosophy’ carries with it a host of expectations that are, like the term itself, defined by the Western tradition. Philosophical activity that does not come from that background is therefore naturally put at a disadvantage when judged by these standards. This does not mean it lacks philosophical substance; it just means that it is sometimes more difficult to sift out the philosophical contents. Great scholars of Buddhist thought such as Alexander Piatigorsky or Edward Conze, for instance, talk about it on its own terms without trying to squeeze it into the starlight jacket of Western philosophical structures. Some experts, such as Trevor Leggett, go even further by accepting that theory is accompanied by certain practices such as meditation, which will allow for a more complete insight. All this may make it seem that studying non-Western thought is more trouble than it’s worth.

Yet it has to be done. “We must learn to talk with each other, and we mutually must understand and accept one another in our extraordinary differences,” wrote Existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, a thinker with an appreciation for the importance of global philosophies. He has taken a lot of criticism, including from me, for his idea of the Axial Age, a period of intense philosophical activity in many separate parts of the world from about the 8th to the 3rd century BCE which Jaspers believed to be “the foundations upon which humanity still subsists today.” Though I used to think of his emphasis on this historical accident as frivolous and perhaps even distorting, on reflection his idea may be a legitimate starting point for developing an interest in cross-cultural thinking.

Eastern philosophy is tremendously diverse so as we can’t be comprehensive we haven’t tried to be. The articles in our West Meets East section mainly involve Buddhist and Hindu ideas, and don’t on the whole try to force comparisons with Western thinkers. Three focus on tricky problems: (the nature of substance; the difference between truth and the true; our ethical relationship with nature) and tackle them with insights from both West and East. Karen Parham looks at Descartes famous Meditations with Buddhism in mind. Two articles explain core concepts in Eastern thought (impermanence; karma). One introduces the life and ideas of a Samurai philosopher. We also have a brief interview with Joerg Tuske about Western academic perspectives on Eastern philosophy.

Engaging with radically different approaches to philosophy, despite all linguistic, conceptual and structural difficulties, can be extremely rewarding. Even ‘edifying’, as Richard Rorty suggested: “The attempt to edify (ourselves and others) may consist in the hermeneutical activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable culture.” And this may be the most important result to which we can look forward: that the activity itself changes us and challenges our conventional ways of thinking.

So enjoy our ‘impossible’ issue. May it inspire new interests and ideas, and spark controversy as well as understanding. We haven’t let its impossibility stop us and, I hope, neither will you.

Anja Steinbauer
Anita Silver
Anita Silvers, philosopher and activist, whose writings ranged from aesthetics to medical ethics, feminism, and disability rights, has died of pneumonia in San Francisco at the age of 78. She was Professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University, and also served as Secretary-Treasurer of the American Philosophical Association’s Pacific Division for more than 25 years until 2008.

A serious case of polio at the age of eight left Silvers with partial quadriplegia. Angry about her limited mobility, she was determined not to be held back by it. Starting her career in academic philosophy as an expert on aesthetics, she later turned her interest to developing a new field of applied ethics: philosophical engagement with disability. This reflow was motivated by her analysis of the Americans With Disabilities Act passed in 1990. She argued that disability rights should be viewed the same as other civil rights and not as a special accommodation or as a social privilege: “Progress depends on constructing a neutral conception of disability, one that neither devalues disability nor implies that persons with disabilities are inadequate.”

She wrote an overview of ‘Philosophy and Disability’ for Philosophy Now in 2000 (Issue 30). Her great intellect and philosophical insight will be sorely missed by all of us.

Robots and Rules
Channelling Asimov, the EU has been wrestling with a particularly philosophical problem: what ethical principles should by law be built into future AI technology? The European Commission’s High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence (AI HLEG), formed in summer 2018, and also served as Secretary-Treasurer of the American Philosophical Association’s Pacific Division for more than 25 years until 2008.

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The proposals have been described by some commentators as underambitious. One of the experts, Thomas Metzinger, professor of philosophy at the University of Mainz, pointed out to Der Tagespiegel that almost half of the group were industry representatives, and only four were ethicists, which according to him prevented the report from including red lines banning potentially unethical AI applications such as social scoring or citizen surveillance.

The next step is to test how well the requirements can be integrated into applications, with a view to favourably positioning ‘trustworthy’ EU AI technology in a market dominated by Chinese and US products. Eline Chivot of the Center for Data Innovation think-tank told The Verge magazine: “We are skeptical of the approach being taken ... To be a leader in ethical AI you first have to lead in AI itself.”

Culture War Claims New…. What?
In Issue 129 we reported that conservative philosopher and aesthetician Sir Roger Scruton had been made chairman of the British government’s Building Better, Building Beautiful housing commission. Alas, the appointment was short-lived – he has now been fired following the publication of an interview in left-leaning New Statesman magazine, in which he appeared to make provocative comments about race, antisemitism and Islamophobia. Afterwards the interviewer, New Statesman deputy editor George Eaton, posted a picture on Instagram of himself swinging champagne with the caption “The feeling when you get right-wing racist and homophobe Roger Scruton sacked.” Scruton protested that he had been misquoted in a deliberate take-down. Rival magazine the (right-leaning) Spectator took up cudgels on his behalf, eventually obtaining a recording of the interview, prompting the NS to publish the unedited transcript online and launch an internal review, which is still on-going. Claiming vindication, Scruton and his supporters are calling for his reinstatement.

Even Educated Wasps Do It
Research published in the journal Biology Letters brings us some interesting news from the world of wasps. The research found that wasps use a form of logical reasoning to infer unknown relationships from known relationships. Their behaviour demonstrates a problem-solving ability known as transitive inference, meaning if A is greater than B, and B is greater than C, they can work out that A is greater than C. While evidence of vertebrates such as birds, monkeys and fish doing this has been emerging over the last few years, Dr Elizabeth Tibbetts, evolutionary biologist at the University of Michigan, is the first to find it in an invertebrate animal, the paper wasp.

Training wasps to discriminate between different pairs of colours, she found that they easily learned the pairs, and were later able to use those learned relationships to organise a hierarchy of colours when given new pairs of colours. “This study adds to a growing body of evidence that the miniature nervous systems of insects do not limit sophisticated behaviours,” said Tibbetts. “We’re not saying that wasps used logical deduction to solve this problem, but they seem to use known relationships to make inferences about unknown relationships.”

STOP PRESS: Frankenpigs!
Scientists at Yale University have just succeeded in partially reanimating pigs’ brains four hours after slaughter. The research is under intense debate and throws up a host of ethical and medical questions. We’ll try to bring you an interview with the pigs in a future issue.
Meditating with Descartes

Karen Parham asks how close Western philosophy gets to Buddhism.

Why did René Descartes (1596-1650) name his famous treatise Meditations on First Philosophy? Broadly speaking, ‘to meditate’ means ‘to think deeply about something’ (OED). Although Descartes probably meant the word in this general sense, I would like to look at whether his method, and Western philosophy in general, has some correlation with meditation in the Eastern sense of the word. To do this I will consider the meditation techniques of Zen and of traditional Theravada Buddhism.

Peace of Mind

First let us consider whether Western philosophy aims for peace of mind.

The purpose of Western philosophising is to find solutions to profound questions, such as the meaning of life or the nature of mind, and every philosophical theory is an attempt at solving a philosophical problem. To develop such a theory might momentarily provide peace of mind.

The object upon which Western philosophers focus is the question they aim to answer, such as ‘What is truth?’ or ‘What is language?’. These questions may be a little like the koans that Zen Buddhists focus on during their meditations. Koans are paradoxical statements, parables, or questions that have no logical answer—a commonly cited koan is, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” They require the student monk to disengage their reasoning faculties and instead turn to their intuition; to answer their ‘koan’, they would also be required to be introspective. The student monk must engage in an introspective exercise of reason. The answer does not require the monk to make judgements, infer or conclude. Nevertheless, a monk may well respond to a koan in a number of ways: by being silent, by nodding, or by screaming; or they may respond by talking about something seemingly unrelated to the question they aim to answer. The answer may or may not be a ‘solution’ to a given koan, whereas Zen koans are not. Philosophical answers will also have meaning and make sense to others, not just to the ‘meditator’. So, although philosophy does in a sense aim for peace of mind, it aims for it using a different technique to that of Zen Buddhists. Furthermore, its object of enquiry, the philosophical question, has an answer that is designed to appeal to others as well as satisfying the individual philosopher in question.

Descartes’ Koan

Let’s now consider Descartes in particular. Descartes’ philosophical koan in his Meditations is, “What can I know for certain?” At the start of his Meditations he explains how he reached a stage in his thought where he was no longer as certain of anything as he used to be. The senses can sometimes deceive, and as he says, “it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once” (p.12). For all he knows in this state of uncertainty, it may even be the case that he has no body; that he’s just dreaming that he’s sitting by the fire writing out the Meditation. It could even be possible that one plus one does not actually equal two and an evil demon is deceiving him into thinking that it does. Perhaps he may not even exist? To achieve any peace of mind in this situation of radical doubt, Descartes needs to find something certain. The way he intends to find this is through an introspective exercise of reason.

If a Zen Buddhist were given “What can I know for certain?” as a koan, they would also be required to be introspective. The answer to a koan cannot be sought in the outside world. However, the response does not require the monk to make judgements, infer or conclude. Nevertheless, a monk may well respond to a koan in a number of ways: by being silent, by nodding, or by screaming; or they may respond by talking about something seemingly unrelated to the question. Descartes, however, does none of this. His response to the question comes in the form of a conclusion reached deductively. One type of logical deduction relies on a specific example being applied to a universal premise to reach a conclusion. For example:

All Buddhists meditate (universal premise)
Descartes is a Buddhist (specific example)
Therefore Descartes meditates (conclusion)

However, Descartes’ thought process about what he can be certain of (which he started in his previous work, the Discourse
on Method) produces an incomplete argument: an enthymeme. An enthymeme is a deduction without the universal premise. His famous argument ‘I think therefore I am’ (p.17) is arguably of the form:

- All thinking things exist (universal premise)
- I am thinking (specific example)
- Therefore I exist (conclusion)

According to this interpretation, Descartes assumes, but has not written, the universal premise that all thinking things exist. So some philosophers might class Descartes’ response – ‘I think therefore I am’ – to his koan as being merely intuitive.

Perhaps Descartes would have had more peace of mind if he had engaged with his Buddha-nature. He may then have realised the limits of his conceptual thought and trusted in just ‘being’.

Natural Light

Another Zen-like feature in Descartes’ Meditations is the ‘natural light.’ Through what he calls ‘clear and distinct ideas’, the natural light presents truths to Descartes that cannot be doubted. Descartes’ general rule is that “whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly must be true” (p.24). Descartes uses the natural light of reason to conclude (among other things) that he exists, that God exists, that deceit is an imperfection, and that material objects do indeed possess the geometric and other mathematical properties he judges them to possess.

Zen Buddhists could also claim that the responses they receive from meditating on koans are clear and distinct ideas. That is the nature of ‘seeing the light’. Good responses to Zen koans must, by Descartes’ criterion, therefore be true. They may even be nearer the truth (if there is such a thing) than Descartes’ conclusion, because Descartes’ argument about relying on the natural light is circular. He believes that the natural light is reliable because God exists and does not deceive him about the natural light; yet Descartes needs the natural light to prove that God exists. This natural light tells Descartes that deceit is an imperfection: therefore, God, who by definition is a perfect being, cannot deceive him about what the natural light tells him.

Descartes does not seem to have engaged his intuition properly here, and had he had a Zen Master he might have received a slap in the face (an interesting teaching tool often used by Zen masters) to awaken him.

Shifts in Consciousness

Like Descartes, Buddhists tend to be substance dualists, also believing that mind and matter are what constitute Ultimate Reality or Truth (paramattha). This claim is made for instance in the Abhidharma Pitaka, part of the important Buddhist scripture known as the Tipitaka (or Tripitaka). This section of the Tipitaka also stresses that there is no ‘I’ or individual person – as Hume also claimed in response to Descartes’ assumption that ‘he’ is doing the thinking. Hume believed that a unified self is an illusion and that there is only a bundle of perceptions. If the self really is an illusion, then meditation requires a shift in awareness in order for the meditator to realise Ultimate Truth.

Empiricists, who rely on experience as their source of knowledge, will not be interested in shifting their consciousness away from the evidence the world presents to them. Rationalists like Descartes, on the other hand, may well shift their consciousness away from the world of appearances when contemplating deduction, logic, mathematics and geometry.

Let’s consider what rationalists shift their consciousness towards before comparing it to the Buddhist mental shift. The rationalist will direct their attention towards something abstract – towards concepts or ideas. Descartes shifts his consciousness towards the idea of God, for example: an idea that he believes is innate. The idea he has in his mind is of an infinite and perfect being. This is quite different from the idea he has of himself. He makes mistakes, is subject to change, will one day cease to exist as an embodied thinking thing, and has trouble getting out of bed in time to teach philosophy to the Queen of Sweden. So Descartes is finite and imperfect. But Descartes’ natural light tells him that a cause must be equal to or greater than its effect (this is known as the causal adequacy principle). So the cause of the idea of God must be something either equal to or greater than its effect (this is known as the causal adequacy principle). So the cause of the idea of God must be something either equal to or greater than its effect.

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idea of a perfect being? The only possibility is that God must be the cause of the idea of God that Descartes has. So God exists.

Unfortunately, Descartes has not managed to shift his consciousness entirely. Indeed, he has not really managed to distance his thought from the external world at all, because his idea of God could quite easily be built from experience. He believes that the idea of God is innate. Yet if it were innate, everyone would possess it. However, as John Locke pointed out when criticising the concept of innate ideas, some people do not have any idea of God, and others have a different idea of God. Hume proposed a better origin for the idea of God: the mind transposes, combines, and enlarges ideas derived from sense impressions to create the idea. As Hume states, “the idea of God – meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being – comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds” – adding that these latter ideas are copied from sense impressions (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p.8).

If Hume is right, then Descartes has been unsuccessful in actually distancing himself from the world of sense impressions. He could have tried to shift his awareness further away from the world of appearances, as Theravada Buddhists do during *samatha* meditation. *Samatha* meditation involves focusing on the breath or some neutral object in order to achieve calmness, in preparation for a second type of meditation called *vipassana*, which aims to achieve insight. As the practitioner becomes more proficient they will experience profound states of absorption known as *jhanas*. Theravada Buddhists recognise eight *jhanas*. As the meditator progresses from one *jhana* to the next, they experience deeper levels of concentration, to the point that they have transcended time and space and even nothingness in their experience, and the meditator enters a realm of immanence. In the sixth *jhana* the successful Buddhist will encounter boundless consciousness; in the seventh nothingness; and in the eighth neither perception nor non-perception. These are the realms of the infinite; of no-thingness and of non-dual awareness. The mind has here surpassed any idea of an infinite and perfect being; that idea would only be an obstacle to achieving enlightenment. In other words, for the Theravada Buddhist, the idea of God would be a distraction standing in the way of seeing the true nature of reality.

Isn’t this distraction exactly what happened to Descartes? So if he had been able to let go of his idea of God, he may have come to some deeper realisations… Then again, if he had done this, he may not have delivered a treatise so thought-provoking that it has kept Western philosophers busy ever since.

**Western Philosophy In General**

So Descartes is not really very Buddhist, but he did have the potential. If he had used the natural light without being distracted by the idea of God, maybe he would have got a little further towards enlightenment.

What can we say about Western philosophy in general? How far are its methods compatible with those of Buddhism?

Well, the aims of philosophy do not seem so far removed from the aims of Buddhism. Both philosophers and Buddhists want peace of mind; to rationalise does require a shift in consciousness; and philosophical questions do sometimes seem to resemble *koans*. The enlightened Zen Buddhist, however, can respond to any type of question, paradox, or unanswerable question using their method. The philosopher, on the other hand, has a different task. First, she needs to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable questions before attempting to answer the reasonable ones in a systematic way. Once the right questions are asked, the philosopher is less likely to stumble into inconsistencies or make errors in reasoning. She can then let her rational faculties run wild in the hope of finding an answer; but should not fall into the trap of thinking that the answer will be the final say on the matter. The question of certainty cannot be a sound philosophical question in this mould, as Descartes has unintentionally demonstrated, since nothing in the realm of thought is certain; but in the realms beyond thought and ideas it may well be.

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Some Solid Ideas

Bharatwaj Iyer examines substance with the help of Hume & Vedantic philosophy.

In his 1738 classic *A Treatise of Human Nature*, the Scottish philosopher David Hume criticised a conception of *substance* held by many philosophers throughout the long history of Western thought. He rhetorically asks these philosophers how they know of the existence and nature of substances. Hume considers two possible answers: sense perception or sheer thought. If our senses are the source of our knowledge of substances, then substance would need to be observable through taste, smell, touch, and so on. No one, of course, considered substance to be a smell or a taste or a touch, nor even the combination of all these. Rather, the combination of all our sensations of an object, argues Hume, is imagined to belong to an unknown entity that acts as the locus of their manifestation; and that is precisely what the ‘substance’ is thought to be. Our conception of substance is a function, then, of our minds, not of our senses. The intellect conjures up the idea of ‘substance’ and then a relation is imagined between an unknowable something, the substance, and its knowable, sensible attributes or qualities.

This substance-attribute relation was instrumental in the conception of thing-hood and identity in Western thought. For instance in Plato’s dialogue *Meno*, when Meno asks what a solid is, Socrates answers that a solid (or we could substitute ‘thing’) is something that has contours (or edges) in which certain sensible qualities *inhere*. And to Aristotle, *form* confers thing-hood on a lump of matter by separating that form-impressed matter from the rest of the world in a specific way. Imagine Mount Rushmore were the matter. The monument would have thing-hood conferred upon it by the sculptor carving out the faces of the Presidents. The sculptor *separates* the monument from the remaining matter of the mountain. To call the unformed lump something in addition to what is defined by the faces of the Presidents would be to miss the whole point. In Aristotle’s view matter must combine with form to become a substance. In our example, the monument of sculpted faces is the substance formed by the rocks given shape by the sculptor. In Aristotle’s terminology, unformed matter is mere potentiality, and form is that which makes it *actual*. This actuated potentiality is what he calls substance. A mass of pure potentiality, a sea of undifferentiated matter, cannot be a thing or substance: a potentiality, by definition, is not (yet) a thing.

Hume thought that Aristotle’s argument did not hold water. Nevertheless, it’s a good starting point to critically consider some core aspects of Hume’s metaphysics.

**Hume’s Substance Problem**

The key term Hume uses in the *Treatise* in his criticism of the classical conception of substance is ‘inhere’. In his words, “the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly referred to an unknown *something*, in which they are supposed to inhere” (1.1.6). This unknown something seems to act as a bearer of a bunch of qualities the senses perceive. The problem with this thing is that it is unknowable to the senses and thus has to be conceived in an abstract form. But abstract ideas are problematic for any empiricist philosophical project, such as Hume’s. Empiricism says that all knowledge comes originally from the evidence of our senses, from which both simple and complex ideas follow. We cannot know with any certainty things we cannot perceive, such as substances. We can only have abstract ideas of them.

It’s not entirely surprising then that in his *Treatise* Hume places the section on ‘Abstract Ideas’ immediately after that on ‘Modes and Substances’. For Hume, as for Berkeley, a *general* idea is nothing but a label for a set of *particular* ideas with varying degrees of quantity and quality. An abstraction is but a confused and inaccurate particular idea. For instance, there is no universal ‘Man’ as such, but only a lot of particular men and women, whose particularities have been confused in the mind. A vague representative has been set up instead and given a name to call to memory the particular instances when the general word ‘Man’ is thought of or called up. Universals like Man, Justice, Goodness, and so forth, do not have concrete referents out there but are vague collections of particular instants. As Hume writes, “If ideas be particular in their nature, and at the same time finite in their number, it is only by custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number of other ideas under them.” (1.1.7)

The controversy over the connection between abstract generalities and particular instances can be traced as far back as the debate between Peter Abaelard and Bernard of Clairvaux in the Twelfth Century. It makes its first appearance even further back, in Aristotle’s criticism of Plato’s Forms. But for Hume abstract ideas are only vague collections of particular instances. Given this, the abstract idea of the inherence of qualities in a ‘something’ behind them is a problem. However, if the supposition of a thing that is somehow the bearer of sense qualities is unfounded, then there still arises the question of the packaging and bundling-together of qualities that separates one such bundle off from the rest as an apparent object. What does give rise to this tying together or parceling together of sense qualities, without which we wouldn’t have individual objects in the world but just an incoherent sea of sensations?

**Another Substance Problem**

The fact that we can’t perceive substances is a problem on Hume’s account of knowledge. But why insist on the unifier of our sense impressions as existing beyond perception?

One problem is that if there is another, *perceivable* entity that parcels together the sense data, that entity itself must have sense qualities for it to be perceivable; and so it in turn would require a further perceivable ‘substance’ binding it to the other qualities, and so on *ad infinitum*: a sort of ‘third substance’ problem.

As it cannot be a sense quality, then, can the bundling principle holding our sense perceptions together be something innate, even prior to perception, but not a substance in the sense problematic to Hume?

If a kind of innate individuality is conceded in the person who perceives – he or she being intrinsically a discrete individual –
then there is nothing inconceivable in also assigning innate individuality to things in the external world. So, given the plausible idea that individuals have individual experiences, it follows that intrinsically individual things (that is, substances) are at least possible. There could be an unknown something (to use Hume’s term) that bundles together a lump of sense qualities. But in Hume’s philosophy, the problem doesn’t lie in accepting the possible existence of something that ‘carries qualities on its back’, but in our capacity to know this something. The question is not ontological but epistemological: it’s not about what exists, but about what we can know about what exists.

