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Philosophy: What Are We Really Doing?

Utopia
Humanism
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Desire
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Kafka
Manifesto on Health

Issue 21 | January 2025
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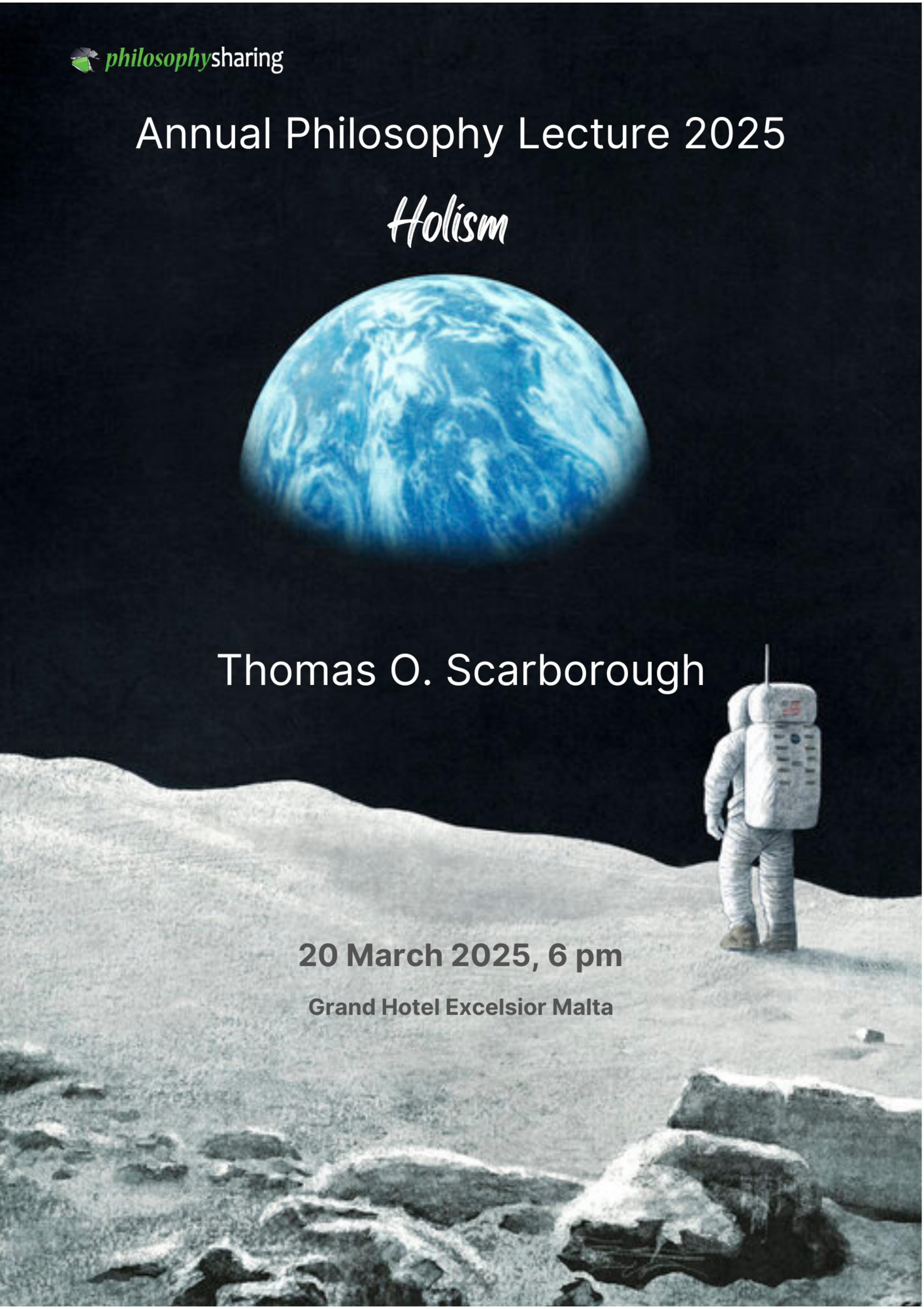

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Annual Philosophy Lecture 2025

Holism

Thomas O. Scarborough

20 March 2025, 6 pm

Grand Hotel Excelsior Malta

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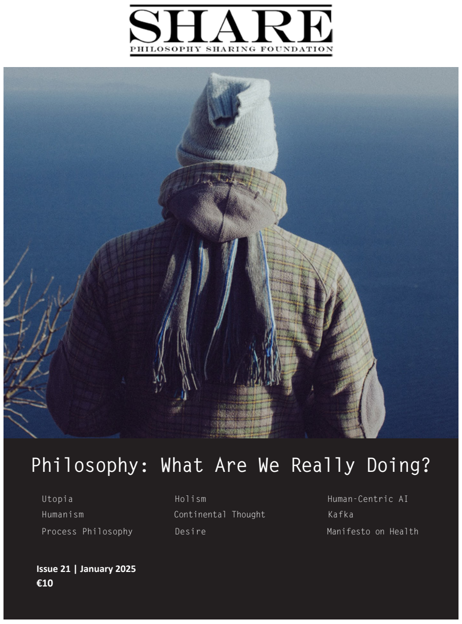
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4 **Editorial**

6 **What Are We Doing When We Do Philosophy?**
Stephen G. O'Kane

9 **Island Utopia**
Kathrin Schödel

12 **The Future of the Humanist Movement in Malta**
Christian Colombo

16 **Finally, Process?**
David Bevan

20 **An Interview with Thomas O. Scarborough on Holism**
by Ian Rizzo

23 **Etienne de la Boétie's Mark on Continental Thought**
Karl Baldacchino

26 **The Desiring Self**
Inger Cini

29 **Dusk Dialogues**
Ian Gauci and Gordon J. Pace

32 **An Interview with Kenneth Wain**
by Kurt Borg

36 **This Town: A Complete Metaphysics by Thomas O. Scarborough**
reviewed by Valderi Pereira

38 **Memento Mori**
Mike Lewis-Beck

39 **Philosophical Manifesto – On Health (Part 6)**
drafted by Ian Rizzo

Editorial

SHARE 21 opens with ***Stephen G. O'Kane's*** article posing a critical question: *what are we doing when we do philosophy?* O' Kane explores various perspectives such as thinking for oneself, forming systematic world views, engaging in rational inquiry and studying fundamental principles. Philosophy involves questioning and interpreting the world, highlighting wisdom as both knowledge and application to living. Philosophy reminds us of the severe limitations of conventional wisdom and the need for philosophers to challenge orthodoxy and uncover misconceptions.

Kathrin Schödel, in her article on *Island Utopia*, challenges orthodoxy by presenting utopianism as a hopeful alternative to the entrenched status quo of capitalist realism. With reference to various works on utopia, she highlights how utopian ideas can inspire better visions for socio-political systems.

In our third article on the humanist movement in Malta, ***Christian Colombo*** explains how he enhanced his understanding of humanism through philosophical inquiry since joining the Movement's Committee in 2017. As the leader of the Humanist Movement, he argues for a broader focus on ethical questions, inclusivity, and contemporary issues that move beyond anti-religious sentiments to foster a more inclusive dialogue on human flourishing.

In a similar vein, ***David Bevan*** explains how Process philosophy, drawing from Heraclitus's idea that 'everything flows', rejects finality and embraces continuous change and becoming. Influenced by thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, James, and Whitehead, Process philosophy focuses on movement and emergence without expectation of an end point. This perspective aligns with pre-Socratic materialism and challenges the finality of traditional ontological approaches, emphasising an ongoing, dynamic understanding of existence.

SHARE 21 features an interview by *Ian Rizzo* with ***Thomas O. Scarborough***, a philosopher from South Africa who will address the Annual Philosophy Lecture in March 2025 on the theme of holism. Scarborough's philosophy on holism distinguishes between the 'finite whole', defined by its parts, and the 'nameless whole', encompassing everything beyond named and defined parts. He argues that recognizing the limitations of ‘finite wholes’, can lead to better solutions to contemporary problems by broadening understanding and applying more open-minded methods for problem solving. His latest publication *This Town: A Complete Metaphysics* is reviewed by ***Valdeli Pereira*** who commends Scarborough’s ability to make metaphysical concepts and philosophical issues more graspable through vivid storytelling and a trialogue format.