Let’s go back for a moment to Aristotle. ‘Form’ seems an interesting candidate for an unknown something that could carry (or perhaps help contour) a set of properties, and thus establish thing-hood. But can form be observed in experience, and so be known to Hume; or is the idea of form merely abstracted from the objects experienced through the senses? I think clarity about this problem can be obtained by viewing it from the standpoint of Vedanta, one of the six traditional schools of Hindu philosophy.

**Vedantic Metaphysic**

Let me first restate the problem: all our knowledge of the world is received via perception of the qualities of objects by the senses, and as substance cannot be so perceived, one can never have knowledge of it. On close examination one finds here an interesting question-begging which provides fertile ground for thought. But first I wish to describe the Vedantic conception of substance as succinctly as I can. After this we shall look at the question-begging.

In the Vedantic conception (and also for Thomas Aquinas) two components make up an object: form and substance. Form is further divisible into ‘name’ and ‘shape’. The term ‘shape’ here does not only mean shape in the sense that the sculptor gives shape to a statue, but includes all of an object’s quantitative and qualitative attributes, including the arrangement of its component parts. Furthermore, the naming of something as a ‘statue’ happens to the substance ‘rock’, which has the form of a statue. Or we can say that a ‘pot’ is given that name when the constituent clay assumes the shape and form given it by the potter; or that the
‘lamp’ is called so when all its constituent parts – the base, the shade, the bulb, the stand, and so on – are arranged together by its maker.

This much is common sense; but the Vedanta takes this further. One might begin by trying to locate an object in the external world. Consider the clay pot. On one inspection we see that there is in fact nothing called a ‘pot’ apart from the clay that is its underlying stuff. There is only a pot-shaped lump of clay: there is nothing substantive or additional given by either the name or the shape of the pot. So the name and shape of the clay aren’t the substantives, the clay is. But the ‘clay’ isn’t substantive in its own right either. It too is but a name for a particular arrangement of its underlying molecules, and the clay is not an additional substantive element on top of the molecular arrangement. The ‘molecular arrangement’, in its turn, is but a label for the particular atomic arrangement that underlies it. There is no water molecule as an additional entity on top of the arrangement of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, for example. The same logic holds from the atomic to the subatomic particles, right down to quarks and even beyond. If something has a form, it must be an arrangement of something that underlies it as its substance, which in turn acts as the form of a substance underlying it, and so forth.

This sort of thinking is important in relation to Hume’s philosophy. In his arguments for the indivisibility of space, he says, “It is also obvious, that whatever is capable of being divided in infinitum must consist of an infinite number of parts, and that it is impossible to set any bounds to the number of parts, without setting bounds at the same time to the division” (1.2.2). If that conclusion can be the result of reasoning, a similar result of reasoning (as above) is that any entity that has a form must always be the form of something underlying it. The search for the most basic components of the universe shall go on without end, so long as those components (whether they be the primary particles of physics or the strings of string theory) have mass and form. For everything that is a form has to be the form of something underlying and composing it, as experiment and observation continues to make clear. What this implies for the study of Hume’s thought is that the bundle of qualities that constitute things can be further analysed into bundles of bundles of bundles.

At this point, I am tempted to quote from Blaise Pascal’s unforgettable 72nd Pensée: “Perhaps he will think here is the smallest point in nature. I will let him see therein a new abyss. I will paint for him not only the visible universe, but all that he can conceive of nature’s immensity in the womb of the abridged atom. Let him see therein an infinity of universes, each of which has its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportion as in the visible world.”

Hume Begs The Question

As I mentioned, a final thing needs to be said with respect to the knowing of substances in which qualities supposedly inheres. While discussing causation, Hume criticises the type of metaphysician who argues that the very definition of an effect presupposes the existence of a cause, and thus any effect has a cause: “They are still more frivolous who say that every effect must have a cause, because it is implied in the very idea of effect. Every effect necessarily presupposes a cause; effect being a relative term, of which cause is the correlative. But this does not prove that every being must be preceded by a cause; no more than it follows because every husband must have a wife, that therefore every man must be married.” Though Hume is right in ridiculing these kinds of thinkers, I am going to temporarily risk becoming one of these frivolous ones (though not in the same sense) by looking briefly at the question-begging I mentioned earlier.

What would it mean to really know a substance? If a substance were to be known through sense impressions, wouldn’t the question arise, in what do these impressions, in their own turn, inhere? The alternative would be to follow Hume in denying the very existence of substance, on the basis of its not being amenable to sense experience. But here Hume begs the question, by assuming that everything that exists must be perceivable to sense experience. Why must it? Nor will it do to concede to its existence but deny knowledge of it. For if you concede the existence of something that you cannot perceive, you must also concede that you have knowledge of it in some way other than perception.

The Vedantic notion of substance is that substance by its very nature or by definition cannot be a form. Whether you view substance, as we have done, as that which underlies a form, or as that which acts as the locus for the inheritance of sensible qualities, in the final analysis, it must itself be formless, and so not itself an object of perception. Therefore, to question the concept of substance from Hume’s standpoint of strict empiricism is to demand of substance what it logically cannot provide. The infinite regress that we were faced with in our Vedantic consideration of the problem, along with the circularity we presently saw, only proves the logical misplacement of this demand.

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© CLINTON VAN INMAN 2019

Clinton Van Inman was born in England, raised in North Carolina, graduated SDSU with a degree in philosophy, and is now retired and living in Florida with his wife Elba.
We have a tendency to identify the true (facts) with truth (an ideal). What we know to be true are facts taken individually. Cumulatively, we may assume that these make up the “truth”. But they certainly do not if by truth we mean conclusive, unsurpassable knowledge, subject neither to revision nor expansion. But this tendency to identify the true with the truth can create problems.

An old friend says farewell through a mutual acquaintance.

“She told me to say goodbye to you ...”

On hearing this we may think that this fact represents the truth about the situation. Our friend said goodbye to us through someone else, a third party. And all she said was ‘goodbye’! If we’re not careful we will take the true here for the truth. The truth of this situation then becomes “Our friend said goodbye to us through a third party.” Our jumpiness may then lead us to conclude that our friend didn’t care too much about us after all.

Our tendency to identify the true with the truth here can block understanding. The assumption that the truth has been said imputes a full-stop to what may only require a pause. What I mean is that there is always something unknown, something hidden and undetermined. Perhaps this sounds obvious; but our use of the term ‘truth’ to describe the knowledge we have is liable to make us think that this knowledge is final, conclusive – that all that is to be known is known. (“That’s how it is!”)

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Our tendency to identify the true with the truth here can block understanding. The assumption that the truth has been said imputes a full-stop to what may only require a pause. What I mean is that there is a lot more to the situation than what is given at first sight. Not everything has been said about the situation, there may be more facts than meet the eye. But if we identify the facts we have been given with the truth we will stop short of further enquiry. If we pause though, to ponder what has been said, we may realise there is more to be said and we may ask further questions:

“How did she say it?”

“Under what circumstances did she say it? For example, did she take you aside to tell you? Or did she say it in the middle of a group of friends?”

“What expression was on her face?”

Such questions allows us to fathom more about the situation by gathering facts which we deny ourselves as soon as we take the first statement to be identical with the truth. We would then see that the first fact by itself in no way represents ‘the truth’ of the situation but only something true about it.

Could these further questions then bring us to the ultimate truth of the situation? Probably not. The full truth remains an ideal for us. What we could say is that the extra questions we
ask and the additional facts they yield bring us nearer to this ideal and take us further away from untruth, which would here involve an inadequate or one-sided picture of things.

Closeness to the truth is here related to the extent of our questions. For our questions here determine which facts a situation yields. In our example, not questioning left us with only one fact about the situation, which by itself gave only a vague picture of it. Our inability to pause prevented us from moving nearer to the ideal. We mistook the true for the truth.

In Meditation IV, René Descartes wrote about the origin of error. We make errors not because of our intellect but because of our will. We see the Sun as a round disk and conclude it is actually a round disk. But this needn’t happen. The fact that the Sun appears as a round disk to us needn’t compel us to assert that it is so. This judgment is made by an effort of the will; we take one fact and identify it with the truth. But this is due to hastiness.

Hastiness goes with an inability to question. We judge too quickly. Truth requires a kind of patience, an ability to open up to the possibility that what we have now is not final. We cannot rush truth but must wait for it to unfurl and who knows the limit to which it will reach in its unfurling? This unfurling may take a lot of time to happen and so we need patience.

Truth tends to be linked with judgment. But perhaps truth might be more closely related to understanding. That is to say, if our aim is to understand rather than judge we may be less hasty in making assertions about the truth on the basis of a few facts we have at hand and be more prepared to wait, to suspend judgment in the awareness that there may be more facts to come which will bring us closer to the ideal of truth. We can contribute to discovering these facts by pausing in the face of the facts we have so far gathered in order to ask more questions.

On this approach we gather facts not to make a judgment but to understand. And understanding is something we can always gain more of. We may get enough of judgment but not of understanding. Understanding is inexhaustible. It leaves a space for more facts to come and take us nearer to the ideal of truth.

Choosing to seek greater understanding rather than rushing to judgment enables us to do justice to the many-sidedness of a complex situation. Our mind takes the shape of the situation instead of forcing it into a preconceived mould. We are ready for more; we have not locked ourselves into a position which is static, and from which new facts appear like assaults upon our intellect.

The word ‘factor’ here becomes significant. When we speak of factors we do so non-finally whereas the term ‘fact’ has more of a hard-edged ring about it. It is more conclusive and exclusive. The notion of a factor leaves more space. Factors do not claim to capture a situation, only to illuminate it. Factors always aspire to being facts. On the other hand, facts are factors which have forgotten themselves.

We get nearer the truth by seeing a situation from as many perspectives as possible. The more perspectives we can gain, the more our tendency moves away from judgment to understanding.

Consider an example. Why do other people sometimes seem to be less free than we ourselves are? Maybe this perception is the source of a lot of problems as it can tie in with seeing others as more like objects than we take ourselves to be. It may require an effort but we can imagine other people as equally free. This involves understanding a perspective other than the one we may be immediately given.

Truth may be an ideal which we never reach once and for all, but we can certainly gain a richer approximation to it through this openness to plurality. And the more facts we grasp about a situation, the more careful we will be about the assertions we make. This is contrary to the view that ignorance alone can guarantee non-judgmentality. The more eyes we have, the more understanding we gain and the less judgmental we become. And we gain more eyes through questioning. The fact that I’ve never seen a Number 7 bus go to Russell Square doesn’t mean there is no Number 7 bus that goes to Russell Square. If I keep my eyes open and don’t jump to conclusions I may yet spot such a bus one day.

It might be asked whether all facts are the same? Moreover, what if there are no facts ‘out there’ at all, only interpretations? It should be said here that we mustn’t allow understanding to be so excessive and so passive as to rule out goodness. Some facts may be better than others. The fact that a mother loves her child is simply not of the same kind as the fact that a sadist is frying a kitten in a microwave. The former deserves understanding while the latter requires us to pronounce judgment without hesitation. We must here even go as far as to impose a limit on our understanding rather than wait for our under-
standing to limit itself. Even if all facts are nothing but interpretations we must still decide which among the countless interpretations is best. After all, we are willing, not just thinking and feeling, beings. We should choose the interpretation which brings the most love and goodness.

In the ancient Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, three kinds of knowledge are outlined which express a theory of the three qualities of nature. These qualities are sattva (goodness), rajas (energy) and tamas (inertia). The first kind of knowledge is described in the following terms:

“That knowledge by which one sees
One imperishable Being in all beings,
Undivided in separate beings,
Know that knowledge to be satvic.”

(Bhagavad Gita XVIII.20, trans. W. Sargeant)

The highest kind of knowledge involves a deep sense of the unity of life. What makes this kind of knowledge good? The case of the mother loving the child shows the presence of unity and interconnection, a condition which is far from being morally evil or even neutral. Knowledge of unity recognises the absolute value of such situations and does not put them on a par with ones characterised by division or aggression.

Hegel describes something akin to this first kind of knowledge with his idea of ‘the concrete universal’, a universal idea running through its individual instances which is best exemplified by God, the Absolute, who is infinite and finite at once:

“It may also be said in this strain that the absolute idea is the universal, but the universal not merely as an abstract form to which the particular content is a stranger, but as the absolute form into which all the categories, the whole fullness of the content it has given being to, have retired. The absolute idea may in this respect be compared to the old man who utters the same creed as the child, but for whom it is pregnant with the significance of a lifetime.”

(Hegel, Logic, trans. W. Wallace 237)

Here is an account of the second kind of knowledge:

“But that knowledge which sees
In all beings
Separate entities of various kinds,
by differentiation,
Know that knowledge to be rajas.”

(Bhagavad Gita XVIII.21)

Philosophers like Jacques Derrida who emphasise the role of difference in language provide a case in point, as does the thirteenth century Indian philosopher Madhvacharya, who speaks of the ‘fivefold difference’ – between God and individual souls, individual souls themselves, God and matter, individual souls and matter and between pieces of matter. David Loy construes all everyday conceptual knowledge from this perspective for two reasons. Firstly, in this knowledge a subject knows an object apart from itself. Secondly, this object is understood in distinction from other objects:

“... such knowledge must discriminate one thing from another in order to assert some attribute about some thing.”(David Loy, Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy Yale Univ. Press, 1988)

What of the third kind of knowledge?

“That (knowledge), however, which is attached to one single effect
As if it were all, and without reason,
Without reason and small in significance,
Is declared to be tamasic”

(Bhagavad Gita XVIII.22)

This suggests that knowledge is not confined to the general but can be something particular. The third kind of knowledge involves narrowing the focus of attention down to one thing to the exclusion of the wider environment in which it is really situated and not connecting it to a greater field of unity. Removing a piece of fluff from my coat is an example. Isolated matters of fact also exemplify this. So does the sad case of the kitten in the microwave, whose murderer thinks only of his own pleasure to the exclusion of the first, higher knowledge which involves a strong sense of relatedness to the kitten’s life.

This essay is an everyday example which shows how all three kinds of knowledge can come together. In writing it I have a guiding theme or idea summed up in the title ‘Truth and the True’ (the first knowledge) which is expressed in many different words (the second knowledge) written or read one at a time (the third kind of knowledge). This example shows that the three kinds of knowledge need not be seen in terms of a moral hierarchy.

The Bhagavad Gita’s three kinds of knowledge, however, relate to the qualities of nature, the gunas, which are the elements of the material universe. They are mentioned within a wider context which discusses another kind of knowledge altogether – that of pure unity:

“It is axiomatic in the yoga tradition that ‘knowledge is different in different states of consciousness’ (Rig Veda). In other words, our level of consciousness completely determines how much truth we see of any given situation. The clearer our minds, the more correctly we evaluate our experience. The state of Enlightenment is said to be complete knowledge, because it is based on the unchanging experience of the Knower – the Self. Until this state is reached, any knowledge is ultimately baseless, because it depends only on the mind, which is a prey to passing moods and general instability.”

(Alistair Shearer, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, pp.41-42)

This is an experience of nonduality beyond every kind of differentiation. Does this experience show that the ideal of truth can be realized once and for all? Is enlightenment a static condition or is even enlightenment a condition from which more and more growth is possible?
“For the Perfect the drama of life is ended: nothing can be done any more, no decision can be taken any more, for decisions belong to the condition of man to whom both knowledge and ignorance are given and who can have an hypothetical knowledge of the future, knowing that on his decisions the future may depend and to whom a sure knowledge of the future is denied. But an Omniscient Being can neither act nor decide; for him the future is irremediable like the past and cannot be changed any more by His decisions or actions. Paradoxically the Omnipotent is impotent.”

(Averroes, The Incoherence of the Incoherence)

According to Hegel the true infinite includes the finite, the perfect includes the imperfect. For God to be complete He must partake of the incomplete, otherwise there is something left outside Him which would make Him incomplete anyway. His completeness either consciously embraces incompleteness or He is unconsciously incomplete. The first view is compatible with omniscience, the second denies it. Maybe in God there are two kinds of perfection: perfect perfection and imperfect perfection.

Surely God, being perfect, has the richest life and this entails a future. But maybe he is omniscient about the general drift of the future; maybe he knows, for example, that it will be good without needing full knowledge of every detail of it. Mystery should not be the general rule but something found only in the small print. Likewise the presence of a good God ensures a good future for everyone without this entailing that God will determine this future in every detail for other beings.

According to Professor Richard Sorabji in his 1983 book Time, Creation and the Continuum, Gregory of Nyssa “viewed mystical experience of God, not as something static, but as a perpetual discovery. Since the distance between the soul and God is infinite, there will always be more to understand, and the more we understand, the more we recognise that God is incomprehensible. But we will never feel satiety, because we can always progress.”

However, just because there is endless progress this need not imply the absence of fulfilment at each step of the movement. Maybe there is an ever growing fulfilment as well. In Buddhism, the Bodhisattva continues to develop in his or her enlightenment into a future we can barely conceive.

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Seeing True Nature

John Worthington-Hill explores Buddhist environmental thought.

Today you’d be hard pushed to find a corner of the biosphere unaltered by human hands. In some places, nature has been rendered almost incapable of sustaining healthy life. Industrial society has caused a loss of species estimated to be 1,000 times more rapid than the rate of extinction that would have occurred in the absence of human activity. Manned emissions have increased the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide to its highest level in several million years, and the onset of human-induced climate change is set to produce ever more devastating effects. So extensive is the human impact on the planet that a growing number of scientists think we’ve entered a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene, which signifies irreversible changes in the Earth’s ecosystems. How did we get here, and how is it that we are able to carry on like this?

All cultures and societies provide criteria for moral behaviour. In the West, the inherited framework for morality is based on individual rights and entitlements that place human interests at the summit of ethical concerns. This orthodoxy can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Philosophers have also linked the emergence of an exploitative attitude towards the environment in the West to the medieval ethos of human supremacy over the world, with human beings as the crown of creation and centre of the universe.

Buddhism sees things differently. Buddhism’s first ethical precept is that of non-harm; and the first ruler in history to advocate conservation measures for wildlife, the Indian emperor Ashoka Maurya (304-232 BCE), was Buddhist. For many environmental philosophers, however, Buddhism doesn’t appear to provide direct guidance on the proper attitude towards the natural world. This is largely because there is some discord between Buddhist understanding and Western environmental ethics.

In explaining this discord, it’s useful to remember the Buddha’s distinction between ‘conventional reality’ and ‘ultimate reality’. Conventional reality is the way things appear to be, giving rise to apparent structure and organisation in the world. Central to conventional reality is the sense of self. We tend to have strong ideas about our own identity, signified by things like family, nationality, religion, occupation, and possessions. Ultimate reality, however, transcends this sort of experience. It describes all things in terms of properties and conditions within an ever-changing universe rather than as independent objects. This perspective means for example that the synthesis of forces and conditions that we perceive as ‘a river’ remains recognisable in itself, and yet intrinsically it exists as an element of a much wider system. It can only be understood in terms of the forces of physics, the geology of the land, the life it supports, and the hydrological cycle. If the self is considered in the same way, how much substance is there in what I think of as ‘me’?

In Buddhism, the self is understood as an ongoing process rather than an underlying thing. This resembles the ‘bundle theory’ of David Hume. In accordance with Buddhist thought, Hume describes the mind as “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in a variety of postures and situations” (A Treatise of Human Nature, 1738). So, despite what’s inferred from conventional reality, there is no single abiding entity or essence behind our thoughts, words and deeds. Hence in Buddhism, ‘individuality’ is an illusion, particularly in the sense that our assumptions lead us to believe that we’re separate from everyone and everything else in the world.

On a personal level, problems arise when we get caught up in the sort of experiences that characterise this sort of sense of self. We become driven by notions of possessing, and so become the cause of our own suffering by craving for, and becoming attached to, things that are impermanent. This inevitably leads to dissatisfaction, unease and anxiety. But the consequences of these existential misunderstandings reach far beyond our own individual lives. In fact, self-centeredness is the great illness from which all imbalance, insensitivity and abuse ultimately stem: an illness directly linked to the Buddha’s ‘three poisons’ of greed, ill-will, and delusion. Yet these poisons have been instilled in the norms and structures of society, helping to direct how politics and economics deal with the environment. Environmental destruction is therefore an outer manifestation of an inner affliction. If our thoughts are polluted, then our actions will be polluted too, and so will their consequences. By contrast, Buddhist principles treat the person and the environment as inseparable.

The way we perceive and understand ourselves is crucial in determining how we act. It shapes the way we perceive and understand each other and the environment. By thinking and acting as separate we create disharmony. Disharmony is both a symptom and cause of alienation from the natural world, as well as blindness to our true nature. Reversing this process means breaking down artificial boundaries between people and nature, to reveal the underlying unity and wholeness.

Both philosophically and ecologically, therefore, our personal interests can be seen as the interests of the whole. This realisation can set the tone for a more balanced relationship between society and nature.

The future of the planet is, for the first time, at least partly under the control of conscious, reasoning human beings. But for any kind of viable shared future, people must nurture an awareness and understanding that enables the regulation of their impulses and behaviour. This is a morality based on self-discipline, or what Buddhism calls the ‘Middle Way’. People must also cultivate a new appreciation and reverence for the inviolable sanctity of all forms of life, rooted in humility, respect and compassion as the basis for every decision and assessing the appropriateness of every action. As an old Asian proverb goes, “The careful foot can tread anywhere.” And just as we may come to a better understanding of nature along the way, so we may also see ourselves as we really are.

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John Worthington-Hill is a conservation biologist. His interest in our ethical relationship with the natural world has been strongly influenced by the principles and practices of Theravada Buddhism.
Japanese Bridge with Water Lillies by Claude Monet 1899
In this world all things are transient. They inhabit only a brief space of time. Some may lament this, but others may not; they think they can enjoy things all the better for their mutability.