Karl Baldacchino explores the French philosopher Étienne de la Boétie, a 16th century political thinker who was a close friend of Michel de Montaigne. Although not as renowned as Montaigne, Boétie shaped Continental philosophy’s discourse on power and freedom through his critical analysis of why people willingly submit to tyrannical power. Boétie’s ideas on conformity and the power of societal structures to maintain obedience are echoed in the works of subsequent philosophers such as Spinoza and Foucault, aligning with the philosophical pursuit of understanding reality, ethics, and the human condition.

In her essay on *The Desiring Self*, ***Inger Cini*** explores various perspectives on desire, considering it as both a lack and a resource. Integrating psychology and philosophy, Cini encourages readers to understand how desire can shape self-knowledge and productivity, leading to deeper self-understanding and challenging established norms.

In their article *Dusk Dialogues*, contributors ***Ian Gauci*** and ***Gordon J. Pace*** create an imaginative setting in Athens where six of history’s greatest thinkers — Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Albert Camus and Nick Bostrom — gather for a lively discussion on human-centric AI. Throughout their discussion, they are tended to by a witty young waiter who recently quit his software developer job and interjects with practical criticisms, challenging the philosophers to offer concrete, actionable advice rather than abstract theories. This creative dialogue highlights the ongoing struggle to define and live out human-centric ideals in the face of advancing technology.

In the interview conducted by ***Kurt Borg*** with philosopher ***Kenneth Wain***, readers are encouraged to explore Wain’s recent novel *K: The Letter Writer (Book One: Felice)*. The interview highlights how Wain’s work is an additional contribution to the vast body of literature on Kafka while offering a fresh and imaginative perspective on a literary giant.

We have also included in this issue a poem by ***Mike Lewis-Beck***, which urges a constant awareness of mortality to enhance one’s appreciation for life. While the poet acknowledges the loss of sensory experiences after death, he highlights his efforts to live fully and to embrace daily routines, social interactions, and personal expressions of love and creativity.

All these articles tie back to the question: what are we doing when we engage in philosophy? By exploring a wide range of subjects- such as utopia, humanism, process philosophy, holism, continental thought, desire, human-centric AI, Kafka, metaphysics and mortality, SHARE 21 revisits the essential functions of philosophy – to question, to gain knowledge, to apply wisdom to living and to challenge orthodoxy.

The philosophical manifesto drafted by ***Ian Rizzo*** continues from the past series, this time discussing health as a crucial necessity for the fulfilment of our lives. Viewing health as an integration of physical, mental, and social well-being, the manifesto challenges us to consider our individual and collective responsibilities in maintaining health. When we engage in philosophy, we actively question and redefine our understanding of essential human conditions to better navigate and improve our existence. The manifesto concludes with an important question for humanity – as we continue to improve healthcare with exponential advances in technology and AI, will humanity become immortal one day and play God in nature? Or should we recognize the inevitability of ageing and death? Philosophy remains essential in safeguarding what makes us truly human.

What Are We Doing When We Do Philosophy?

By Stephen G. O’Kane

Although the above question is not precisely the same as simply ‘What is philosophy?’, any answer will reflect on the nature of philosophy itself. A simple internet search is enough to uncover an interesting list of possible answers:

1. Thinking for yourself (Andre Comte-Sponville).
2. Wonder (Andrea Borghini) – makes reference to Plato, Aristotle, and the Tao Te Ching.
3. Forming a systematic worldview (early rationalism, Hegel, Marx).
4. Rational/critical inquiry reflecting on one’s own assumptions (Wikipedia).
5. A way of thinking about some subjects: thought, existence, time, meaning, and value (Philosophy Foundation).

6. The philosopher’s job is to discover a logically ideal language (Russell)
7. Study of the reasons for things (Wikipedia again).

These answers appear to boil down to two broad views of the philosopher’s task: (a) questioning and/or critical thinking and inquiry, and (b) systematically interpreting the world, which can be either theological or secular. In some ways early philosophy from the Greeks (and Eastern thought) to medieval times emerges as a blend of these, as does Russell’s statement. A clue can also be drawn from linguistic usage. We have various examples of ‘philosophy of …’ but do not speak of ‘… of philosophy’. When considering specific cases like philosophy of science, language, aesthetics, religion, time, and so on we find thinking about the fundamental principles or characteristics of the subject concerned. Broadly this amounts to considering what is most *basic* about the various aspects of what we think and do.