A Japanese poet and writer in the Kamakura period, Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216 CE), wrote that the flow of a river is not what it was a minute ago and the bubbles on the surface are constantly coming and going, never remaining even for a second [see also Heraclitus, Ed]. A famous war story set in the same period, The Tale of the Heike, begins with a description of transience: “The sound of the Gion Shoja bells echoes the impermanence of all things; the color of the sala flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous decline. The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night; the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.”

Those who grieve over impermanence are not only in the East. Men and women of letters in the West are also saddened by it. In his poem “The Flower That Smiles Today”, the nineteenth century English poet Percy Shelley wrote:

“The flower that smiles today
Tomorrow dies;
All that we wish to stay
Tempted and then flies;
What is this world’s delight?”

But why focus on the impermanence of things if it makes us depressed? Well, an appreciation of mutability can actually lessen our suffering.

Buddhism tells us a relevant story. A mother had a baby who died. She became half-crazed wanting her baby back. She couldn’t believe the baby was gone forever. The Buddha told her he could bring back her loved one if she got some poppy seeds – but only from a house where death has never entered. She rushed to every neighboring house, asking if anyone in their family had died before, only to fail in her quest. She realized: there’s no home without death. All things are transient. Nothing remains forever. And she was calmed by this understanding. This is why one of the main themes of literature is mutability. Understanding the transience of things in the world makes us sad because all will be gone before long; but it also gives us some composure as well.

Strangely, the recognition of the evanescence of things may afford us not only calmness, but also contentment, even happiness. Another poet and writer of the Kamakura period, Yoshida Kenkō, said this world is all the better for its changeability; and in The Peal of Bells (1925), Robert Lynd, an English essayist born in Ireland, wrote:

“With most men the knowledge that they must ultimately die does not weaken the pleasure in being at present alive. To the poet the world appears still more beautiful as he gazes at the flowers that are doomed to wither, at springs that come to too speedy an end. The loveliness of May stirs him the more deeply because he knows that it is fading even as he looks at it. It is not that the thought of universal mortality gives him pleasure, but that he hugs the pleasure all the more closely because he knows it cannot be his for long.”

Some might say that impermanence, and the related concepts of wabi-sabi, and yugen are mostly just of concern to Eastern and Japanese aesthetics. That’s not always so. Americans, Chileans, Israelis, people from all cultures, can understand what it means. However, they may not be so conscious of this understanding, being aware of impermanence only dimly and vaguely. Some may say, East is East and West is West, what’s the use of thinking the two will meet? I would say, to some degree, East is West and West East; or rather, if a Westerner considers her culture in all its aspects, she’ll likely find a touch of things Eastern in it, and vice versa.
versa. After all, we all live on one and the same planet, and share one and the same atmosphere; how can we be totally alien to each other? So a mathematician at Oxford University may discuss the concept of zero, whose notation originated in ancient India; Mahatma Gandhi practiced nonviolence, which was one of the most important teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. Just as love and harmony combine, and around our souls intertwine, so East and West combine, and deep in our souls interweave.

Indeed, we live in an age of globalization. It’s a process of integration of the values of different nations, peoples, and cultures – which we’ll accomplish not merely by learning the exterior things; we’ll integrate by the attainment of knowledge out of the depths of our souls. This might be termed ‘individuation’, in the Jungian sense of the term. Individuation is when we become self-actualized by integrating our conscious and unconscious. The unconscious is something we don’t think we have, but in fact we do. We discover it in two places; deep in our soul, and far away from our mother country. That’s why we think of it as foreign to us. And I think that the search for the unconscious is very similar to the learning of foreign cultures. The more we are self-actualized, the more we are globalized, and vice versa.

So much for digressions. Impermanence is one of the facts of life all of us, in the East or in the West, should face, have faced, and will face. We can’t flee from it. Since we can’t, we should confront it. And the more we are face to face with it, the more consoled we will be.

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Is Karma a Law of Nature?

It seems Matthew Gindin is destined to ask, and answer, this question.

Karma is the concept that, eventually, ‘you get back what you give’. The idea that karma is an observable type of causality, just as gravity or the laws of thermodynamics are, might strike some as far-fetched. Isn’t karma a mere piece of wishful thinking or grim moralising which asserts, against all evidence, that the universe is just? Yet a careful perusal of the doctrine, at least in its elaboration in the early texts of Indian Buddhism, yields a thought-provoking picture which might contribute to our own thinking about ethics.

The source of the concept of karma appears to be the idea of karman in the Hindu scriptures the Vedas, where it refers to ritual acts. If the ritual gestures (karman) are performed correctly, the future is bright. It was the sbramanas – countercultural philosophers, including the Buddha and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism – who transformed the idea to refer to human action in general.

For the Buddha, karma, which literally means ‘action’, was part of the compound idea of karmavipaka (action and result), one of the key aspects of his teaching. The Buddha taught that karma was cetana – action was intention – and that the intentional quality of actions determines their results: whether they lead to well-being or to suffering. Thus, for the Buddha, it is the quality of character, of the life of one’s mind, that determines one’s future. (This is reminiscent of Heraclitus’s dictum that ethos is telos: character is destiny.) The Buddha taught that intentions rooted in greed, hatred and confusion lead to suffering; and those rooted in non-greed (for instance, patience, calm, generosity), non-hatred (goodwill, compassion, empathy), and non-confusion (knowledge, clarity, rationality), lead to well-being. This will probably make a general kind of common sense to most people. But is it a principle worth elevating to the status of a law of nature?

Buddhist tradition indeed sees the ‘law of karmavipaka’ (as it is commonly called) as a law of nature. However, in the Sivaka Sutta, an early Buddhist discourse, the Buddha denies that karma is a total explanation for what happens to a person, stating that other factors also play a role. Later commentaries talk of five natural laws: the laws of physics, biology, karma, psychology, and dhamma-niyama, or the truths taught by the Buddha. These are all seen as being utterly dependable natural laws which operate without recourse to a deity or any other metaphysical grounding. Does this make any sense with regards to the idea of karma?

A first objection might be that the idea that nature organizes itself according to human moral laws stretches credulity. The rejoinder would be that actually it’s the other way round: human moral intuitions are based on centuries of Homo sapiens’ observations of the patterns of life and our physiological and psychological adaptations to it. There is no more (or less) reason behind hatred causing suffering than heat causing water vapour: it’s just the way it is, and our moral intuitions reflect this reality in a way similar to how our physical instincts favor withdrawing our hand from a flame. This also helps to explain the tendency for fundamental moral intuitions to be universal, since it indicates an adaptive advantage to adhere to them.

A second objection would be that the claim that somehow greedy intentions (for example) regularly provoke suffering down the line, fails through having no way of showing how the law works or is applied. What mechanism connects cause and effect? This challenge also fails, however, since no mechanism can be shown for any cause and effect relationships, even physical ones – as Hume pointed out long ago. Why does gravity pull one object towards another? Why do positive and negatively charged particles attract each other? What causes these relationships to be regular across time and space?

There are two further objections to the idea of karma as causal law that are not so easy to deflect. The first is that karma is believed to apply not only within this life but beyond it, yielding results in future lives too. In principle there is no reason to deny that karma could operate on this scale, providing one believes in reincarnation. For those who don’t so believe (and there are of course good reasons to be skeptical about the doctrine) then karma could still be regarded as functioning within this lifetime.

The second problem is the claim that karma operates as an absolute law. It is hard to believe that this is the case. But consider again the example of gravity. Gravity is indeed in a sense an absolute law; but many kinds of other laws interact with it, mitigating its effects. You cannot be certain that if you throw a piece of bread into the air it will land on the ground: there may be a crow in the vicinity. It also seems reasonable to see karma as one of many laws – which the Buddha himself suggested, as we’ve seen. This would also imply (contra the opinion of some Buddhists) that although karma is an absolute law, it is mitigated and modified by the operation of other laws. So although karma exerts an influence over all things, it does not provide a guaranteed Cosmic Justice.

In terms of ethics, the idea of karma can offer a workable theory of morality. Good and bad are, as Spinoza said, not transcendent categories, but simply names for whatever brings us well-being or suffering. There is a regularity to the causality wherein acting on certain mental states generally either brings weal or woe. It also provides some succor for those of us who wish to see wicked people get their come-uppance. They generally will, although not in every case, and not in ways we will necessarily see as proportionate.

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How and why did you first get interested in Indian philosophy?

I became interested in Indian philosophy when I was an MA student in the Philosophy Department at King’s College London. Jonardon Ganeri had just finished his PhD in Oxford under the supervision of Bimal Matilal and he had been appointed as a teaching fellow at King’s. I attended his lectures on Nyāya and Buddhist logic and epistemology and became fascinated with the subject. I ended up taking one of my MA papers on the topic. I had not been exposed to Indian philosophy in my undergraduate studies and had picked up the prejudice that Indian philosophy was mystical and religious and not governed by rational thinking. Jonardon’s lectures demonstrated that there was also a very sophisticated rational tradition that could be brought into dialogue with analytical philosophy, which is what I had been trained in until then.

What is the most exciting area of research in Indian philosophy at the moment?

It’s impossible for me to pick out an individual area in Indian philosophy and claim that it is more exciting than another. What I am excited about is the change in attitude towards Indian philosophy and the resulting effect of this on research within the field. When I was first introduced to the subject it seemed that you had to justify the pursuit of Indian philosophy by showing how it can fit into ‘mainstream’, i.e. Western, philosophy. While I think that it is important to point out that Indian thinkers (and of course many others) have been engaged in questions that we can recognize as philosophical, I am excited by the fact that the study of Indian philosophy is becoming more accepted for itself within Western universities. This has led to a shift in the field away from trying to show its usefulness to Western philosophers and towards studying Indian texts on their own terms as contributions to their own traditions and debates.

What can Western philosophy learn from Indian philosophy?

I don’t think it is helpful to think in terms of any specific philosophical points that one tradition can learn from another. The problem with this type of thinking is that it leads to situations where a culturally dominant tradition instrumentalises another tradition, which is what I think happened in the study of Indian philosophy, and other non-Western traditions too. However, there is a general point that Western philosophy (as well as any other tradition) can learn, namely that there are other interesting and fruitful ways of thinking about a problem which require questioning assumptions. Socrates famously described himself as like a gadfly, stinging the lazy horse of Athenian democracy with his questions so that it didn’t fall asleep. Western philosophy is built on this Socratic ideal of the philosopher making people question their most fundamentally held beliefs. Within the history of Western philosophy we see that this can be difficult to live up to. Studying traditions other than our own can help us to see this. However, this requires us to study these other traditions for their own sakes.

Is a meaningful dialogue between philosophical traditions as different and complex as those of India and the West possible?

When we talk about Indian philosophy, we usually mean the history of Indian philosophy. Parimal Patil, who teaches Indian philosophy at Harvard, once remarked that the study of the history of philosophy is really a way of engaging with some of the smartest minds that have ever lived and that by studying the history of Indian philosophy (or other traditions) you are increasing the number of smart minds you can engage with! I think that this is a nice way of thinking about the dialogue between traditions. With the study of different traditions also comes the possibility of developing new ideas and theories that are equally grounded in these traditions. To me that is a very exciting prospect!

What is your very own most recent area of research into Indian philosophy?

I am working on the concepts of free will and agency in a number of Indian traditions. There has been a lot of work done recently on the notion of freedom in Buddhist philosophy, because of the Buddhist idea of no-self. I am particularly interested in those traditions, e.g. the Nyāya school, that argue for the existence of a self and whether or not they have a concept of freedom that we could call free will.
Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659-1719)

Martin Jenkins considers the way of the samurai.

It is a paradox of early modern Japanese history that this highly militarised society only once attempted a foreign war – the invasions of Korea in the 1590s. The samurai mostly fought each other in civil wars, until the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 led to the establishment of Tokugawa Ieyasu as shōgun (regent/dictator). Tokugawa created a peaceful regime which lasted until 1868. In doing so he also created a period of ethical reflection: what was the role of a warrior elite in a society which had effectively abolished war?

Arguably the greatest ethical text to emerge from this period was Hagakure, the work of a once obscure samurai named Yamamoto Tsunetomo.

The Forging of a Warrior Philosopher

He was born in 1659 on Kyushu, the southernmost of the Japanese islands, as far as possible in Japan from the capital Edo and the shōgun. Tsunetomo’s father, Yamamoto Jin’emon, who was seventy when his son was born, was a loyal retainer of Nabeshima Katsushige, the daimyo or local feudal lord. Katsushige’s father, Nabeshima Naoshige, played a prominent part in the Korean expedition but had a difficult relationship with Tokugawa in the turmoil that followed, originally backing him but switching sides at the last minute. Katsushige had died two years before Tsunetomo’s birth and been succeeded as daimyo by his grandson Nabeshima Mitsushige. Young Tsunetomo was regarded as sickly and not likely to live long (but he made sixty, which at that time would be regarded as pretty good going). The boy received the usual samurai training as he grew, which included swordsmanship, calligraphy, and poetry composition. Two examples of his calligraphy survive; the translator describes them as having “a vigorousness befitting a warrior.”

Following his father into service with the Nabeshima clan, Yamamoto’s first official position was as a page to Mitsushige. By the age of twenty he despaired of finding a suitable position as a retainer. He was told that he looked ‘too intelligent’, and so devoted a year to learning to look less so. About this time he encountered the Zen Buddhist priest Tannen, a man of outstanding integrity who greatly influenced the young samurai.

Through the efforts of his nephew, who was in fact older than he was, Yamamoto eventually secured a position as a scribe in the capital. However there was a disastrous fire for which the nephew took responsibility and so resigned, and Yamamoto lost his position in the wake of the resignation.

Back in the Nabeshima domain, Yamamoto secured what amounted to a job as the daimyo’s librarian. Unlike mediaeval Europe, Japan never developed a separate clerical class. The samurai fulfilled both military and administrative roles.

In 1700 Mitsushige died. Steeped in samurai traditions, Yamamoto wished to commit seppuku (ritual suicide) in solidarity with his lord, but was prevented by a final edict from Mitsushige explicitly forbidding this. Instead he chose to become a Buddhist priest; his wife joined him as a nun. As a priest he took the personal name Jocho, and so sometimes appears as Yamamoto Jocho. He withdrew to a hermitage in the woods. This gives its name to his work – Hagakure means ‘Hidden Among the Leaves’.

He did not actually write the work. Another unemployed samurai called Tsuramoto became his disciple and took notes of his teachings, which he eventually worked up into the book we have today. This is set out in eleven chapters, the last of which has the delightful title ‘Events Not Related in the Other Ten Chapters’.

The Servant Samurai

As that chapter title suggests, Hagakure is not a highly structured treatise. It mixes Yamamoto’s own reflections with anecdotes recalled from his feudal lords and others. Its central message is concerned with how a samurai should behave in the new social order, but in many ways it looks back to the period of the civil wars.

The samurai is first and foremost a warrior; but he has to conduct himself in a peaceful society. Yamamoto does not distinguish between ethics and etiquette as Western philosophy tends to. Thus, a thoughtful reflection on the issue of advising another person concerning their faults is closely followed by advice on avoiding yawning in public. He stresses the importance of outward grooming as evidence of inner resolve: “if you are slain with an unseemly appearance, you will show your lack of previous resolve, will be despised by your enemy, and will appear unclean.”

His best known observation appears in the opening chapter (from which most of my quotations are taken):

“The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death.”

Yamamoto is not arguing that the samurai should seek death. Rather, he is challenging the idea that preserving one’s own life is the supreme good. He argues that overcoming the fear of death is not only liberating but enables the individual to achieve clarity of purpose.

We can understand this idea in the context of a sword fight. The aim is to defeat the enemy, and in order to fulfil that aim it makes sense to defend oneself; but if one is obsessed above all with ensuring one’s own survival, this detracts from fulfilling the aim. The samurai’s duty is victory, not survival, and if his death will better serve the interests of his lord, he should choose death.

The word samurai comes from a verb meaning ‘to serve’, and Yamamoto puts great emphasis on the service and duty owed by the samurai to his lord. In fact, he writes, “Every morning one should first do reverence to his master and parents and then to his patron deities and guardian Buddhas.” In many ways this is shocking to Japanese tradition: to place the master before the gods might be called blasphemous. It is worth recalling in this context that one of the great issues facing Japanese society in the seventeenth century was what to do with the ronin or masterless samurai. (The Seven Samurai in the film of that name were actually seven ronin.) Yamamoto has an interesting comment here: “People at the time of Lord Katsushige used to say, ‘If one has
not been a ronin at least seven times, he will not be a true retainer. Seven times down, eight times up.” The idea is that only the man who knows what it is like to be without the security of serving a daimyo can properly fulfil the duty of service.

The duty of revenge is an important element in Yamamoto’s ethics. He recommends undertaking it promptly, by “simply forcing one’s way into a place and being cut down.” It does not matter that you will be killed: the important thing is that you have made the attempt. On this basis Yamamoto criticises the famous Forty-Seven Ronin for delaying and planning a (successful) revenge of their slain lord: “When the time comes, there is no moment for reasoning” he says: “The Way of the Samurai should be in being aware that you do not know what is going to happen next.” Spontaneity is central to the samurai creed: to be is to do.

Yamamoto may so far appear to be rigid and demanding of a strict code of duty, but he also displays considerable sympathy for his fellow men (women may have been another matter): “What is called generosity is really compassion. In the Shin’ei it is written, ‘Seen from the eye of compassion, there is no-one to be disliked. One who has sinned is to be pitied all the more.’” In writing about the upbringing of samurai children, he emphasises that they should be taught to avoid fear, but then adds, “A child will become timid if he is scolded severely.”

Hagakure appears to promote what we might call a ‘Classical Greek’ attitude to homosexuality. Yamamoto sees it as a relationship between an older and a younger warrior in which the older man inspires the younger with the samurai virtues, the basic principle being, ‘to lay down one’s life for another’. Yamamoto recognises, however, that laying down one’s life for one’s lover may conflict with the duty to lay down one’s life for one’s lord.

The Zen idea of detachment permeates Yamamoto’s thinking. Acceptance of death implies detachment from one’s own life. However, detachment does not exclude compassion and sympathy for one’s fellow beings. Yamamoto clearly felt an intense loyalty to his feudal lord, to the point of it overcoming his feelings towards himself. His philosophy is a philosophy of service.

Public Acceptance

Hagakure more or less disappeared from view following Yamamoto’s death in 1719. Manuscript copies were retained and studied by the Nabeshima clan in Saga Han, but the work was not published. No doubt the emphasis on loyalty to one’s immediate lord would not have gone down well with the centralising government of the shogunate.

The work came to public knowledge following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and was published in the early twentieth century, towards the end of the Meiji period. In the 1930s it was reinterpreted: loyalty to the daimyo was replaced by loyalty to the emperor. It became a standard text in the thoroughly militarised society of mid-twentieth century Japan. Kamikaze pilots often went into action wearing headbands which bore slogans from Hagakure.

After the defeat of Japan and the American occupation, Hagakure was a text to be avoided. It was seen as promoting the values which had led Japan to start the Pacific War. However, Hiroakа Kimitake, who reinvented himself as the novelist Mishima Yukio, realised that it had something to say to post-war Japan too. The context was very similar to that of the original, as Japan had adopted a constitution which renounced war (this did not prevent it from developing one of the strongest militaries in the world). In 1967 Mishima published a short book consisting of extracts from Hagakure and his commentary on Yamamoto’s philosophy. Whether this commentary accurately reflects Yamamoto’s ideas is another question. Personally, I believe that Mishima’s interest in death, which eventually led to his own ritual suicide, is at odds with Yamamoto. Mishima was fascinated by death; Yamamoto promoted indifference to death. When Mishima chose death it was not in an either/or situation; he brought it upon himself. Yamamoto would not have approved.

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Baroness Mary Warnock passed away on 20 March 2019, aged 94.

Her philosophical career began in 1949. After teaching at a girls school in Dorset (her military assignment during WW2), she completed her studies and became a fellow at St Hughes College, Oxford. Warnock’s research interests were broad. In the 1960s, she wrote several books on existentialism and Sartre. The following decades saw her publish works on the philosophy of mind and education, before she focused in on the medical ethics for which she is most well known. Warnock was married to fellow Oxford philosopher Geoffrey Warnock and kept sharp company with the likes of Isaiah Berlin and Peter Strawson.

Warnock was an influential philosopher in the public sphere. Her theoretical and practical work in education led to her appointment as chair of a 1974 government inquiry into special education in the United Kingdom. Warnock’s report recommended that children with special educational needs should be included in the mainstream schooling system and that attention be given to each child’s unique needs. Whilst the philosopher’s ideas were put into law, she became deeply concerned about the way they were implemented. In a 2010 article for The Telegraph, she suggested that radical change was needed because too many children with special educational needs were being failed.

Warnock would be less frustrated by the success of her 1984 report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. By balancing the realities of medical progress, the hopes of potential parents, and the moral status of human embryos, Warnock’s report achieved the rare feat of widespread – though certainly not universal – ethical agreement. It led to the regulation of medical procedures and research involving embryos. A key requirement is that all embryos used in such practices must be less than 14 days old, for that is when the nervous system becomes visible.

Turning her attention to the opposite end of human life, Warnock argued that the law should not prohibit all assisted dying. A 2006 interview on the matter with Philosophy Now’s Rick Lewis reveals Warnock’s nuanced approach to ethical issues. Motivated by a desire to both further the ‘common good’ and help individuals dealing with specific problems, Warnock was not a philosopher prone to categorical, sweeping statements. Instead, she took care to combine open-ended philosophical theory with an understanding of the practical complexities of contemporary moral dilemmas.
From Ape to Man & Beyond

Henrik Schoeneberg contends that our next step is to learn to accept ourselves.

“T

e overman laughs at man, like man laughs at the ape.” Thus spoke Zarathustra in Frederich Nietzsche’s famous work of the same name when he came down from the mountains to convince humanity of a new and better way to be human.

Zarathustra was right.

Put in cognitive evolutionary terms, Nietzsche’s idea of the Übermensch or ‘Overman’ is more than just utopian ideology. We have evolved from an unreflective state of being as small furry mammals to eventually become self-reflective Homo sapiens. Our ability to grasp our place in the world around us has continuously increased. To think that this evolutionary story will end here merely reflects our tendency to overestimate ourselves – such as when Hegel, many history books ago, proclaimed the end of history. But if we have yet to reach our full potential, what then will be the next step in the development of our conscious awareness?

The answer might very well be that life, which first began to sense itself through the emotional life of animals, later becoming self-conscious and capable of pondering its own existence, will finally come to reconcile itself with the fact that it exists.

We humans are not quite there yet; we have not quite reconciled ourselves with the idea that ‘this is where we belong’. We do not live as Nietzsche’s Zarathustra did, who felt one hundred percent at home in this world. On the contrary, we dream ourselves away to paradise or to brighter days, and spend considerable amounts of mental resources on being frustrated with our lives or with each other. We continuously act against our own actual interests through bad habits, procrastination, and the like, and we do not take full advantage of the opportunities that the world puts before us. This all indicates that we have not yet fully embraced or become accustomed to life itself. We seem to still be partly living in the unreflective dream-like state of our animal ancestors, unable to fully grasp our situation and its implications, and act accordingly.

You Don’t Know What You’ve Got Till It’s Gone

Our inherent lack of full life acceptance becomes especially clear when we turn our attention to a small group of people who have had a close brush with death and subsequently managed to make the transition to embracing life on its own terms. According to numerous sources that have examined the phenomenon of psychological growth stemming from close brushes with death, including the Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology (ed. by Greenberg, Koole and Pyszczynski, 2004), the experience leaves people acutely aware of their own mortality. A close brush with death is sometimes accompanied by disputable claims about having experienced an afterlife, but this is the different phenomenon of near death experience. What I want to discuss here are the rationally understandable ways in which our worldview can be deeply altered by a close confrontation with death. Such confrontations can leave people with an acceptance of the limitations of life and its fragile nature, and often with the realization that pain is something not fundamentally bad but part of what makes a beautiful life possible. Often, it is claimed, they no longer fear death; their tendency now is to care more intensely about life. They become less materialistic, and generally feel more closely connected to people and to nature. They no longer frivolously waste their time as it has now become much more precious, and instead take better advantage of opportunities for living well. They do not occupy themselves with what others may think of them, but instead live resolutely in accordance with their own values, and with clear altruistic goals in sight. In other words, human beings are by nature self-conscious, but the realization that one is mortal can make one life-conscious.

Heidegger & Authentic Living

It’s quite interesting that one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), theoretically deduced almost a century ago what it is about a close brush with death that catalyses such deep personal transformation. A brush with death was needed, thought Heidegger, in order to fully grasp the consequences of our own mortality. Experiences of dying were not much studied at this time, apart from through fiction such as Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886), which relates the thoughts the title character goes through on his deathbed. Heidegger references this novella in a note in his magnum opus, Being and Time (1927). He wrote an independent theory on how people can actualize themselves – which was later empirically verified through the testimony of people who had had brushes with death. Heidegger mused that to live life authentically, and therefore well, one must face the fact that death can sneak up on us at any moment. He reasoned that upon our realising that we may at any moment cease to exist, our awareness of being is enhanced. We have the tendency to overlook our mortality in our daily lives, where in order to forget our personal selves we act like everyone else in the persistent ‘they-world’, in an effort to subdue our fears of our own impending deaths. By confronting our looming non-existence, life becomes a settled matter that need not be reinterpreted from one day to the next according to the ever-changing they-world. Death ‘totalises’ our existence, and projects back onto us a particular identity or life story.

While we cannot ever know our complete identity, we can perhaps understand that we have the potential to fully achieve some certain fulfilling way of living our life. Of course, once we are dead it may not matter to us whether we have realised ourselves
as such and such a person. But in order for us to even be able to say while we are alive that we are this or that person, we must first have our sights set on deciding who we want to be. As our deaths will reveal the totality of who we are, thoughts of our deaths must therefore be an ever-guiding influence in our lives. What do you want them to carve on your tombstone?

People who have had a close brush with death may become more conscientiously aware of the fragile nature of life, and accept this as a basic premise of their existence. This may enable them to refrain from constantly fleeing into the everyday conformist ‘they-world’, where life is dictated by trends and fashions and the opinions of others. In overcoming their fear of death, such people have resigned themselves to the fact that their life will indeed end. Having become acutely aware that their death will project back on to them the kind of person that they really were all along – for example, that they were someone who did not live fully, or did in fact take advantage of the opportunities presented to them by life – they own up to the responsibility of taking charge of their finite lives. This is a precursor to living life independently, resolutely, and authentically, with clarity and meaning, with an acceptance of life’s limitations, and hence, an understanding of its possibilities. Such people dwell in the they-world on their own terms instead of hiding in it. They can therefore care about others in a much more enthusiastic way, now that what matters is not how they appear in the eyes of other people from one moment to the next, but how they can live out their personal values against the backdrop of our collective world.

The average person may insist that they are well aware that life is finite and can end at any moment, but their conduct suggests that Heidegger is correct in thinking that this awareness is usually not very present from day to day. For instance, someone may say they have a goal to write a book; but does their life suggest they’re actually on a trajectory toward doing so? Accordingly Heidegger concluded that most human beings have not opened themselves up to their own mortality in the way necessary for them to live life fully, authentically, and on its own terms. [Heidegger’s own life story suggests he himself had some way to go in this department! Ed.] If a person had truly embraced the fact that life can be snatched away from them at any moment, this consideration would be a guiding influence on their actions, would it not?

Applying Lessons Learned

Nietzsche and Heidegger seem to share something in their thinking with those who have had a close encounter with death. They have reached an understanding that there is a better way of approaching life. Let’s be inspired by their thoughts, whether it be through studies, vividly imagining one’s own death or by other means. It is indeed paramount that we begin to develop a more life-conscious intelligence, so as to be better equipped to deal with the dangers of modern life: threats posed to our environment by our exploitation of natural resources; to our wellbeing by animosity and division between people; and of course the ever-menacing threat of weapons of mass destruction. Maybe we can survive such threats in much the same way that our ancestors previously survived the perils of nature, by raising their own level of intelligence and developing the sophisticated ability of self-conscious thought. The difference is that the lessons of life-consciousness can be taught, whereas self-consciousness evolved biologically. In this way life-consciousness can undergo cultural evolution.

Albert Einstein once said that “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” Fortunately for us, people who have had a close brush with death, as well as theoretical studies, show us that we do indeed have the potential to rise above our present, merely self-conscious level of existence. We can instead thrive to become life-conscious individuals, capable of embodying a profound appreciation for life in order to live out our best selves to a much greater extent than our previous selves may have allowed.

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The vast majority of people I posed this new version of the thought experiment to changed their decision and decided not to pull the lever. They would rather let five serial killers die than kill their own mothers. They were not pleased when I pointed out the inconsistency in their morality. No longer are they being utilitarian – the greatest good for the greatest number. Instead they are being biased and judgmental.

We can also break the utilitarian view by framing the thought experiment in another setting. You’re a doctor at a hospital and your ward round contains five people dying from various organ failures. A healthy person walks in, delivering a pizza maybe, and you know that if you could harvest that person’s organs you could save the other five people. Would you give the order to kill him?

Not many of my friends want to now sacrifice the one life for the other five. The reasons they give me for this are interesting in their variety; but the point stands that their position again changes away from utilitarianism. Here they mostly seemed to change to Kant’s deontology, or duty-based ethics.

Immanuel Kant argued that every human being is an ‘end in themselves’: a basic moral unit who is due basic moral consideration, and should never be used merely as a means to other ends. Kant also said that you should act only in such a way that you would be willing to make the principle of your action a universal principle for all moral beings. (Jesus said it more eloquently: “Do unto others as you have them do unto you.”) You don’t want to make the utilitarian principle ‘Sacrifice others for the greater good’ a Kantian universal principle, as someone might want to sacrifice you for some greater good. So this is why people wouldn’t usually want to harvest someone’s organs.

Deontologists versus Utilitarians: Infinity War
The 2018 movie Avengers: Infinity War contrasts these two philosophies. Captain America, the heroes’ leader, takes up the Kantian position, and Thanos, the villain, takes up the utilitarian position.

Ethics & Uncertainty
Michael Jordan asks how knowledge of circumstances affects our morality.
To those few of you reading this who haven’t seen the movie, Thanos wants to kill half the population of the universe to save the other half from the effects of overpopulation. To kill half the universe, he needs all the infinity stones. One stone is inside the head of a character called Vision. There’s a discussion around whether the heroes should quickly destroy that stone, even if it means killing Vision, so that Thanos can’t carry out his plan. Captain America says, “We don’t trade lives” and refuses to kill one person even to save half the universe. Thanos (spoiler alert!) gets the stone anyway and kills half the universe, including Vision.

Did Captain America make the right decision? If you were Captain America, what would you have done?

To those who say Captain America should have allowed Vision to have been killed to stop Thanos, I point out that if we accept Thanos’s assumption that the only way to save the universe is by halving its population, then your utilitarian motives for killing Vision to stop Thanos are paradoxically thwarting Thanos’s greater utilitarian plan.

Like many of our heroes, Captain America probably had the same mindset – there must be another way. Maybe this is what’s happening with the other thought experiment, in the hospital. Do you kill the healthy person to save the other five? People say no. And I’ve realised it’s not the same as the runaway trolley. With the trolley thought experiment, people usually assume a determined outcome. With the hospital thought experiment, people don’t make this assumption. Instead, they’re thinking, “There must be another way. Maybe we can give the sick people medication, or perhaps we can harvest organs from someone who’s already dead.” Could this tacit assumption be the key to our moral responses?

I decided to test this on a new group of friends. Once again I presented them with the classic trolley thought experiment; and once again they all wanted to pull the lever to save the five at the expense of the one. This time, however, I then took a different approach to show them that their utilitarianism is on shaky grounds: I provided them with ‘another way’. What if there actually is a brake on the trolley – but it only has a 50% chance of stopping the trolley before it kills the one or the five? And unfortunately, there isn’t enough time to pull both the brake and the lever. What would you do? Would you pull the brake, or would you pull the lever?

Most of them pull the brake. They say they do this because there is a chance of the best case scenario where no one dies. I challenge them, pointing out that 50% of five is 2.5: therefore there is an expected 2.5 people dying by pulling the brake, and only an expected one person dying by pulling the lever – so based on utilitarian principles, you should pull the lever and not the brake. They still insist on choosing to pull the brake.

I think what we’re seeing here is that in a deterministic scenario people tend to a utilitarian position, yet as soon as we add uncertainty, people’s ethical reasoning changes. Why? Is it because uncertainty introduces hope and we’re naturally optimistic? Or is it because the very uncertainty removes a degree of responsibility: “It’s the brake’s fault. Those people were unlucky. I’m not to blame”?

Captain America believed he had a chance to save everyone, and so chose not to sacrifice Vision. Thanos believed that there was no other way, and therefore he acted in a utilitarian way.

In Search of Another Way

Nevertheless, the statement ‘There must be another way’ comes to mind, as it’s how I would respond to the runaway trolley. I would not do nothing. Instead, I’d look for a brake or some other way to save the people. But my Kantian position would never let me consider the trading lives option.

Captain America probably had the same mindset – there must be another way. In fact, most superheroes in most movies take this approach, and down to sheer luck they are usually able to save the day without having to sacrifice anybody.

Maybe this is what’s happening with the other thought experiment, in the hospital. Do you kill the healthy person to save the other five? People say no. And I’ve realised it’s not the same as the runaway trolley. With the trolley thought experiment, people usually assume a determined outcome. With the hospital thought experiment, people don’t make this assumption. Instead, they’re thinking, “There must be another way. Maybe we can give the sick people medication, or perhaps we can harvest organs from someone who’s already dead.” Could this tacit assumption be the key to our moral responses?

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Further Uncertainty Principles

How much uncertainty is needed to change from utilitarianism to Kantianism or something else? If the brake only has a 10% chance of saving the five lives, would you still pull it? What if the chance of the brake working is unknown?

In life we usually don’t know the probabilities associated with our actions; we can only guess them, and there’s a lot of room for error. Sometimes we pretend probabilities don’t exist. In other words, we round them off: if something is likely to occur, we might round the probability up and say it’s certain to occur; if something is unlikely to occur, we might round down the probability, and say it will never occur. Yet Actuarial Science has taught me that nothing is certain to occur. The Actuarial profession is built around dealing with uncertainty. This view is in direct contrast to determinism, which says you can predict the future with certainty if you have sufficient knowledge of the past.

However, could it be that ethical differences are down to different views on the nature of reality? Determinism results in utilitarianism, whereas indeterminism results in something else.

Why is this important? Well, maybe a lot of ethical debates could be resolved if people took a step back and stated their assumptions around the chances of outcomes. So maybe ethical debates should be started by asking everyone to state the potential outcomes they foresee as a result of the actions being considered, and the rough probability they assign to each occurring.

Understanding peoples’ different views on uncertainty and the assumptions on which they base their arguments could go a long way to reducing conflict.

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Michael Jordan recently became a Fellow of the Actuarial Society of South Africa.

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According to psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, who published an influential paper on the subject fifteen years ago, ‘awe’ involves a response to something larger than oneself – a perceived vastness – and a need for accommodation, referring to how we make sense of and adjust to what we experience. And although we sometimes use the word without much thought, ‘the sublime’ has a long philosophical history, dating back to a treatise attributed to a first-century writer known as Longinus. I conceive of the concepts of awe and the sublime as more or less the same, and will use the words interchangeably. Recent renewed interest in the concepts of awe and the sublime gives us a chance to test some of the philosophers’ claims about them, as well as to modify some of the theories put forward in psychology.

There is much on which the philosophical tradition and empirical research agree. The sublime (awe) is the complex, mixed feeling of intense satisfaction sensed before a striking or inspiring object, event, or act. It includes the positive feeling of exaltation before a vast or powerful object, such as a natural wonder or marvel of architecture. Some examples of things that elicit awe include the Grand Canyon or the starry sky, mountain ranges, and storms or hurricanes (if viewed from a safe distance). Some of the grandest human artifacts can evoke similar feelings: soaring cathedrals, mighty hydroelectric dams, ancient ruins. It is a mixed experience – a combination of satisfying and discomfiting elements. Nonetheless, overall it is positive and pleasant, and perceivers typically want the experience to continue.

**Sublime Psychology**

We are all aware of the bodily or physiological changes associated with awe: goose bumps, dropped jaw, raised eyebrows, widened eyes, a sense of time slowing down.

Recent empirical research is much more than an updated version of the somewhat crude physiology put forward by eighteenth-century statesman Edmund Burke when he wrote about aesthetics. It employs modern fMRI brain scans to measure levels of activity in different areas of the brain in real time. This enables researchers to explore which areas of the brain are associated with different tasks and different experiences. This research not only deepens our understanding of the human brain but also can help us investigate some long-standing philosophical theories about the sublime. One of the most influential is by Immanuel Kant, who argued that the pleasure of the sublime was based on the recognition of one’s own power of reason in the face of the power of nature. His idea, itself influenced by ancient Stoic thought, was that however great or vast nature might be, the mind is still greater. On this reading, the experience involves an explicit awareness of oneself. But a study by neuroscientists Tomohiro Ishizu and Semir Zeki (Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 8, no.891, 2014) suggests that the self-consciousness claim is false, as do other studies conducted by psychologists. They say that a person experiencing the sublime is instead oriented outward toward the external world: awe draws attention away from the self and toward the environment, and the brain regions associated with self-awareness are deactivated, not activated. It appears that the experience involves a sense of belonging to something bigger, to a larger whole – either the vast object triggering the experience, or to the universe as a whole, the totality of nature.

However, Ishizu and Zeki did find that in terms of brain activity, experiences of sublimity and beauty differ fundamentally, suggesting that Burke and Kant appear to have been right to make conceptual distinctions between an experience of the sublime and an experience of beauty – a conceptual move not made by Hegel and his followers. Also in line with Kant and Burke, they found that the sublime is not exactly a kind of fear. They found that the overall patterns of brain activity during this experience were significantly different from the activity observed in studies dealing with fear, pain, or threat. This is because although the object eliciting the feeling is vast or powerful and thus potentially menacing, we nevertheless feel safe; just as Kant suggested. If we, observing on the shoreline, actually were on the ship at sea during the storm, we would feel fear. But since we are not on the ship, we are able to find it awe-inspiring instead.

**Awful Pleasures**

Their fMRI brain scans also showed that on experiencing the sublime the imagination is activated, as Kant and twentieth-century philosopher Jean-François Lyotard had suggested. When we place ourselves on the ship while not being on the ship, we are stretching our imaginations.

Why should this bring about pleasure? One of the main questions concerning the sublime is why it is pleasant rather than painful. A team of psychologists and I have identified three main sources of the pleasure: the expansion of the imagination; the belonging to a whole larger than us; and the rising above everyday affairs. Leaving the everyday concerns behind provides a release, which feels good. (My team and I are eager to report the results of our study, which is not yet concluded.)

One possible etymology of the word sublime is ‘rising up to the threshold or lintel’, from sub (‘up to’) + limen (‘lintel, threshold’). Thus, the sublime has to do with going up to the limit or edge of normal experience, or even exceeding it. It is not uncommon to connect the sublime to religion. But while some experiences of the sublime are religious experiences, others are not. Indeed, various types of sublimity can be distinguished by their triggers: God; a powerful leader; or a large, formidable object. I like to call the religious kind the transcendent sublime, and the kind stimulated by the vast or powerful object or the powerful leader, the immanent sublime. I also think of the sublime as a thread with two strands made up across the different sides of the limit: the two strands weave together, creating its complex history. The transcendent thread concerns the ineffable and unnamable, while the immanent tends to focus on the emotion, the perceptual and imaginative play in the experience.
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Life-Altering Experiences

Finally, psychologists tend to think awe refers to a life-changing and transformative experience – one that alters one’s perspective. Once there is accommodation to the sublime experience, they maintain, one comes out a different person and sees the world differently.

I am ambivalent about whether we should see awe as involving a kind of epiphany. I agree that it would be useful to understand the long-term effects of the experience. We could carry out a study involving repeated observations over a prolonged period. We might well discover that awe has interesting and beneficial therapeutic applications.

Yet, leaving aside the usual problems accompanying such studies (funding, time, resources), it may not be the best theoretical move to pack so much into the concept of the sublime. If it is defined as a life-changing and transformative experience, this seems to raise the bar too high, rendering awe too rare, even too significant. How many life-changing experiences, after all, can one have in a single lifetime? Perhaps it is better to see the sublime/awe as Burke and Kant did: as a rich experience running parallel to beauty, but still aesthetic and imaginative, as beauty is.

However the questions are settled, philosophers and psychologists can help each other refine and flesh out their theories and formulate the questions to be asked. The psychological, neuro and cognitive sciences would profit from knowing awe’s philosophical history. In turn, philosophy could profit from the empirical investigation of those of its claims that lend themselves to such study.

Establishing the best relationship between psychology and philosophy will doubtless continue to be an ongoing issue. This case shows that they can collaborate in a fruitful way and profit from each other’s work, just as they have in other areas, such as over free will and moral psychology.

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Encounters With The (Post) Sublime

Siobhan Lyons asks where we can find the sublime in the modern world.

Imagine watching a storm at sea. Imagine standing on a towering, vertiginous mountain peak. ‘The sublime’ refers to an experience of magnificence that nearly, but not quite, invokes fear. Does the sublime still exist in the twenty-first century? Or have we become desensitised to the very concept in a post-nature, mediated world?

A concept widely discussed by philosophers from Burke to Kant, Schopenhauer to Hegel, in recent years its linguistic potency seems to have become diluted through misuse of the term, as ‘sublime’ has been used increasingly to refer to some-
The Sublime

As Matthew Flisfeder says, the sublime “exists outside language: words fail!” (The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film, 2012, p.123). Andrew Slade goes further: “These [artistic] presentations seek an idiom to articulate the impossible, the unrepresentable” (Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime, 2007, p.14). The concept of the unrepresentability of the sublime has its origins in Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the mathematical sublime refers to the imagination’s capacity, through reason’s superiority, to comprehend the magnitude of something empirically great or even infinite that would otherwise lie beyond comprehension. He writes: “Because there is in our imagination a striving to advance to the infinite, while in our reason there lies a claim to absolute totality... the very inadequacy of our faculty for estimating the magnitude of the things in the sensible world awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us” (Critique of the Power of Judgement, 1790, p.134). Kant argues that the source of the sublime is never an object or a painting, say, but is our mental representation of what he calls the thing-in-itself (ding an sich, which is his name for the world as it exists beyond experience). So this experience can be known only in the intellect – that is, beyond pure sensation. “We express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime...” he writes: “We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the intellect – that is, nature in its most chaotic, boundless, terrifying dimension which is best qualified to awaken in us the feeling of the Sublime: here, where the aesthetic imagination is strained to its utmost, where all finite determinations dissolve themselves, the failure appears at its purest” (The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p.203).

We are meant to be more intelligent and aware of the universe than our predecessors. But if we are more aware than ever, and as Kant contends, reason is linked to the sublime, why are we having fewer sublime experiences? Logically, we ought to be having more.

Perhaps the sublime may then be better located in a profound sense of the incomprehensibility of the world’s vastness. This idea is found in Edmund Burke’s conception of the sublime, in which the sublime is generated through obscurity and ignorance. As he writes: “It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions... The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have” (The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory, 1996, p.135). It is my sheer ignorance of the machinations of the world, from the stars to gravity, that produces in me some sense of the sublime, rather than my knowledge of these things.