Now, all this leaves a dimension not explicitly mentioned in any of the answers given above, although it may be implicit in all of them. If we introduce the point that the word ‘philosophy’ is derived from the Greek ‘love of wisdom’, then we find the question whether philosophers do seek wisdom. Comte-Sponville (2005) explains that an etymology (*sophia* in Greek, *sapientia* in Latin) identifies wisdom with knowledge, but that the philosophers have typically identified wisdom with thought, knowledge, and learning not just about specific subjects, but about living. That is, living in the world we know, not a utopia.

That gives wisdom a holistic character, suggesting a connection with applications of knowledge as well as knowledge as such, and not dependent on particular areas of knowledge. Like many concepts in philosophy, it may be useful to think of wisdom in relation to its negation, i.e., folly or stupidity, which differs markedly from the negation of knowledge, i.e., ignorance – with falsehood as the negation of truth. Foolishness need not imply ignorance, although it will sometimes connect with self-deception, but it does imply inability to use whatever knowledge a person may have.

It would be tempting, bearing in mind the challenge to think about the basic principles behind any activity, again a holistic consideration, to follow Labouvie-Vief’s (1990) attempt to characterise wisdom as integrating the two modes of thinking denoted by the Greek terms *mythos* and *logos*. The problem with that, not least in a 21st century context, is that the very close identification between self and object of thought in mythos thinking leading to an integrated narrative experience lends itself to the dogmatism and intolerance frequent in ‘identity politics’ or nationalist and religious extremism. If it is to be part of what is usually understood by ‘wisdom’, mythos thinking needs at the least to be tempered with a self-critical attitude also characteristic of logos thinking alongside its features of analysis and precision of meaning. That is to say, logos thinking needs to be a part of what is understood as a ‘wise person’ as well as that person’s ability to work out solutions to problems.

How well wisdom bears on what anyone is doing when doing philosophy may not depend on the divergence in the views of philosophers themselves about whether wisdom is a skill which can be developed by training, as Plato and the Stoics believed, or whether it does not depend on education and can be found amongst people ignorant in terms of formal knowledge and training, as Montaigne held. Again, the negative is useful in showing that lack of wisdom is likely to connect, not so much with past training and education as such but with the inability to learn, not least learn from one’s mistakes. Indeed, Kant’s (1881 [1781]) claim that ‘it is a great and necessary proof of wisdom and sagacity to know what questions may reasonably be asked’ again places the focus on readiness to find out and learn rather than simply knowing (it also relates to some of the answers to the question at the beginning).

Strangely, a further guide as to the role wisdom can play appears with a recent popular usage seemingly far removed from philosophy in any sense. That is the downright ironic notion of ‘conventional wisdom’ which implies a lazily accepted orthodoxy which is probably erroneous. Accepting *conventional* wisdom is not only contrary to the popular usages above, it also flies in the face of philosophical understanding. The answers to the first question here all indicate refusal to accept conventional wisdom (even forming a systematic worldview meant working out that view, not blindly following it from others).

The theme of avoiding conventional (shallow if not actually false) wisdom is illuminating in regard to the paths many recent philosophers have taken. Instead of pursuing wisdom in a holistic sense, they have been more inclined to restrict themselves to more limited ambitions, but ones that connect to challenging orthodox thinking or uncovering misconceptions. That has been so in varying ways. The analytic schools’ focus on logic and the nature of meaning would indicate that the prime task of the philosopher is to *secure* (rather than seek) truth, and to show how it is preserved from 'bewitchment' by language in Wittgenstein's expression. Despite the supposed contrast with 'continental' philosophy, an aim of clearing people's (not just philosophers') thinking often emerges there too in different ways; including Derrida's project of deconstruction of texts to reveal hidden possible meanings which otherwise go unnoticed, Heidegger's etymology, or use of psychoanalysis. But with existentialism and perhaps the Frankfurt school, a central theme is how to cope in a world with conflicting values, with reason – rationality in modern usage – ineffectual for resolving the conflicts. None of these thinkers expected to be able to find the serenity usually associated with wisdom. Again, none attempted to frame a systematic worldview, or even felt it possible to do so. (The Marxists would be nearest to making an exception to that). Yet the aspect of asking questions, opening the mind, and avoiding foolishness – the opposite of wisdom – is strongly present in all cases.