A defining image of the sublime is Caspar David Friedrich’s painting Wanderer over a Sea of Fog (1818), depicting the titular nomad atop a deep abyss. In his book Reinventing the Sublime (2014), Steven Vine analyses the painting, which, he says, tells us something useful about the Kantian sublime:

“When, in one sense, the solitary figure dominates the scene and dwarfs the rising mountains and plummeting trees with his body, in another sense he is diminished and reduced by the landscape – standing minute, precarious and vulnerable above an abyss into which, with one false step or slip of the rock, he might plunge to annihilation.” (p.2).

Our relationship with nature is, indeed, ambiguous.

The Cinematic Sublime

The notion that nature could provide sublime experience was prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; but a direct experience of nature was replaced in the twentieth century by technology. Particularly in twenty-first century cinema, the sublime functions in place of the Thing-in-itself as one of Žižek’s paradoxical representations of that which cannot be represented. Many recent films have focused on the human in the harsh wilderness, including The Revenant (2015), The Grey (2011), Wild (2014), and Into the Wild (2007). More often than not (spoiler alert) these films culminate in the death of the protagonist; although both The Revenant and The Grey feature more ambiguous endings about the fate of the main character up against the odds of the natural world. Despite the popularity of the survival film, of the beautiful tyranny of the natural world, some theorists suggest that sources of the sublime in nature are becoming rarer. As Temenuga Trifonova notes: “Nature proves less and less likely to provide us with sublime experiences – the disappearance of savage landscapes leaving only Deep Space as the Sublime’s last refuge” (The Cinematic Sublime, 2016). The spate of deep space films in recent years is evidence of this, including Interstellar (2014), Gravity...
(2013), Moon (2009), and The Martian (2015). Indeed, when we witness the collision of planets or a fierce dust storm on Mars, it is as frightening and compelling as anything on Earth and takes us out of the domain of our own world.

Pushing even further, past the celestial sublime, is the ‘apocalyptic sublime’, seen in movies from Richard Kelly’s Donnie Darko (2001) to Lars von Trier’s Melancholia (2011). Melancholia has garnered particular attention for its hauntingly beautiful portrayal of a world ending, said to perfectly accommodate the concept of the sublime. For instance, Margaret Pomeranz from the Australian TV show At the Movies claimed that Melancholia is “a sublimely beautiful film that begins with a ten minute sequence of astonishing images of horses falling, of a bride being weighed down by vegetation clinging to her wedding dress, of a woman carrying a child through what seems to be quicksand to the strains of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde” (2011). Similarly, film critic A.O. Scott describes the film as “an excursion from the sad to the sublime by way of the preposterous… it nonetheless leaves behind a glow of aesthetic satisfaction” (New York Times, 2011).

On the other hand, for Joshua Gunn and David E. Beard in ‘On the Apocalyptic Sublime’ (2009), the apocalyptic sublime relies on ‘non-linear temporality’ – the narrative jumping around in time. This fits the surreal experience of Donnie Darko as he time travels and hallucinates the world nearing its end.

The apocalyptic sublime accords well with Lyotard’s concept of the sublime. For Lyotard, the sublime is “a sudden blazing, and without future” (The Postmodern Condition, p.55, my emphasis). The lead characters in both the films mentioned, Donnie and Justine, are without future, and accept the end of the world; Justine impassively accepts it, while Donnie laughs maniacally moments before he sacrifices himself, supposedly to save the world from annihilation. In these ways they come to their own respective understandings of the machinations of the universe, comprehending the incomprehensible – so fulfilling Kant’s estimation of the sublime.

In both survival and apocalyptic films, the sublime appears to involve an encounter with death. Donnie is quite literally crushed by a falling jet engine, while Justine is killed along with everyone else when the planet Melancholia collides with the Earth, in a dizzying yet moving display of carnage, light and terror. Melancholia is perhaps the ultimate estimation of the sublime here, rendering it through the utter destruction of the Earth, suggesting that the sublime cannot be found most purely in the world, but at the world’s end.

Although these films represent the sublime, Patrick Fuery suggests that the medium of cinema is itself a sublime experience because it submits us to an experience of the world which we do not control:

“Here, then, is our first proposition of sublime terror and cinema: that our engagement with ‘reality’ (be it objective, textually construed, cinematic, psychical, and so on) is mediated, but in this mediation is the underlying terror of losing the capacity to be the active agent in the processes of perception and interpretation.” (Terror and the Cinematic Sublime, 2013, pp.183-184)

Can we claim then that the sublime is now rendered purely imaginatively? One may think of the phenomenon of post-Avatar depression in 2009, when James Cameron’s CGI-infested film left such an impression on some viewers that they were despondent about returning to the real world after seeing the graphic delights of the imaginary world of Pandora. Have we exhausted the natural world of its sublime capabilities? Can we no longer rely on our own imaginations to the point that only a Hollywood director’s will suffice?

The Post-Sublime?

2016 was the centenary of the American national park. As David Quammen notes in ‘How National Parks Tell Our Story – And Show Who We Are’ (National Geographic, January 2016, p.31): “Our national parks… inspire active curiosity as well as passive awe. They help us imagine what the American landscape and its resident creatures looked like before railroads and automobiles and motels existed. Repeat: They help us imagine.”
Yet several theorists have recently discussed the nature of the sublime in a culture in which image and spectacle reign and nature per se has become less important. Clare Martin asks: “If the sublime was natural in the eighteenth century and technological in the twentieth century, how might the post-natural’s synthesis of nature and technology create a new aesthetic tradition, new conditions for the sublime?” (“Uncanny Nature: The Post-Natural Sublime,” 2011). In her article, ‘The Twenty-First Century Sublime’ (2014), Amy Scott argues that conceptions of the sublime constantly shift to fit new ideas of how the natural world suits society, noting that “the sublime has been reconfigured in the postmodern era as a means of naturalizing the presence of technology within the contemporary landscape.” Jos de Mul similarly links the contemporary sublime with technology: “Have our sense of awe and terror been transferred to factories, war machines, and the unknowable, infinite possibilities suggested by computers and genetic engineering?... Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the main site for the ambiguous experience of the sublime has gradually shifted from nature to technology... Our current period is viewed as the age of secularization. God is retreating from nature and nature is gradually becoming ‘disenchanted’ in the process” (“The Technological Sublime”, 2011).

Such arguments seem to suggest that secularization and an awe inspired by pure nature cannot co-exist and that the sublime is reserved for religion. Have we so exhausted the world through economic, social, and touristic over-use, that any promise of the sublime is reserved only for cinematic and mediated experiences? Philosopher Siegfried Kracauer certainly thinks so. In The Mass Ornament (1995), he explores how the notion of the wilderness is increasingly slipping away: “This relativising of the exotic goes hand in hand with its banishment from reality – so that sooner or later the romantically inclined will have to agitate for the establishment of fenced-in nature preserves, isolated fairy-tale realms in which people will still be able to hope for experiences that today even Calcutta is hardly able to provide” (p.66). This, perhaps, is why the cinema has proved a popular alternative source of the sublime.

There is clearly a problem with this dynamic away from nature and towards technology – one that appears to have little resolution. But in years to come we may see a dramatic reversal of this formula. Perhaps we will tire of the technological prominence of the contemporary age and find solace once again in open nature. Or perhaps it’s something that can be found internally, without the catalyst either of the natural world or of technology.

Because the sublime is a subjective experience, it’s difficult to argue whether or not it can exist in a given way. It functions a bit like the Matrix: nobody can be told what it is, you have to see it for yourself. But recent films tell us that we are still interested in the natural environment, as well as the extraterrestrial environment, as much as we are in awe-inspiring architecture.

However, whether the sublime is achieved by gazing up at redwoods or skyscrapers seems beside the point. Given that the sublime is a subjective experience, arguably it cannot be located in any one place. This suggests that we have not exhausted its potential yet.

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CONFUCIUS
(c.551–479 BCE)

Old ways of doing
Right ways of being in life
Thus tranquillity.

A s is the case with many of the great thinkers of the past who offer us clarity amidst the confusion, light where there is darkness, and consistency in the place of contradiction, the details of Confucius’s life are confused, opaque, and contradictory. Confucius – better known to his followers as Kong Fuzi, “Venerable Master Kong” – may have had ancestors of the royal bloodline. His childhood may have been spent in the town of Yu, where he may have been born, and it may have been one of poverty. He was possibly born under the sign of the dog. As a young man, Confucius may have even gotten his hands dirty caring for livestock (although given the lack of Confucian sayings on animal husbandry, I find this a doubtful claim). And so on. Still, if there’s one thing we can say with confidence, it is that no other philosopher has influenced more people in human history than Confucius.

We also know that he lived at a time of civil war and chaos, which tended to disturb his preference for quiet contemplation. With a view to putting things right, he tried to persuade the warlords he met to practise his moral philosophy. This said that a person should ‘cultivate humanity’ through honouring society by recognising and responding to one’s place in it. This will lead to greatness in both personal and public life, as well as, in turn, bringing about happiness. He further said we need to observe the traditional ways of doing things (his knowledge, he said, came to him from the past), revere our ancestors, and not make fun of old people for being slow. Drawing on Laozi, Confucius added to this the need to follow the Dao.

Confucius’s pithy sayings and insights were later put together in the Lun Yu (Analects). Combined into a complete philosophy, they offer a guide for the construction of an orderly society and were used that way for thousands of years.

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**Beauty versus Evil**

Stuart Greenstreet asks whether we may judge a work to be artistically good even if we know it to be morally evil.

"It is not an accident that the artistic manifestations of Fascism were banal in the extreme," John Casey writes in *The Language of Criticism* (p.54, 1966). It is not an accident, the argument goes, because works of art take their character from their makers. Art draws on what is distinctive about how artists view the world and the attitude that they take towards it. So Fascist art, for instance, is bound to be bad because it instantiates Fascist values and a Fascist worldview. This amounts to claiming that it is impossible for evil individuals and institutions to produce laudable art, or for a work of art to be artistically good if it is also morally bad.

This claim is severely tested by Leni Riefenstahl’s 1935 film *Triumph of the Will*, a piece of Nazi propaganda which Hitler commissioned and helped to produce. It is not banal. It is commonly judged to be both beautiful and evil; the artistic and moral criteria tug in opposite directions. The basic evaluative question, therefore, is whether the film’s evil content nullifies its artistic merit.

*Triumph of the Will* is a film of the 1934 Nuremberg party rally, one of several giant rallies promoted by the Nazi Party in the 1930s. The rally lasted seven days, involved thousands of participants, and was estimated to have drawn half a million spectators. Hitler went to Nuremberg to help to organise the spectacle that involved thousands of troops, marching bands, and ordinary citizens. The film was made at Hitler’s request and with his support; he even gave it its title.

As a work of propaganda, designed to spread the Nazi creed and mobilize the German people, *Triumph of the Will* presents National Socialism as a political religion. Its images, doctrine, and narrative all aim at entrenching its tenets: *Ein Volk. Ein Führer. Ein Reich*. Germany is one nation, Hitler is an inspired leader, and the Third Reich will last a thousand years. The film’s most unsettling feature is how it presents a beautiful vision of Hitler and the New Germany that is morally evil. Here is one critic’s reaction:

"*Triumph of the Will* is a work of creative imagination, stylistically and formally innovative, its every detail contributes to its central vision and overall effect. The film is also very, very beautiful. ... Its every detail is designed to advance a vision that, as history was to prove, falsified the true character of Hitler and National Socialism. ... [The film] renders something that is evil, namely National Socialism, beautiful and, in so doing, tempts us to find attractive what is morally repugnant." [From Mary Devereaux’s essay 'Beauty and evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, 1998. I have drawn on parts of her essay in writing this article.]

There is a standard solution for tackling the problem of evaluation that arises when beauty is entwined with evil in a single work of art. The solution is known as ‘formalism’: it puts an iron curtain between the ‘form’ of an artwork and its ‘content’. ‘Form’ is shorthand for a work’s ‘formal features’, which in visual art (including film) include balance, symmetry and perspective, all of which are usually achieved by the arrangement of shapes and lines and colours. In music formal features can include the key chosen, the rhythms, the role of different instruments, and the intervals between notes.

We take in the formal features through our eyes (in all visual art); or through our ears (in music); or through eyes and ears, in ballet, and in drama performed on either stage or screen. Whereas an artwork’s formal features engage our senses, its ‘content’ appeals to our mind and our emotions. It makes us think and feel. So ‘content’ refers to the meaning or message ‘contained’ in works of art, which their makers strive to express.

Formalism asks us to evaluate art narrowly, solely in terms of its formal features; and to keep that assessment apart from any parallel evaluation of its emotional, political or other content. But is this actually possible? Consider these two critical descriptions of a musical work, first in terms of its formal features:

The work opens in C major but then changes to a minor key; the theme introduced by the oboe is taken up by the violins; the rhythms become increasingly syncopated ...

**Now in terms of the emotions expressed (the work’s ‘content’):**

After a serene and joyful opening the music becomes progressively more disturbed and anguish until at last it issues in a final outburst of grief.

Try to imagine a critical description of Beethoven’s 9th symphony (The Choral) that ignored its content and referred solely to its formal features. By failing to mention the symphony’s optimism and nobility the critic would defraud us. But suppose that we could make a purely aesthetic evaluation of a work’s formal properties without discussing its content. That would let us ignore the Nazi propaganda in *Triumph of the Will* and judge it (as ‘art for art’s sake’) purely in terms of its formal qualities. In that case we would be free to judge it artistically good even if we know that it is morally bad. However, as we shall see, this isn’t a practical solution, let alone a morally acceptable one.

In the best works of art form is fused with the content. Consequently the value of such a work (as art) is not something that can be judged apart from the moral qualities of its content. This is what F.R. Leavis meant when he said “works of art enact their moral valuations.” When we examine the formal perfection of Jane Austen’s novel, *Emma,*

“we find that it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterise the novelist’s peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an ‘aesthetic matter’, a beauty of ‘composition’ that is combined, miraculously, with ‘truth to life’, can give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel and no intelligent account of its perfection of form.” [F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p.8, 1960.]
Form and content are not two discrete elements which Austen miraculously combined: it is the novel’s aesthetic form which in itself ‘enacts’ (expresses and brings to life) Emma’s moral content. So the form of a well-made work of art is integrated with its content: the two become indivisible. To clinch this claim I shall offer one further piece of evidence: namely, Picasso’s mural-sized painting Guernica (1937).

Guernica is the name of a Basque town in northern Spain, a bastion of Republican resistance during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). On 26 April 1937 Guernica was bombed for two hours by Nazi German and Fascist Italian warplanes at the request of the Spanish Nationalists, who were fighting to overthrow both the Basque government and the Spanish Republican government. The town was devastated and according to the official Basque figures, 1,654 civilians were killed.

Picasso (who was born in Spain) painted Guernica to commemorate the horrors of the bombing. It is a work that certainly enacts its moral valuation. It is impossible to make a purely formalist evaluation of Guernica because one could not set aside its ‘content’ (the anger and the pity it projects) without destroying it as a work of art. Picasso explained that the painting was inspired by his “abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death”: he produced it as a ‘weapon’ in a war against Fascism. [Picasso’s Statement, 1937] Guernica was his instrument of war; and Triumph of the Will was Hitler’s instrument in the mobilisation for war. They are committed works, engaged as opponents in a battle, and both should be judged as such.

My reasoning leads me to two conclusions. First, that there is a connection between the artistic value of works of art and the moral attitudes of those who bring them about, which includes those who inspire and commission art, as well as those who actually make it. Secondly, this connection is necessary, not contingent. This necessity isn’t of the logical kind, but an ‘intrinsic’ sort of necessity, one that it is inheres in the work.

How (in the light of these conclusions) should the fact that Triumph of the Will is evil feature in our evaluation of it as a work of art? The film clearly is of artistic value. Mary Devereaux called it “extremely powerful, perhaps even a work of genius.” But despite its mastery we must condemn it because it serves (is indeed ruled by) a vile vision. Its vision is vile because it lies about the real nature of Nazi Germany: it presents as beautiful and good things that are categorically evil, namely Hitler and National Socialism. It is impossible to ignore this fact when we evaluate Triumph of the Will as art, because the film’s vision is essential to it being the work of art it is.

We have seen that the purely formalist approach to a work of art which raises moral issues is to sever aesthetic evaluation from moral evaluation, and to assess the work in aesthetic (i.e., formal) terms alone. This is impossible in judging Triumph of the Will, because the evil quality of its content is (to use Leavis’s word) ‘enacted’ by its form.

I have taken the following path to reach a judgement of Triumph of the Will:

(1) Every detail of the film contributes to its moral vision.
(2) This vision is essential to the film being the work of art it is.
(3) Therefore, if the film’s vision is flawed, then so is the film as a work of art.
(4) The film’s vision is flawed. It attracts us to evil by rendering it beautiful.
(5) Therefore, the film is flawed as art.

The film’s content is inextricable from its form, and therefore it is impossible to judge the formal elements in isolation from the vision they instantiate. The beautiful vision of Hitler and Nazi Germany is the soul or essence of the film, the property that makes it the work of art it is. Hence in watching it, it is impossible to disregard or to disengage or distance oneself from that vision. Therefore the film is bad as art.

© STUART GREENSTREET 2019
Stuart Greenstreet was awarded a diploma in Philosophy by Birkbeck College, London. After graduating from the OU he also studied philosophy at the University of Sussex.
Debate about cutting-edge technological advancements is philosophy à la mode. At the forefront is artificial intelligence, which looks set to become the greatest technological leap in history. No one can comprehend the extent of its possible uses; but among the feats already carried out by merely semi-intelligent software are beating the world’s best human players at chess, diagnosing cancer patients more reliably than trained oncologists, writing music that listeners can’t distinguish from the human-composed, and reading and commenting on extensive legal contracts in seconds. The potential applications of AI are so astounding that it seems we’ll be in a position to outsource all manual work, creative problem-solving, even intellectual labour, in less than a century. It is the greatest promise of our time.

Yet, when the great techno-cultural icons of our time get on stages around the world to discuss AI, the picture is not always optimistic. AI poses some truly enigmatic concerns. Some of the more existential problems have taken centre-stage, concerning the direct risk to humanity of the literally inconceivable potential of self-developing artificial intelligence. Sam Harris, Elon Musk, Max Tegmark and Nick Bostrom all warn of the risk that an AI which can improve itself could come to annihilate modern society as the consequence of a poorly-stated program or neglectful management. For instance, given some task to fulfill, the AI...
might work out that the easiest way to complete it is to turn the entire planet into a research lab, removing all functions not related to the goal, including all biological life – and doing this with all the emotional investment of a construction crew removing ant hills to make way for a new highway.

The prospect of mass annihilation at the hands of superpowerful computers is terrifying, all the more so for originating in something as human as faulty programming or sloppy routines. A multitude of movies and books depict menacing cyberantagonists creating hopeless dystopias, and this may strike you as the greatest moral risk we face in continuing to develop artificial intelligence. I happen to think that this is not the case, and that our new technology might yield even worse states of affairs. The greatest ethical risks in fact concern not what artificial intelligences might do to us, but what we might do to them. If we develop machines with consciousness, with the ability both to think and to feel, then this will necessitate an ethics for AI, as opposed to one merely of AI. Eventually, we will have to start doing right by our computer programs, who will soon fulfill whatever criteria are required to be considered moral subjects.

There are extensive arguments readily available for a positive answer to the question of whether computers could actually become conscious, which I can only summarize here. Basically, neuroscience seems to suggest that our entire conscious experience originates from our neural activity. This is not the same as a materialist reduction of the mental to the physical, but rather the assertion that whatever consciousness is, its origin is physical, in the brain and central nervous system. Those who argue against even the theoretical possibility of digital consciousness seem to disregard the fact that human consciousness somehow arises from configurations of unconscious atoms. Moreover, it seems that human neurological processes can be described in terms of neural networks – which can already be emulated in computers to the extent of allowing them to recognize pictures or play complicated games. These artificial networks are still comparatively primitive; but eventually – perhaps soon – they will surpass our own neural nets in capacity, creativity, scope and efficiency. So although the ability of computers to feel and suffer seems far off, it is getting nearer all the time.

Assuming, then, that we can come to create consciousness digitally, it ought to be obvious that the suffering of AI is potentially indefinitely more horrendous than even the worst imaginable human suffering. We stand in a position to develop the means for creating amounts of pain which vastly outweigh any previously seen in the history of human or animal suffering. The obstacles to creating biological suffering are demanding – the number of possible biological beings is relatively low, their upkeep is high, and they are prone to becoming desensitized to painful stimuli. In the digital world, when simulated consciousesses can be programmed in computers to be subject to whatever laws we wish, these limitations disappear.

The consequences are not fully comprehensible, but let me sketch an image of what could be possible. Someone could, for example, digitally recreate a concentration camp, fill it with sentient, suffering AI, and let it run on a loop forever. It may even be possible to turn up the speed of the suffering, so that a thousand reiterations of the camp are completed every second. From the perspective of the AI, this will feel no different from what was felt by those who suffered through the real thing. Then the programmers use the copy-and-paste function on their computer, and double it all again... So the reason that pain-disposed AI is the greatest ethical challenge of our time is that it could so easily be caused to suffer. Picture a bored teenager finding bootlegged AI software online and using it to double the amount of pain ever suffered in the history of the world – all in one afternoon, and from the comfort of a couch.

If this description does not stir you, it may be because the concept of a trillion subjects suffering limitlessly inside a computer is so abstract to us that it does not entice our empathy. But this itself shows us that the idea of the suffering of a sentient program is not necessarily sufficient to give rise to empathy in us – making every person a potential monster from the perspective of the computer.

Perhaps this development seems exorbitantly unlikely, merely a perverse philosophical thought experiment. This would be a failure of imagination on your part. Artificial consciousness will be a desirable development to many, and will have enough applications to warrant significant investment. Financially, AI has already proven to be profitable. That we will make computers properly conscious is already foreshadowed by software which engages directly with us, as smartphone companions and chatbots. Whether by morbid curiosity or by financial incentive, applications of digital sentence will become increasingly widespread. Some people will want to upload their own minds to the Cloud or make backup copies on hard-drives; others will want effortless interesting adventures and interactions. The technology will become available, and sooner or later artificial consciousnesses will be made that are able to suffer, perhaps in order to ensure authenticity or self-correction.

If there are such things as cultural and moral progress, they pale in comparison to the technological explosion that humanity has experienced in the last ten thousand years, faster still in the last century. The advancement of invention is palpable, high-speed and tremendously useful to everyone – few people feel they need further motivation to embrace ever newer and more audacious gadgets, software, and weapons. Yet, as the story progresses, our inventions become more powerful and thereby riskier. So far, the potential mishaps have been manageable. Our historical nuclear disasters have been survivable because of their relative small scale. Artificial intelligence is an invention which promises to be far more destructive if misused. We have the existential risks to humanity which have already been raised by the authors mentioned above. Now we have also seen that there are consequences even more problematic than nuclear holocaust, as weird as that may seem.

Artificial intelligence has for decades been the greatest hope for transcendence and fulfilment in the secularised West. Chasing the unyielding dream of perfecting the world, convinced that we are entitled to anything for which we strive, as so often before, we put ourselves beyond morality. But now we’re claiming our reward at potential costs so terrifyingly great for others that they resemble Dante’s Inferno or Memling’s Final Judgement, perhaps as just the first monument of the forthcoming Homo deus.

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Remarks Re: Marx

DEAR EDITOR: The collection of articles on Marx in PN 131 makes a useful contribution to discussion in Britain, especially at a time when Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn is being accused (quite erroneously) of being a ‘Marxist’. But perhaps your debate would have been more fruitful had there been at least one piece from a supporter of Marxism. It reflected many widespread notions about Marxism that actually come from Karl Popper’s attack on him in The Open Society & Its Enemies. This is a pity, since Popper’s knowledge of Marx was itself quite limited and most of his references to Marx were taken from Emile Burns’ Handbook of Marxism (1935), an official Communist Party manual of the Stalinist period. Popper reveals little knowledge of the rest of Marx’s work or of later Marxists. Thus Popper tells us that Marx calls his theory ‘dialectical materialism’. But he didn’t: Marx never used the term, which was invented by Plekhanov.

Popper famously claimed that Marx was guilty of ‘historicism’ – defined as “the idea that history has a pattern, a purpose and an ending, and that it moves inexorably toward that end according to certain laws.” But while Popper measures Marx against the standards of the natural sciences, which can be judged by their ability to predict, for Marx human history could not be approached with the same methods as the natural sciences. Marx did make predictions – some of them injudicious – but they were not his central concern. Marx was primarily concerned with encouraging action, to change the world: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.” And far from believing in an inexorable end to history, Marx argued in the Communist Manifesto that throughout history, class struggle “ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” Today, in the age of nuclear weapons and climate change, ‘common ruin’ looks like an all too probable outcome.

IAN BIRCHALL
LONDON

Looking@Locke

DEAR EDITOR: A couple of points about Alessandro Colarossi’s ‘Locke’s Question to Berkeley’ in PN 131, in which the author defends Locke over Berkeley.

Colarossi makes the common mistake of saying that Locke’s so-called ‘secondary qualities’ are sensations of objects. This is wrong. In fact Locke says primary and secondary qualities are both qualities of things: the secondary are ‘powers’ in things to produce sensations, not the sensations themselves. One difference between primary and secondary qualities is that our sensations of the first resemble them, and our sensations of the second don’t; but neither type of quality are sensations.

Colarossi, through Locke, then objects to Berkeley that objects “contain a great deal more complexity than is apparent to our senses... For instance... atomic structure.” Berkeley wouldn’t deny this, if by ‘our senses’ we mean human senses. For Berkeley, an object is a construction from all actual and possible perceptions of it, by all possible perceivers, human and non-human, and the ultimate complexity of objects is contained in the mind of God; and this reality (such as atomic structure) is revealed to us as we investigate scientifically, which God wants us to do. So there can be far more complexity in any object than is revealed to our senses. The primary objection to Berkeley isn’t that he doesn’t regard objects as complex enough, but that his explanation of their complexity, in terms of actual and possible experiences from the mind of God, seems implausible, or otiose.

ROBERT GRIFFITHS
SURREY

Free For All

DEAR EDITOR: I have a couple of issues with Taylor Dunn’s article ‘The Free Will Pill’ in Issue 130. First is the explanation of free will Dunn and many philosophers indulge in. They follow Occam’s brother’s razor: ‘Never choose the simplest answer when a more confusing one is available’. But we all have free will, we just choose not to use it, due to our inhibitions, personal ethics, and all the self-imposed restrictions we adopt in order to survive in civilised society. So, in that regard, we do not use the free will we all have. My second issue is that Dunn’s hypothetical Free Will Pill already exists and so isn’t hypothetical at all. Millions of people take them every day. They’re called opioids. They block your inhibitions, subvert your thinking and self-discipline, and open the door to using your free will because you now have no regard for the consequences of any decision you make. Free will, or not free will? I choose not!

D.H. SOCHA
DARTMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS

Wrong Footed On Ought v Is

DEAR EDITOR: In Book VII, Chapter 16 of Politics, Aristotle’s notion of how children ought to be treated is the opposite of Philippa Foot’s in her note in Issue 130. He writes, “There should be a law of Philippa Foot’s in her note in Issue 130. He writes, “There should be a law of Philippa Foot’s in her note in Issue 130. He writes, “There should be a law to prevent the rearing of deformed children.” So he takes for granted that infanticide is sometimes correct. Many Greek states exposed newborn infants to die if they were unacceptable for whatever reason to the father. The Greeks took for granted that it is up to Dad, having regard to what ought to be done for the state, what sex or robustness of child ought to survive, or whether it ought to be killed. Foot on the contrary takes it for granted that if a child is born, it must be nurtured. There is something wrong with someone, says Foot, if they do not feel they ought to care for an infant. Aristotle might say the same about some-
one who does not know they ought to take the interests of the community into account or ought to respect the authority of the father. Surely the difference between the Greeks and Foot is that different oughts have been slipped into the reasoning?

MICHAEL MCMANUS
LEEDS

DEAR EDITOR: David Hume told us that we cannot get an ought from an is. He did not say that we cannot have any oughts; we just cannot get them from the ises. So from what can we get them, then? From our own preferences and desires (or “passions”, as David Hume called them). We may indeed find Philippa Foot’s owl (Issue 130) that cannot see in the dark ‘useless’, unable to hunt where and when it ‘ought’ to, unlikely to survive for long and have offspring; but here is the thing: The owl is under no obligation to do any of those things, to be useful, to be like other owls, as much as we might prefer it to be and think it ought to be. We may care about the owl, but Nature does not. As the great German poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe reminded us: “... unfähig ist die Natur” (Nature is unfeeling). It does not care about this or any owl, or whether there are owls at all: Most species that ever lived are extinct, and no amount of oughting can bring them back.

AXEL WINTER
QUEENSLAND

DEAR EDITOR: I wouldn’t be much of a philosopher if I’d have committed the Humean is-ought fallacy as Tracy Braverman says I did (Letters, 131). And of course, I haven’t. I did not argue from the fact that we put animals to sleep in certain circumstances to the conclusion that we should therefore put humans to sleep in the same circumstances. I say that normative moral arguments lead us to think that putting animals to sleep in certain circumstances is morally right (indeed there would be something morally wrong if we did not sometimes do so); therefore, for it to be morally wrong to do the same for humans in the same circumstances there would have to be a relevant moral difference between animals and humans. I then go through possible candidates for such a relevant moral difference, and show that either there is no difference, or none of them amount to something that should, morally speaking, lead us to treat humans differently from animals.

JOHN SHAND
MANCHESTER

Making Not Much of a Difference

DEAR EDITOR: The article ‘Homo Faber’ by Raymond Tallis in PN 130 is a classic example of ‘moving the goal posts’. It happens every time studies show advanced thinking or self awareness in non-human animals. Tallis concludes that humans are cognitively distinct from other animals. As his argument is set out in both philosophical and scientific terms, I will address both.

Science often produces conclusions that are challenged for years before they are accepted by the majority. Years ago it was believed that most animals were not self-aware and that this line was only crossed by humans and the great apes. Then dolphin and elephant studies showed that they recognize their reflected images in mirrors. This was well accepted, with most people concluding something like, “Well, after all we knew they were smart, and they are mammals.” But recently there have been similar studies done using a small reef fish called a Wrasse which passed the test like the dolphins. The difference between human and animal awareness of self appears to be in degree, not in simple absence or presence.

Tallis states that in our tool use humans transform naturally occurring materials in a way not seen in the animal world. What about parrots, who eat clay before they eat poisonous fruit in order to neutralize the toxicity? He refers to the essential nature of a division of labour as an admirable trait that humans possess over animals (except bees and ants?); but does not consider the fact that by definition, specialization means that some individuals will lack certain skills. He admits that New Caledonian crows use tools, but dismisses that use by stating that the tools are not “housed in a common store for use by authorized members at some indefinite future time.” It sounds like he wants to see them set up a shared tool co-op! At best this displays his preference for collective social structures, but it has nothing to do with tool-making. He states the following: “At its heart is the uniquely joined or collective intentionality of human consciousness”; but again, this has nothing to do with tool use, nor is it exclusive to humans when, for example, it is compared to the highly coordinated and intentional cooperative manner in which a school of fish of a flock of birds moves in unison in order to escape predators.

Tallis shows that the degree of complexity in human cooperation and tool use is extraordinary, but he fails to show that there is a difference in kind from that of tool use in other animals; only in degree. In my opinion, as a species we are not as special as we like to suppose.

WILL EVANS
BY EMAIL

Ethics of Future Groups

DEAR EDITOR: Alexander Joy’s efforts to pin down future ethics in PN 130 are laudable yet unsuccessful. Painism fails to account for the harms suffered by groups of individuals that exceeds the sum total of their individual suffering. Yet harms are frequently magnified when suffered by an entire group. The Holocaust didn’t just kill individual Jews: it destroyed families and communities. It went beyond a collection of individual harms, to an existential harm suffered by a community as a whole. The same can be said of slavery. Any adequate moral theory must be able to aggregate harm in order to account for this reality.

John Stuart Mill succeeds at this where both Bentham and Painism fail. According to Mill we minimize harm and maximize pleasure as a community by adopting rules that take the interests of both minority and hegemonic groups into account. Mill’s Rule of Liberty provides a framework for protecting the interests of minority groups from harm suffered as a group, as in cases like the Holocaust and slavery. And when we look at future generations as a group, the same principles apply. Our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren are either here now or will be here soon. As such, their interests are already important to us. We demonstrate this fact by our actions on a daily basis. Their problem is that they are a group that can’t speak for themselves. Mill’s Rule Utilitarianism provides a framework for us to take their interests as a group into account in our moral decision-making.

BARNETT B MCGOWAN, JD
OHIO
Artful Dodging

DEAR EDITOR: Lowie Geers, in Letters, PN 131, says I offer only one argument against conceptual art in PN 129. That’s true. But I have two others up my sleeve.

Geers reminds us of the manifesto claims of conceptual artists: ‘Ideas can be works of art’ (Sol le Witt) and so on – from which he concludes that the embodied work is simply “an instrument which guides us towards the actual art work, which is the idea”. Unfortunately, it rarely works like that. The embodied works are usually just too opaque to ordinary understanding: it is the manifesto or the gallery notes which guide us from the thing to the idea. Without the crib sheet, we are often simply baffled.

There are exceptions. When Banksy recently arranged for one of his screen prints to self-destruct just as it was sold for a million in a public auction, the act was transparent enough to guide us to the kind of ideas which might have inspired it. Bravo, Banksy!

Banksy’s act also leads to my second argument. Most conceptual art is best looked upon as a type of prank. A prank is a gratuitous act which requires a certain amount of imagination to think up, and some boldness to perform. The aim is to make a point or set off some critical thinking. Borat (Sacha Baron-Cohen) is a famous contemporary prankster. But Borat does not rely on public funding, and he makes people laugh. The pranks of conceptual artists may require some imagination and boldness – for example, in vast scale or expenditure – but the yield to audiences is very small. That is why the audiences are pretty thin on the ground.

TREVOR PATEMAN
BRIGHTON

Plumb This

DEAR EDITOR: Neil Richardson’s letter in Issue 131 about Mary Midgley’s plumbing metaphor reminded me of John W. Gardner’s comment on the same subject: “The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water” (Forbes Magazine, August 1st, 1977).

MARTIN JENKINS
LONDON

A Stand on Rand

DEAR EDITOR: In regard to the Brief Life of Ayn Rand in Issue 130, when I saw the subtitle ‘Martin Jenkins traces the life of a self-made woman’ I expected to learn something. Unfortunately, the article had little to do with Ayn Rand’s life or her philosophy, Objectivism. Rather it was a rehash of long recycled gossip, invective, and falsehoods. It is clear that Jenkins took all, or nearly all, of his information for his article from the 1986 pseudo-biography The Passion of Ayn Rand, written by a woman who hated Ayn Rand, as he repeats numerous personal and professional smears lifted directly from that book. He fails to accurately present the life of Ayn Rand or her philosophical position on a number of issues.

In the future, when an author wishes to write an article on Ayn Rand or her philosophy, may I suggest contacting the Ayn Rand Institute in California? The Institute houses the Ayn Rand Archives, a collection of all her personal papers, which are open to all serious writers. If readers wish to gain an accurate assessment of Ayn Rand’s life, they may wish to purchase A Companion to Ayn Rand in the Blackwell Companions to Philosophy Series. In an appendix, the author takes to task the undercurrent of malice and mendacity in The Passion of Ayn Rand. And if one wishes to read the best scholarly work on Rand’s philosophy, one could not do better than turning to the work of the Ayn Rand Society, a professional body associated with the American Philosophical Association (Eastern Division). The Society has recently had its third volume on Ayn Rand’s philosophy published by the University of Pittsburgh Press: Foundations of a Free Society.

RAY SHELTON
GLENDALE, CALIFORNIA

A Study in Scarlet

DEAR EDITOR: In his article in Issue 129, ‘A Forgiving Reason’, Tim Weldon considers which philosopher Sherlock Holmes would be a follower of, and decides on Blaise Pascal. Admirable as this choice is, I think he missed his man: it’s not Pascal, it’s Spinoza. Holmes’s reliance on leaps of intuition does not resemble Pascal’s ‘instincts of the heart’ as much as it does Spinoza’s ‘third type of knowing’, which takes in large patterns of causality or logical connection (the same thing for Spinoza), and does so with speed and certainty. Holmes dis-passionate but humane character matches Spinoza’s too; as well as his capacity for a stunning level of contemplative absorption and intellectual precision. The description of Holmes as “a little too scientific for my tastes – it approaches to cold-bloodedness” which Weldon quotes from A Study in Scarlet surely describes many readers reaction to Spinoza better than to Pascal.

We should also consider that a key brilliance of Holmes, beyond his grasp of empirical deduction and science, is psychology. Holmes himself says that psychology is the advanced matter for consideration in the art of deduction, beyond more ‘elemental matters.’ Spinoza’s mastery of the logic of human emotion and motivation outshines Pascal. It is also perhaps worthy of note that Pascal was a traditional theist, which I have a hard time imagining Holmes being, and which we know Spinoza was not. Lastly, Holmes marches fiercely to his own drum in a way matched by few philosophers other than the excommunicated heretic Spinoza. I suspect that if Holmes had published philosophical treatises, he too might have had to go underground to safely publish his thoughts. So with all due respect to Pascal, if there was a philosophical tome on Holmes’ bookshelf I suspect it would be the Ethics, not the Pensées.

MATTHEW GINDIN
VANCOUVER, BC

Elements of Spinoza

DEAR EDITOR: In his article in Issue 129, ‘A Forgiving Reason’, Tim Weldon considers which philosopher Sherlock Holmes would be a follower of, and decides on Blaise Pascal. Admirable as this choice is, I think he missed his man: it’s not Pascal, it’s Spinoza. Holmes’s reliance on leaps of intuition does not resemble Pascal’s ‘instincts of the heart’ as much as it does Spinoza’s ‘third type of knowing’, which takes in large patterns of causality or logical connection (the same thing for Spinoza), and does so with speed and certainty. Holmes dis-passionate but humane character matches Spinoza’s too; as well as his capacity for a stunning level of contemplative absorption and intellectual precision. The description of Holmes as “a little too scientific for my tastes – it approaches to cold-bloodedness” which Weldon quotes from A Study in Scarlet surely describes many readers reaction to Spinoza better than to Pascal.

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MATTHEW GINDIN
VANCOUVER, BC
OU may be familiar with the contrast between ‘lumpers’ and ‘splitters’. Lumpers like to put many different things under one heading, emphasising the similarity between them. Splitters instead focus on the differences, and delight in making distinctions. Well, in mid-seventeenth century India, one of history’s most adventurous lumpers met one of its most notorious splitters.

The scene was the Mughal court during the period of Muslim political domination of the subcontinent. The splitter was a visitor from France, an intrepid traveler and philosopher named François Bernier; the lumper, his host, Prince Dārā Shikāh. Bernier served as his court physician, until his services sadly became superfluous when Dārā was put to death in 1659 as the outcome of a succession crisis.

A Westerner like Bernier could hardly have chosen a better place to learn from the East. Dārā encouraged scholarship at his court and was no mean scholar himself. He produced Persian translations of the ancient Indian philosophical texts known as the Upanishads, calling the result Sirr-i akbar, or The Great Secret.

Dārā was a Muslim, of course, but his interest in these works was not a matter of detached curiosity. He was convinced that there was a fundamental agreement between the teachings of Islam and Hindu Vedic philosophy. As Jonardon Ganeri has written, for Dārā, “it was not the case that the Upanishads provide access to new truths; rather they provide a more detailed description of truths already sketched but less than fully explained in the Qur’ān” (The Last Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700, 2011). In fact, Dārā even thought that the Upanishads were mentioned in the Qur’ān, seeing a reference to them in verses that refer to a mysterious ‘hidden book’ of revelation.

Rather than merely providing these translations and hoping his Persian readership would get the point, Dārā also penned a treatise calling attention to the resonances between Hindu thought and the mystical Islamic tradition known as Sufism. The two traditions had reached the same conclusions, Dārā thought, and differed only in the language used to express what was in fact a single set of ideas. He called his treatise The Confluence of the Two Oceans, the title conjuring a meeting and mingling of two great cultures. It was even translated into Sanskrit – a task that may have been undertaken (it seems in bad taste to say ‘executed’) by Dārā himself. Dārā focused especially on the currents of Indian philosophy that accepted a single divine principle, notably Vedānta, since this school best matched the Islamic commitment to the oneness of God. But the confluence went beyond monotheism. Such famous Indian ideas as the cyclical theory of time were presented as agreeing with Islamic teachings, while the Sufi concept of passionate love for God was compared to similar themes in Sanskrit sources.

Clearly then, Dārā’s guest, Dr Bernier, was uniquely well-placed to complement his own Western philosophical training with a study of Eastern thought. But he only half rose to the occasion. He was duly impressed by the Islamic intellectual tradition, and even learned fluent Persian in order to converse with an unnamed ‘pandit’ at the court (who may have been the scholar Kavindra Sarasvati). Speaking in Persian, Bernier told his colleague about the ideas of Descartes and Pierre Gassendi. In return he learned about ancient Indian ideas.

To some extent Bernier was, like Dārā, persuaded that different cultures had independently reached the same fundamental ideas. For instance, he was struck by the echo between the Indian idea that the divine stretches its influence forth into the universe like a spider letting forth the strands of its web, and the ancient Greek idea that there is a life-giving principle within the cosmos – Plato’s ‘world soul’. Yet he saw this as mythic story more than philosophical insight. Justin H. Smith has written that Bernier “saw local or indigenous knowledge as useless in the pursuit of truth, since he did not believe that this knowledge, having developed beyond the pale of philosophy, is underlain or driven by reason” (Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy, 2015). Worse still, Bernier achieved a more lasting fame by writing a classification of the races of the world – the work of a born splitter, and a source for later pseudoscientific racism.

I suppose you’ll join me in admiring Dārā Shikāh, the enthusiastic philosophical martyr, more than François Bernier, who seems so blinkered in retrospect. Of course it is wrong to reject the philosophical ideas of another culture as ‘irrational’ simply because they don’t look similar enough to the ideas of your own culture. But I’d suggest that Dārā too was making a mistake. It is also wrong to investigate the philosophy of another culture solely in order to discover its deep agreement with your own. This sort of lumping is not infrequently found in the study of comparative philosophy today, and it tends to leave me cold. After all, if the ancient Indians really thought the same things as the ancient Greeks, then one of the two cultures can safely be ignored as superfluous. More interesting to me are cases where philosophers of more than one culture arrive at ideas that are similar, yet different. Śāṅkara, Parmenides, and Spinoza were all monists, believing that there is ultimately only one substance, but in different ways and for different reasons. Also fruitful is the case where the same problem is confronted, but with different solutions. There is nothing quite like the Buddhist doctrine of ‘no self’ in Greek philosophy, but it does address a problem of selfhood that was raised by Plato, at about the same time as it happens.

When West meets East, the most interesting result is neither mutual incomprehension nor total agreement. It is a conversation in which both sides find that they have something to learn.
Richard Baron wonders what changes in our own thinking it would take to live with sociable robots, and Melissa Merritt considers the logic of Immanuel Kant.
Wake Up by Cameron Gray, 2019
exists in relation to the human beings who play with it. In this way it fits the picture of emotions as arising out of interactions. But we should be cautious when reapplying this argument. Human beings do have emotional states when on their own. Even human beings brought up without social contact have them. And social robots a good deal more complex than Paro might have them too.

Finally, Chapter 5 considers robot ethics. At the opposite end of the scale from cute robot seals are military robots. We might want to program them so that they automatically observed the Geneva Convention. That would be reassuring. But the military would want the power to override that constraint in exceptional circumstances, and that veto would be concentrated in the hands of a small number of senior officers. It might be better to allow the robots themselves a bit of leeway while equipping them with artificial empathy so as to deter them from committing atrocities. More generally, social robots are going to need the flexibility to respond appropriately to the requirements of the human beings with whom they work, and rigid rules will sooner or later prove inadequate. Social robots will lose all credibility if their obedience to rules reduces them to simply saying, “Computer says no.” If they are to have as much flexibility as human beings, they will need an appreciation of ethics that goes beyond knowing the rules – an appreciation that allows them to think about the rules, and occasionally to challenge them.

Overall, this book offers plenty of food for thought. It does not establish that we should change our paradigm for the philosophy of mind, but it opens up the possibility and shows how it could be developed. And if anyone is expecting the robot revolution to change nothing much apart from the number of hours we have to work, this book will surely change their mind about that.

Finally, although the book is well-produced, the publisher should be told off for one failure of layout. Notes, including many which enlarge on the argument rather than merely giving references, have been shunted to the end of the book rather than being made easily accessible at the bottom of the page. Now that typesetting is done by computer, there is no excuse for this.

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It is well known that Immanuel Kant wrote the Critique of Pure Reason to establish metaphysics as a science. At the outset of the Critique, Kant considers what this effort might learn from successful examples of scientific inquiry – mentioning logic first of all, which he claims has been a science since the time of Aristotle. Logic had a relatively easy time finding the ‘sure path’ of a science, since it deals only with the pure form of thought, abstracting from “all objects of knowledge” (Critique, p.ix). But metaphysics is concerned with matters of fact, and cannot make this abstraction. Yet if it is to be a science, its claims about matters of fact must nevertheless hold of necessity. This is why the central question of the Critique is: how can we legitimately make such claims? Or in Kant’s terms: ‘How is synthetic a priori judging possible?’ [A synthetic proposition is one that is true because of its relation to the world, but something is a priori knowledge if it is known independent of experience. Ed.]

To answer this question, Kant argues that there are certain fundamental concepts of pure understanding (he calls them categories) which are necessary conditions of the possibility of experience. He draws this list of categories from pure general logic. Next, he argues that a system of necessary principles of nature can be derived from these categories. These principles (in effect) include our ordinary implicit understanding that every event has a cause or that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. The core argument of the Critique is meant to establish our entitlement to these principles as synthetic a priori knowledge. Most commentary on the Critique focuses on this core argument. Huaping Lu-Adler’s interests in her new book, Kant and the Science of Logic, lie upstream from this core argument: namely, in Kant’s conception of logic as a science, and his initial reliance on logic to develop, ultimately, that system of
principles – which he calls ‘transcendental logic’, and by which he in turn aims to establish metaphysics as a science.

Logic, of course, has not stood still since Aristotle. Lu-Adler’s examination of its history is illuminating and reasonably focused for her purposes: with it, she provides an immense service to Kant scholars. She traces two distinct approaches to logical inquiry that she contends are not intrinsically incompatible with one another, but nonetheless quite different in spirit, and pursued in somewhat different traditions. One – call it Scientific Logic – is primarily occupied with questions about whether logic is a science of its own, with a distinct subject matter, and how it relates to other parts of philosophy. It has roots in Aristotle, was importantly developed by Aquinas and other medieval commentators on Aristotle, and taken up by the German rationalist tradition of G.W. Leibniz and Christian Wolff. The other – Lu-Adler calls it Logical Humanism – rejects the pursuit of logic for its own sake, and “places the value of logic in its ability to assist us in coping with our own human limitations and pursuing wisdom” (p. 61). To get a sense of the Logical Humanist tradition at its most colourful, consider Seneca, the later Roman Stoic. He derides the humanist and Lockean practices of emphasizing certain ethical dimensions of logic

“Zeno, of our school, offers the following syllogism: ‘Nothing bad is glorious. But death is glorious. Therefore death is not bad.’ Now, that was a big help! … Do you mean to make me laugh, just when I’m about to die?”

(Seneca, Letters on Ethics 82.9, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015)

For Lu-Adler the key humanist figure in the modern era is John Locke, who arguably had some influence on Georg Meier, author of the 1752 Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason that served as the textbook for Kant’s logic lectures for some forty years.

Lu-Adler examines Kant’s relation to both traditions, arguing that while Kant is interested in Scientific Logic for its role in establishing the Critique’s ‘transcendental logic’, he nevertheless “pays homage to the humanist and Lockean practices of emphasizing certain ethical dimensions of logic” (p.6). This is certainly true, and Lu-Adler’s arguments for these claims provide an eye-opening perspective on the importance of Kant’s philosophy of logic. But certain aspects of her story are underdeveloped.

Although Kant wrote the Critique to show how metaphysics could become a science, he also took the Critique itself to be a science. For Kant, a proper science is in effect a closed system: it gives us complete grasp of a domain – not in its particulars, but through the exhaustive articulation of its fundamental principles. A metaphysics of nature is a science inasmuch as its principles spell out what it is to be an object of possible experience, and figure in the domain of nature. The Critique’s transcendental logic ostensibly produces such a system of principles. These principles in turn rest on the categories, which in turn rest on a table of judgments that Kant openly borrows from pure general logic. Yet while Kant provides a couple of pages of commentary about how the items in the table of judgments relate to one another, he does nothing like demonstrate the systematic completeness of the table. Nor does he give anything approaching a satisfactory account of the derivation of the categories from the table of judgments. These are serious problems, since the whole project of securing metaphysics as a science ultimately rests on the completeness of the table of judgments as a basis for deriving the categories.

In this way, the set-up of Lu-Adler’s book leads one to hope for a substantial treatment of the issue on which the work of the Critique seems, ultimately, to rest: the completeness of the table of judgments as the basis for the derivation of the categories. Lu-Adler gives some account of this issue, but she recognises that it may seem underwhelming to some readers (pp.188, 197). The upshot of her response to the completeness problem is, effectively, that arguments must start somewhere. The only account that we can give of why it is these categories is their internal coherence in a system, which pure logic helps provide. Perhaps rightly, she contends that “we can have no insight into whatever ultimate ground might have determined our cognitive faculties”, although we cannot help wanting “to comprehend such a ground” (p.192). But she scarcely mentions a substantial body of 20th-century German scholarship, beginning with Klaus Reich’s 1932 The Completeness of Kant’s Table of Judgments, which aims to reconstruct arguments for Kant’s contentious completeness claims. Given that a driving force behind Lu-Adler’s study is to understand the relation of pure general logic to the ‘transcendental logic’ of the Critique (p.6), the work of Reich and others should not have been brushed off as a pointless quest for a Kantian holy grail.

Finally, most of the action in this book concerns Kant’s relation to Scientific Logic, not Logical Humanism. That perhaps makes sense, given her overarching purposes, and title: Kant and the Science of Logic. However, she does advance the substantive thesis that Kant drew an innovative distinction between pure and applied logic, and through the latter recognised Logical Humanism as a genuine part of logic – alongside, but separate from, Scientific Logic (p. 6). This is an important insight, since many commentators simply fail to see the evidence of Kant’s interest in, and commitment to, Logical Humanism. Perhaps Kant’s interest in Logical Humanism is a separate story unto itself. At any rate, following its lead would have taken her beyond the Critique of Pure Reason, into later works such as the 1790 Critique of Judgment and 1797 Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View. Given her central purposes, she may be perfectly justified in not going down those roads here. Nevertheless, the result is that she can at most only acknowledge, and not really examine or explain, the broader philosophical significance of Logical Humanism for Kant.

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Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason

"Zeno, of our school, offers the following syllogism: ‘Nothing bad is glorious. But death is glorious. Therefore death is not bad.’ Now, that was a big help! … Do you mean to make me laugh, just when I’m about to die?"

(Seneca, Letters on Ethics 82.9, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015)
Philosopher at a Film Festival

Thomas E. Wartenberg reports from the 22nd Ji.Hlava International Documentary Film Festival.

Last summer I received a surprising email. I was asked to be a judge in the ‘Between the Seas’ section of the 22nd Ji.Hlava International Documentary Film Festival, which was to be held from the 26th to the 30th of October 2018 in Jihlava, Czech Republic. Although I have attended and presented many talks at many conferences on film and philosophy, this was the first time I had been asked to be a judge at a film festival. I was particularly surprised because most of my work in the area has been on narrative fiction film. Nonetheless I was flattered and intrigued, and so I headed to Jihlava to be a judge.

The Ji.Hlava International Documentary Film Festival is the largest documentary film festival in Eastern Europe. Over 300 documentaries were screened in 2018, chosen from over 3,500 submissions. Hundreds of people from across Europe attended. There were competitions in such areas as experimental documentaries, Czech films, and debut films, as well as screenings of major documentaries outside of the competitions. ‘Between the Seas’ consisted of two distinct competitions: one for students and one for professionals. The panel consisted of five judges: a Czech film director, a Slovak film producer, a Filipina film producer, a British sound artist, and myself, a philosopher of film. Over the course of four days we had to watch twenty-four films, though not all of them were feature length. At the end of a long fourth day of screenings, we met over a late dinner to decide on which films to award prizes.

A number of films were very intriguing from a philosophical point of view. I was first struck by one of the student films, *Ars Moriendi: The Art of Living* (Kristina Schranz), an Austrian-German production. The film portrayed a 93-year-old woman who had returned to university after breaking off her education to raise a family. I was amazed that the subject she chose to study was death. The film included brief looks at the views of such philosophers as Martin Heidegger, who wrote extensively about death. But what really impressed me was the style in which it was filmed – with extended long shots taken with a stationery camera that allowed the action to slowly develop. Since it was one of the first I saw, I was excited to realize that many of the films in the competition would be interesting to see.

One of the problems with being judges was that we saw so many films in such a short period of time that we didn’t have the opportunity to reflect as deeply as I would have liked on them. For example, I traveled to the airport at the end of the festival with Hilal Baydarov, a director from Azerbaijan. We had seen two films of his, *Birthday* and *One Day in Selimpasha*. They were very similar, though I liked *Birthday* better because of the irony its subject matter makes possible. *Birthday* follows the filmmaker’s mother on her birthday. Given the title, we expect some sort of celebration; but that never happens. Instead we see her cooking her various meals, all of which seem to involve dough of some sort; working outside in her garden; playing cards or a game on her antiquated cellphone; or taking a rest on the couch in her living room. Although the film was not very long (63 minutes), the pressure of watching it with other films before and after made all of us annoyed that it was ‘boring’. It was only in the taxi, when pressed by the director to explain my reaction to his film, that I began to realize that the boredom of everyday life was the subject. He wanted his audience not simply to become bored, but to reflect on boredom as a philosophical topic. A light went on in my head as I realized that we had watched a cinematic equivalent to Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

A film that impressed me both for its style and its content was *The Good Death* (Tomas Krupa). It focused on the decision made by a wealthy British woman suffering from muscular dystrophy to end her life. Having watched her own mother endure a protracted death during which she had become unable to communicate at all, she wished to avoid such a fate herself. Physician assisted suicide is illegal in Britain, so she traveled to Switzerland to arrange it. The film begins about six months beforehand, as we watch her making all the necessary arrangements, including telling her two children and her friends, arranging her finances, and taking care of her two homes. I was struck by seeing someone so clear in her determination to deal with so many difficult issues: her
daughter is pained at the prospect of her mother’s suicide, for example, and tries to convince her not to do it. The film ends when she flips the switch that allows the sedative to course through her veins, causing her to fall asleep. Her death is not far off.

This film clearly had a message: People should be allowed to choose to die with dignity. It made a persuasive case for this, in my opinion qualifying it as a film that presented a philosophical argument. The other judges, however, didn’t like the film. They had various reasons for this. Some thought it ‘too Hollywood’ – one of the reasons I liked it. High production values reminiscent of Hollywood cinema seemed exactly the right choice. Given its message, it seemed important to me that the film strive for a wide audience. One of the other judges said he felt manipulated by the film. I take it that what he meant was that the film had a clear message that it intended to impart to its audience. From my point of view, that was another one of the film’s virtues. But my fellow judges disagreed, and the film did not win the prize I thought it deserved.

This segues into a discussion of serving as a judge at the film festival. While it was an interesting experience, it was also frustrating. Whenever there was a disagreement, I found myself on the losing side. I now think that the issue was that the filmmakers on the panel were less interested in the content of the films than in their style. That is, they were judging the films from the point of view of their form. Were they innovative? I, on the other hand, tended to reflect on some of what appeared to be standard features of contemporary documentary filmmaking. Many of the best films in the festival were, in effect, personal essays, in which the filmmaker’s presence was central to the story they told. One very personal film about the filmmaker’s father being forced out of his apartment by local government so that the building could be renovated, The Last Self-Portrait (Marek Kubos), a Slovak film, highlighted in a humorous yet serious manner the filmmaker’s reflections about making documentary films and the moral compromises they involve. These highly personal films had an impact that many of the more ‘objective’ films, say about the dismantling of a greenhouse and the firing of the elderly woman who had run it for decades, failed to achieve. While such films may not achieve wide distribution, they are truly great achievements that deserve a wider audience than they are likely to have. However, one troubling tendency present in many of the films was a reticence about providing any verbal information, either through voiceover or writing on the screen, to set a context for the audience to help them understand what they would see. It seems a dogma of contemporary documentary filmmaking (at least of the sort dominant in the festival) to simply thrust the audience into a situation and let them slowly come to understand its significance. I think this tendency resulted in needless obscurity in many of the films I saw at the festival. In many cases, the information that would have helped was eventually presented – usually through titles at the end of the film.

Clearly, documentary filmmaking is alive and well, at least in Eastern and Central Europe. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have become acquainted with such a vital area of contemporary filmmaking which most Americans, and, perhaps, Western Europeans and audiences in other areas of the globe, are mostly ignorant of. Seeing so many excellent films produced in the last year by filmmakers had a major impact on me. I hope that at least some of these films achieve the wide viewing they deserve.

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Secure in Sindh

Seán Moran gets to grips with guards.

The armed security guard in my photo is on duty in Karachi, in the Sindh province of Pakistan. He’s protecting a ladies’ shoe-shop against potential thieves: sandal stealers and kittenheel kleptomaniacs. A more dangerous threat would be 

Street Philosopher

dacoits – local bandits – robbing the shop of the day’s takings. But our man has been issued with three bullets (he showed me) and is ready to take on any three villains. (Despite the similar macho name, Tiger Security Services of Karachi are different from Tiger Bouncers of Karachi – who don’t actually bounce tigers, but offer to protect celebrities.)

Security workers of all stripes are a common sight on the streets in this region of the world. Neighbouring India has over seven million private security guards. In industrialised countries, private security personnel are also becoming more numerous than ‘proper’ policemen and women. For instance, in Britain there are now more than twice as many private security operatives as there are police officers (Benjamin Koeppen, PhD thesis, 2019). Similarly, in the United States there are over a million private security guards, comfortably outnumbering the police.

Security, in its broad sense, is a public good. According to philosophers in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the first duty of a nation state is to protect its citizens from harm, providing defence forces and police services to tackle external and internal threats. This gives military and law enforcement personnel a certain prestige, as supposed guardians of our national and personal security. In a democracy, they theoretically work for us.

But private security does not generally conduce to the public good. A shop’s security is there first and foremost to protect the stock, staff and premises, rather than to safeguard the general public. And security guards are well aware of this role. A study by Hansen Löfstrand et al. (‘Doing ‘dirty work’: Stigma and esteem in the private security industry’, 2015) reports on “the commonly used phrase ‘I’ve been bought’”. This work also shows that the general public looks down on retail security guards as being ‘taunted and disreputable’. They have to “manage stigmatised people, and need to behave in a servile manner to both employers and customers.” Combine this with their long working hours in sometimes hostile environments – performing mainly unskilled, boring duties for low pay – and it’s no surprise that staff turnover is high. It seems that security is an insecure occupation.

In spite of this, the sector is growing. Private security guards patrol buildings, city streets and shopping malls (which themselves have an ambiguous public–yet–private status). They operate prisons and refugee centres, and even undertake secret operations in conflict zones. This looks like a major mission drift from their former role of ‘night watchmen’; but in reality, private security has been involved in warfare and policing for hundreds of years. For example, the privately-owned British East India Company ruled in India from 1757 for just over a century, governing directly with its own army and police, before the British Crown took over (with Queen Victoria eventually becoming Empress of India).

Public Insecurity

Retail security has become more and more pervasive in recent times. We may wonder why shops now need to be so heavily guarded. Some of this is due to complex social and economic changes, but it is also likely that retailers themselves have partly caused the state of affairs. Consider a traditional town centre jeweller’s shop. The rings and watches are behind glass, so we must ask a shop assistant to unlock a display cabinet in order to handle the products, and we can’t escape until staff discreetly press a door-release button. There’s maybe no need for a security guard here.

Contrast this with a department store such as TK Maxx (called TJ Maxx in the US). Here we can freely handle watches and jewellery on open display. The very act of absent-mindedly picking up one of these may create a desire for it. This could lead to an impulse buy, or an opportunistic theft. The shop seems almost to invite crime by displaying the slogans ‘Finders Keepers’ and even “Shoes for a steal... grab them before somebody else does”. Now a security guard is needed, and CCTV cameras, plus electronic tags on products, alert the guard to shoplifting activity.

I once found an electronic tag in a café, together with hangers and labels, left behind by some shoplifters who had been taking a tea break. I put the tag in my jacket pocket to return it to the shop the next time I visited. Weeks later, I’d forgotten about the device when I wore the same jacket again and went to the mall. What drama! Alarms sounded every time I entered, exited, or passed each shop in the mall, and security guards started following me around. I eventually handed the tag in to the shop.

I’m not singling out TK Maxx for criticism. Many retailers do what they can to create a desire that they will satisfy for a price. But the strategy of tempting browsing shoppers by putting attractive products on open display makes illegitimate as well as legitimate acquisition easy. The process is seductive, frictionless, and perhaps not totally voluntary. (It’s not involuntary either, or shoplifters would have a useful ‘get out of jail’ card, to deny their culpability). To reduce illegitimate acquisition of the shop’s bounty, the security guard steps in.

Here in Ireland, we don’t trust even our regular police with guns; but in some countries civilian security guards are routinely armed. If you have lunch at McDonald’s in Madrid you’ll be watched by a uniformed private guard equipped with handcuffs and a pistol. According to a recent United Nations report, 24% of private security guards in Spain are armed: with higher rates in Bulgaria (40%), the Dominican Republic (80%), and Colombia (85%).

This is not a welcome development. Philip Zimbardo’s ‘Stanford Prison Experiment’ of 1971 showed that even decent, intelligent people can become sadists when put in uniform and granted power over others. If security guards are given weapons and a sense of authority, some of them will behave badly. For example, in 2007, private guards from the American business Blackwater Security Consulting “shot thirty-one innocent Iraqis in Nisur Square, Baghdad... Fourteen of the Iraqis, including women and children, died” (NBC News, 2018).

The Paradox of Protection

One fascinating philosophical analysis of security involves the notions of ‘immunity’ and ‘autoimmunity’. Paradoxically, when
there is too much emphasis on achieving immunity from threats to the self, the defences activated can damage the thing they are supposed to protect. Here the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) uses the metaphor of autoimmune disease, in which the immune system attacks the host organism’s own tissues. Another French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), points out that the nastiest pathogens emerge in the most sterile places: the highly resistant hospital superbug Clostridium difficile, for instance. Analogously, the presence of large numbers of armed security guards (especially together with gun-toting private citizens) raises the chances of injury to the very people who are trying so hard to achieve immunity from attack. This is an arms race that doesn’t end well. Derrida thus recommends an ethics of hospitality instead of an ethics of security. I’m with Derrida on this. I’ve been offered armed security in some of the places I visit, but prefer to trust the hospitality of local people.

An earlier understanding of immunity as protecting the ‘self’ from the ‘non-self’ is now dismissed as a naïve view, as there is no clear-cut demarcation between self and non-self, either socially or biologically. For instance, more than half of the cells in our bodies are non-human, but are essential to our health. Certain bacteria in our guts are vital to digestion, help to regulate appetite, and are involved in our immunity, but are organisms with completely different DNA from our own bodies. If these micro-organisms are removed by powerful antibiotics – analogous to over-zealous security – the niches that were occupied by these harmless or useful microbes become available for dangerous pathogens to occupy.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk coined the term ‘Immunitätsdämmerung’ to describe the crisis in the immunity system/modern civil security. The word is a nod to Wagner’s opera cycle Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods) or perhaps Nietzsche’s book Götzen-Dämmerung (Twilight of the Idols); but it is the idol of traditional immunity whose twilight we are witnessing. In new models of immunity and security, the principle of toleration is paramount. The human immune system has to tolerate, not attack, its host: it must also tolerate those non-human elements needed for healthy functioning. Rigid self/other activity – particularly when it involves a Manichean (good/bad) element – is unhelpful. We are radically interdependent, both biologically and socially, so should not attempt to cut ourselves off from our surroundings using either antibiotics or guns.

Let’s return to private security in Sindh province with a historical example. General Sir Charles Napier commanded the East India Company’s private Bombay Army in Sindh. In 1842, acting against orders, he defeated the Muslim rulers and conquered the province. (He reportedly then sent a punning single-word message back to London: ‘Peccavi’ – Latin for ‘I have sinned’ = ‘I have Sindh’. We could credit Napier’s erudition and wit to his education in Ireland; but it turns out that the story is Victorian fake news. The pun was not his, but appeared in the humorous magazine Punch rather than in the General’s official dispatches.) Napier later regretted the conquering of India by private enterprise: “The object”, he wrote, “was to enrich a parcel of shopkeepers – the ‘shopocracy’ of England.” In common with their light-fingered visitors, shopkeepers’ intentions have never been entirely benign. But we can still engage beneficially with them, as with the other ‘non-self’ organisms in our environments, internal and external. And we can gently subvert their security measures by treating guards as fellow human beings rather than anonymous uniformed cogs in the security apparatus. They are used to being treated with disdain by customers, shoplifters, and shopkeepers. Whether they are armed or not, a kind word from us – and perhaps a handshake – shows human solidarity and affirms their personhood. It also subtly challenges the legitimacy of private actors policing the public realm.
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Philosophers often remind us, and each other, that mental contents have the property of ‘aboutness’. Indeed, this is their distinguishing feature. Perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, desires, and hopes, are all about things, events, states of affairs, past, present or future, actual or possible. So far, so obvious. Or so it should be. Nevertheless, this aboutness – or to use the philosophers’ preferred term, intentionality – has generated a vast literature in the philosophy of mind, and has been the subject of heated debate, just because it lies at the root of the fundamental differences between the mental and the physical. It makes mind difficult to fit into the cosmos as seen through what Daniel Dennett (in *Consciousness Explained*, 1991) called ‘the prevailing wisdom’ that “We can (in principle!) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principles, laws and raw materials” that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth.”

We can test this claim by looking at something very basic: vision. How do I see this cup in front of me? The physical side of the story is that some of the light bouncing off the cup enters my eyes, tickles up my retinas, and sets in train neural activity terminating in and processed by the visual cortex. Is that the whole story? It doesn’t seem so. While the continuous causal connection between the cup and my brain describes how the light gets in, it hardly explains how the gaze looks out.

An effect in the visual cortex being caused by events on the surface of the cup seems to involve “the same physical principles, laws and raw materials” that operate throughout the material world. But what about the *intentional relationship* between my mental experiences and the cup: the fact that my experience is about the cup? My experience being about the cup seems to point in a direction opposite to that of a physical cause. Do the effects in the visual cortex reveal the cup by *reaching back* to its causal ancestors, why would it bypass more recent ancestors such as the events in the retina? Why isn’t our experience about our retinas? And, moreover, why does it stop at the goings on in the surface of the cup, and not reach further back?

This is only the beginning of the troubles besetting those who would like to assimilate mental contents, with their intentionality, into the physical world. Physical objects such as cups, unless they are hallucinations, are taken to be more than a succession of perceptions. Some hardline empiricists have suggested that our minds invent the idea of continually existing objects to make sense of our experience: that objects are mere ‘logical constructs’ out of sense data. The doyen of analytical philosophy, Willard van Orman Quine even suggested in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951) that objects are ‘cultural positis’ fashioned out of ‘irritations on our sensory surfaces’ and on a comparable ‘epistemological footing’ to Homer’s gods. If this were the case, then it is difficult to see how homely (rather than Homeric) items such as cups could be the seat of those causal interactions with the light that are supposed to account for their being seen. And then there is the inexplicable fact that to the gazing eye, light has subjective properties such as brightness and colour that are not intrinsic to the photons themselves.

It is clear that Dennett’s ‘prevailing wisdom’ is in serious trouble. This may explain the determined attempts by many philosophers to cut intentionality down to size. Dennett himself has argued over many decades that ascribing mental contents such as beliefs to ourselves and other creatures, including our fellow humans, is merely to adopt ‘the intentional stance’ – a useful tool which will help us to understand or predict behaviour. But it is unclear why this tool should be useful unless individuals really had minds with intentional contents. There doesn’t seem to be much use ascribing beliefs to people unless they have them. Others have tried to reduce intentionality to a natural relationship of correspondence or correlation between states of the brain and states of the environment, in which the ‘tracking’ carries biologically useful information about the content of the environment. Biologically useful or not, it isn’t clear how basic correspondence or correlation would amount to the aboutness relation essential to mental contents. After all, tracking is evident throughout the physical world. The surface of a puddle tracks the clouds reflected in it. In the absence of a conscious being, however, what is happening on the surface of the puddle does not amount to an image of the cloud, even less an image that is about the cloud. What’s more, unless the correlation were due to an actual causal relationship between the tracker and the tracked, tracking would be a miracle comparable to Leibniz’s pre-established harmony.

**Shared Differences**

Those philosophers who try desperately hard to naturalize or marginalize intentionality are motivated by a reason opposite to that which motivates those of us who feel that intentionality is not part of the material world. They deny something that we affirm – that there are fundamental differences, first between conscious beings and the material universe, and then between humans and other conscious beings, even our nearest primate kin. To understand how central intentionality is to these differences, let’s go back to vision.

When I see a cup, there is an explicit distance between me and the cup. My knowing the cup is not explained by immediate, causal, contact with it. The intentional object of vision is explicitly other than myself, the one who sees. It is ‘over there’, and I am ‘over here’. By contrast, there is no ‘over here’ and ‘over there’ in the material world. Someone needs to experience them for ‘here’ and ‘there’ to exist. ‘Here’ and ‘there’ are locations in phenomenal, not physical, space. This is crucial for the difference between conscious organisms and nonconscious enti-
ties. It is also additional to the ‘what is like to be’ of subjective experience, which has been frequently identified as the irreducible feature of consciousness. But what of the difference between human consciousness, and indeed human being, and animal consciousness, and animal being? The difference is rooted in the extraordinary elaboration of intentionality in human beings.

The space opened up and reached across, but not closed down by, aboutness, is most clearly evident in vision. It is a non-physical distance between the see and the seen, the basis of a separation between conscious beings and their environment. This space becomes wider, more complex, and of a different character, as human consciousness evolves. There is a progressive ‘unwiring’ of the individual from the physical causal net of which the material of the organism is a part.

The most potent driver of the transformation of human consciousness is the joining, sharing, or collectivization of intentionality. In A Natural History of Human Thinking, the comparative psychologist Michael Tomasello has identified the distinctive power of human minds to be jointly directed towards objects, matters of fact, states of affairs, goals or values, as the key to our uniqueness. Collective intentionality, he points out, encompasses shared intention, joint attention, shared belief, collective acceptance, and collective emotion. This sharing presupposes a sense of other individuals as being fundamentally like oneself and located in a common public space in which all participate. Obvious facilitators of joined intentionality are the various modes of communication. Of course animals communicate, but not in the way that humans do. The difference is evident at a basic level, in the gesture of pointing, which is universal in humans and not seen in beasts. By the time it is one year old, a child will be incessantly pointing to things that it wants its parents to see, soliciting shared attention to an object of interest, and importantly affirming a common world at the distal end of a shared intentional relation.

The intentionality in verbal communication permits further unwiring of the organism from the causal net. Linguistic aboutness – clearly seen in referential, factual assertions – allows subjects to know more while being exposed to less. Although they are tested against experience, facts are remote from experience. This is one of the reasons why no amount of objective, factual knowledge of the visual system will give me a sense of what it is like to see the colour blue if I am blue colourblind. Importantly, facts are uprooted from physical time and space. While my seeing a cup was an experience that occurred at a particular place and time, and my telling you about it is also occurring at a particular place and time (here and now), the fact that I saw a cup at a particular place and time is not itself anchored to either a place or a time.

Digging deeper, we may note that joined intentionality is the opening up of the very possibility of possibility in a material world that has no option but actuality. That is to say, in a culture shared through language, it is possible to create intentional objects to which nothing actual corresponds. For example, to create stories about things that don’t exist. Prior to referential discourse there is no falsehood (or indeed, truth). This collaboration in what we’re communicating about also opens up a common factual past and a common factual future from which we may approach the world in such a manner that our actions are not mere reactions to it. Agency is empowered through being joint; and magnified by the sharing of skills, customs, institutions, artefacts, a thousand patented ingenuities, and by documentation of what works and what doesn’t. In short, a distinctly human world expands through a trillion cognitive handshakes that permit us to act upon nature as if from outside it.

I have scooped a thimbleful from an ocean, but I hope I have said enough to illustrate how the degree to which we are unwired from the physical universe by intentionality is hugely increased by the sharing of intentionality that establishes a community of human minds.

**Intentionality Matters**

It is no wonder then that aboutness, connecting subjects to and yet separating them from objects, is so vigorously contested by those like Dennett who want to incorporate humanity into a world defined by “the same physical principles, laws and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth.” In such a world it would be impossible to see how human organisms could have stepped back sufficiently to see those physical principles, laws and raw materials that supposedly define the universe, and see also that they were subject to them; how we could place ‘matter’ in inverted commas and assert that we are made of it. If human beings were as entirely stitched into the causal net as tectonic plate movement and photosynthesis, we would be unable to understand how we could seem to manipulate it ever more effectively, or even entertain the illusion that we do so.

‘Aboutness’ sounds harmless, or even banal. However, it lies at the heart of what it is that sets apart animals with complex consciousesses from the material world. And the joining together of intentionality drives the widening of the gap between humans and other animals, even our nearest primate kin. No wonder those who want to reduce human beings to pieces of matter try to hide it from sight.

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Raymond Tallis’s next book, Seeing Ourselves: Reclaiming Humanity from God and Science, will be published by Agenda later this year.
Anushka: Hey everyone! Anchal and I have some exciting ideas for the delightfully rejuvenating warmer months on the topic of positive thinking.

Anchal: It’s important to sometimes evaluate our personal philosophies and ensure that we’re not falling into patterns of thinking which prevent us from living our best and most prosperous lives. So we’d like to encourage this now.

Anushka: Often it seems that our circumstances determine our mood. Feelings of negativity can sweep us away and leave us feeling helpless. But there’s great power in remembering that we are not our thoughts, and can even change the patterns of thinking that keep us feeling down or out of control. Positivity is a powerful tool, and might even help us to understand our failures or setbacks. The aguries of defeat, as we might name our setbacks, are often outweighed by the thrills of victory we experience every day. In the case that we find that the aguries of defeat outweigh the thrills of victory, we might also identify ways to create small thrills of victory, whether through acts of kindness or through self-care.

Anchal: Søren Kierkegaard was of the mind that “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.” If we look at our circumstances in this Kierkegaardian spirit, perhaps we can shift the frame in which we view them and take control of the one thing we can change: our thinking. As my great teacher Mrs Wilder once said, if we looked at many so-called negative circumstances and declared to ourselves: “What an opportunity!” we might feel very differently about them. Even if the negativity isn’t immediately converted, perhaps we could laugh at the absurdity of the situation, or reframe the situation in the context of the shared human experience and the miracle of our existence.

Anushka: But it’s important to keep in mind that ‘being positive’ isn’t supposed to be a panacea for negative emotions. Positivity should not repress our emotional confrontations; but it could be used to supplement our moods once we are feeling more stable. The Buddha taught that in order to overcome our emotional pain, we need to accept the experience, allowing ourselves to acknowledge the emotions we’re experiencing. Only then can we replace negative emotions with gratitude and positivity.

Anchal: Let me give some examples of refrares I use to try and jump-start my perspective. Sometimes, acknowledging the miracle of the mundane is the most important step towards a more positive worldview. If we truly take the time to contemplate the unlikeliness of our own existence, we might start to view each day as a gift. If we look out at the rain, and instead of being miserable are amazed that our most precious resource falls from the sky in abundance, then we might forget to be sad about the sunny day we don’t have! If we’re bored by our surroundings but consider the amazing fact that buildings, governments, and movements are structures built by human beings, and came from ideas that were once completely intangible, then we might also believe that the power of our own minds is just waiting to be manifested and harvested.

Anushka: Something that might improve our positivity could be simply identifying or reflecting on the experiences of the day and categorizing them. Practicing appreciation of the little things is not an easy task, but to be able to understand the beauty of the mundane and of simple things is truly effective.

Anchal: We hope that readers will take this as an encouragement to use the ancient wisdom of positivity to start to replace negative thought-patterns with positive ones. Training the brain to think positively might be hard at first, but that’s only because we so often normalize our negative thought-patterns. It takes just as much energy to think “What’s wrong with that person?” as it does to think “I hope whatever that person’s going through changes for the better.” Arguably, the latter thought also returns positive energy and channels your inner force for good. Change starts with a single thought.

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Anushka is a freshman at Harvard and Anchal is a high school sophomore in Orange County, California.
The Parable of the Atheist and the Logical Positivist

Michael Langford drops in on the afterlife for an argument about personal identity.

Two years before his death Professor Jones had a near death experience. The experience had been extraordinary, and surprisingly similar to the accounts he had read of other people’s near death experiences. In particular, there was that rehearsal of his whole life and that long tunnel with the friendly white light at the end of it. For all the following week, for the first time since he had jettisoned his juvenile religious faith (at seventeen), serious doubts about his atheism assailed him. Eventually, however, sanity returned – in no small part thanks to his friend, Professor Thomson. Thomson, another professional philosopher, persuaded him of something he had half-suspected even as the near death experience itself was taking place: that the strange sensations were not contact with another kind of reality, but the purely physiological effects of low oxygen levels in the brain. Indeed, his reason told him that it was precisely the common occurrence of low brain oxygen levels among those suffering cardiac failure or strokes that led to the similarity of the experiences. Of course, some elements of the phenomenon were not yet explained, such as a possible evolutionary cause of such a benign set of feelings when near the point of death; but, Jones concluded, the full explanation must be along these lines.

The two philosophers had been friends since undergraduate days at Oxford, and with respect to religion differed strongly on only one matter. While Jones called himself an atheist, arguing that it was manifest to any truly rational person that God did not exist, Thomson argued that even this position gave away too much to the theist. Following the recommendation of A.J. Ayer, the Godfather (as it were) of logical positivism, he thought it better to say that the word ‘God’ is ‘literally meaningless’. The very concept of God, he claimed, is incoherent: so as a good logical positivist he could not say that theism is ‘false’, because that would credit it with some meaning to be false about. The same approach, he argued, should be applied to the absurd belief in an afterlife, as heralded in many religions. The concept of self, or of ‘me’, in so far as it is coherent at all, refers only to a kind of unity experienced by this particular body. Indeed, Thomson had a sneaking admiration for Old Testament Judaism, which seemed to believe only in the kind of physical immortality that was to be had through one’s descendants’ lives.

Then, just over two years after Jones’ first heart attack, both friends were dead: Jones following another, more serious, cardiac arrest; and Thomson following a tragic accident only two days later, in which his sports car, traveling at high speed in the South of France, burst a tyre and hit a tree, Albert Camus style.

There are a number of anterooms where souls spend some time alone after arrival adjusting to the situation and preparing themselves for a trial before examining judges. Often they are visited by friends who have already ‘passed over’, who inform them of the impending trial, help them to understand that they’re dead, and help them accept this new reality.

In one of the anterooms appears Thomson. There, to his astonishment, he sees standing by a window his friend Jones, of whose death he had been informed only two days ago. “Jones, my dear fellow!” he says, “I was so worried! I was phoned with news of your heart attack, and the message I got was that the attack was fatal. I’m glad to see that that was somewhat of an exaggeration.”

After a pause, Jones replies: “I think you better sit down Thomson. Things may not be quite as you assume.” Once Thomson is comfortably seated, Jones resumes: “I know things are different from what I first thought when I woke up – in the very armchair in which you are currently sitting. I’ve been here two days now. At first, I thought I was recovering after another attack. I assumed this was a rehab unit I hadn’t seen before, since the view of the hills and fields beyond the window is completely unfamiliar, and that I had short-term memory loss. I began to suspect there was more to it when I didn’t seem to be getting hungry or thirsty. This extraordinary body doesn’t seem to need food or drink! Further still, I soon noticed that there was no toilet facility connected with this room. Now I know why. These bodies just don’t need them! Also, have you noticed that both your body and mine look like the ones we had twenty years ago?”

Thomson listens to Jones’ narration with increasing incredulity, albeit accompanied by a careful examination of his own body. Then he gets up, goes to the window and looks through it at the countryside. It resembles the area near Ambleside in the Lake District, which he knows well; but it’s definitely not the Lake District. He looks down again at his body, then bends his knees and stretches his muscles. Visibly trembling, he says: “Are you trying to tell me what I think you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yes. We’re both dead! My heart attack was fatal. I began to suspect that I must be dead a few hours after I woke up here. I was getting worried because there didn’t appear to be a door into the room. In fact I was beginning to wonder if I was in a
kind of Hell – a sort of solitary version of Sartre’s play. But then a door opened – it’s over there, cleverly hidden behind the bookcase, although it only opens from the outside. Peterson came in – you remember James Peterson, Head of Biology, who died four years ago? He explained things to me.”

“Hold it, hold it! Are you forgetting all the things we agreed about – all the results of hard logic? Don’t tell me you’ve got religion in your old age and gone soft in the head? Have you started to believe in God?”

“No, no. Keep your hair on. I’m still perfectly rational. There is no God – we still agree about that – although I still prefer to say He doesn’t exist than to say that the question of His existence is like asking if a square circle exists. But I have to admit that we were wrong about one thing. Physical death does not seem to be the end of personal existence. Here I am, and, so far as I can tell, here you are, and we’re both dead; or perhaps I should say, we’re both alive!”

“I’m glad you’ve not altogether lost control of you senses; but still…” Thomson walks from the window and sits down again. He thinks hard for two minutes before speaking again.

“You say we were wrong, or are wrong, because physical death is not the end of personal existence – you say. But even if I do allow that this is an afterlife” – he winces as he remembers an image of a fast-approaching tree – “what makes you so sure that you are the same person who was alive and well on planet Earth two days ago?”

“Perhaps not well; but alive, anyway…”

“Hmph! And what makes you so sure that I am the person you knew as Thomson; or come to that – that the presence you described as Peterson was really Peterson? To start with, our bodies are not the same as they were. And even if they did look and feel exactly the same, they can’t really be the same bodies, with the same atoms and the same continuity in time and space.”

“But just look here, Thomson. Here we are, with similar – though different – bodies, and with the same memories, and, so far as I can judge, the same characters – even if we are evidently in an altogether different space.”

“My dear Jones, you’re letting emotion run away, and forgetting logic. You are not Jones and I am not Thomson. We just cannot be, because it makes no sense to identify whatever these entities are that now appear to be speaking, with the bodies that were known as Jones and Thomson. There are in fact two logical possibilities that explain what’s going on, and neither of them entails personal survival after death. The first is that one of us is hallucinating; or perhaps both of us are. We are still within our old bodies – or rather, we still are our old bodies – but, perhaps while lying in comas, one or both of us is or are having a strange experience, like that near death experience you had two years ago – an experience that is powerful but illusory, and purely physiologically-based. The second possibility is that we are two new entities, produced by some advanced technology that we do not yet understand, and that these entities have been given, by some unknown means, the content of the memories of the bodies of those known as Jones and Thomson. These advanced powers might have been able to get the bodies of those two extinct persons, collect their DNA to clone them, and somehow – though I admit I do not know exactly how – scan their dead brains so that all their memories and dispositions were preserved in digital format and transferred into these new bodies. In that case we have been ‘replicated’ – perhaps thousands of years after Jones and Thomson died. The same could apply to Peterson, if the entity you encountered really did have his memories. In short, the most probable explanation of what is now happening is that we are replicas. I must admit that this is very surprising – but there is no reason to think we actually are the original Jones and Thomson in some kind of afterlife.”

“But if we have the same memories and the same characters as Jones and Thomson, then what is the difference between what you’re saying has happened and having an afterlife? Aren’t you guilty of making the old mistake of suggesting a distinction without a difference? Wasn’t it Locke who said that being the same person was a matter of having the same memories?”

“Well here’s one difference for starters: there could be lots of identical replicas – identical at least until they have a life and a history unique to them. Don’t you remember, this is something that Parfit used to write about? So if there are lots of, let us say, ‘us’, you can’t say any one of us is the real Jones or Thompson.”

“I must admit that that is a difficulty. But perhaps I am the only ‘replica’; and perhaps I have a special kind of continuity – maybe because of a relationship to someone who has known me both as the earthly Jones and as, shall I say, the ‘new’ Jones?”

“Ah, but now it seems to me that if you’re going to allow talk of a being who knows both the original Jones and his replica, and treats them as moral equivalents, then you’re getting back to the idea of God. It reminds me of the weird view of that Professor of Divinity we both liked – until she got onto the subject of religion. If you remember, she insisted that the concepts of God and personal immortality were inseparably linked, because without a God there would be no ground for belief in the real identity of a person from one life to another. In a way I agree with her – I mean in the link between the ideas. But you see where that leads us, as a matter of logic? Since we both know there is no God, we must conclude that there logically cannot be an afterlife. Unless you bring back the Platonic idea of an immortal soul, with all the problems that form of dualism involves, only a divine being could guarantee the common identity of the original and the replica. So the result is obvious. Because there is no God, and because the idea of a soul is unacceptable, what we’re experiencing now are the experiences of completely new entities, in new bodies, not the experiences of the original Jones or Thomson.”

‘Jones’ looks puzzled. He’s thinking, ‘If Thomson was wrong about an afterlife, could he also have been wrong about God? But perhaps he’s right: there is no God, and, at least partly for that reason, there is no hereafter – in which case I must not say ‘Thomson’, but ‘the Thomson replica’; and what I now experience is not the experience of Jones.’ He finds this thought deeply troubling, and replies, “It really does seem to matter whether this is or isn’t me! For starters, if I am to face some kind of examination of my life, it’s hard to know what kind of defence to make until the issue is clarified.”

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