Despite the efforts of some Aristotelian or Stoic revivalists, including amongst advocates of virtue ethics, what is thought of as the other part of wisdom, i.e., the art of living, still does not feature much in the sense of specific recommendations in the work of philosophers, but is rather to be sought elsewhere. Occasionally in emergencies like war or the Covid pandemic, governments are found to act in a Schmitt-style 'state of exception' and direct people's lives with measures like rationing, military conscription or restrictions on social activities. But in more normal circumstances, specific practical advice on how to live finds its way into the realm of health advice rather than philosophy as such. Such includes the literature on 'mind, body, spirit' as a guide for mental health and coping with stress in the modern world. More than any of the themes in philosophy mentioned above, this draws on Eastern traditions whilst adapting them for incorporation into any culture. It is here, with practices like meditation and yoga, that peace and personal stability is sought. Yet the thinking behind both the practices themselves and the spiritual ideas, such as Buddhist enlightenment, which inspired them, remains something already developed by past philosophers (or religious teachers, as in the Eastern contexts there is no sharp boundary between the concept of a philosopher, and of a religious teacher or theologian). Accordingly, there is little scope here for contemporary philosophers, and in professional terms guidance for anyone anxious to improve their health and quality of life, physical as well as mental, is seen as a task for therapists and doctors rather than philosophers.

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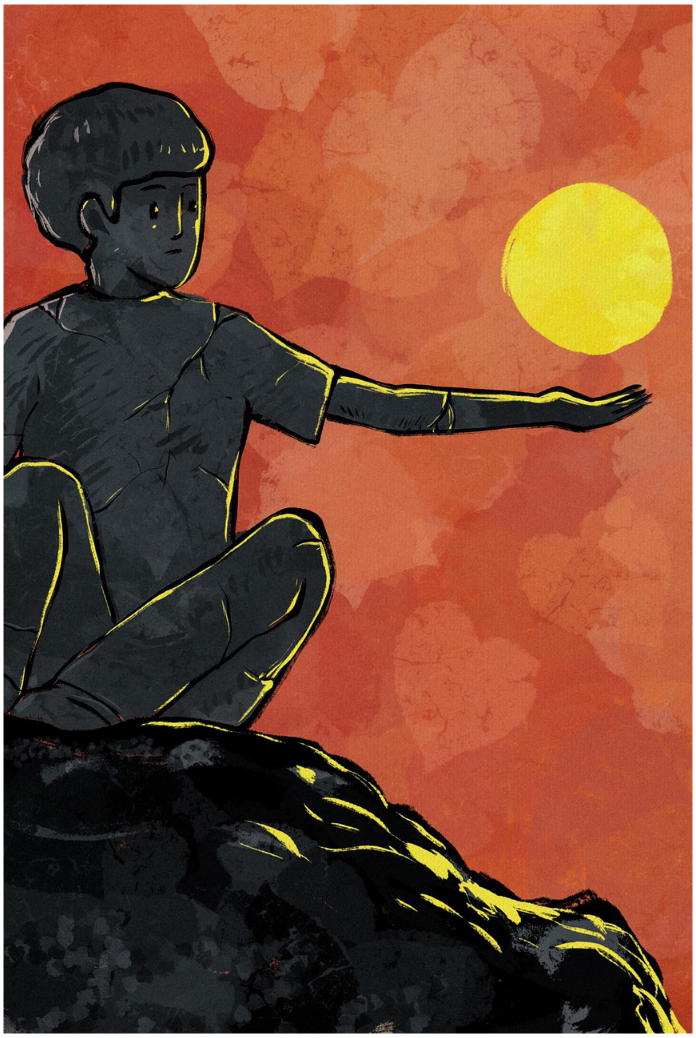
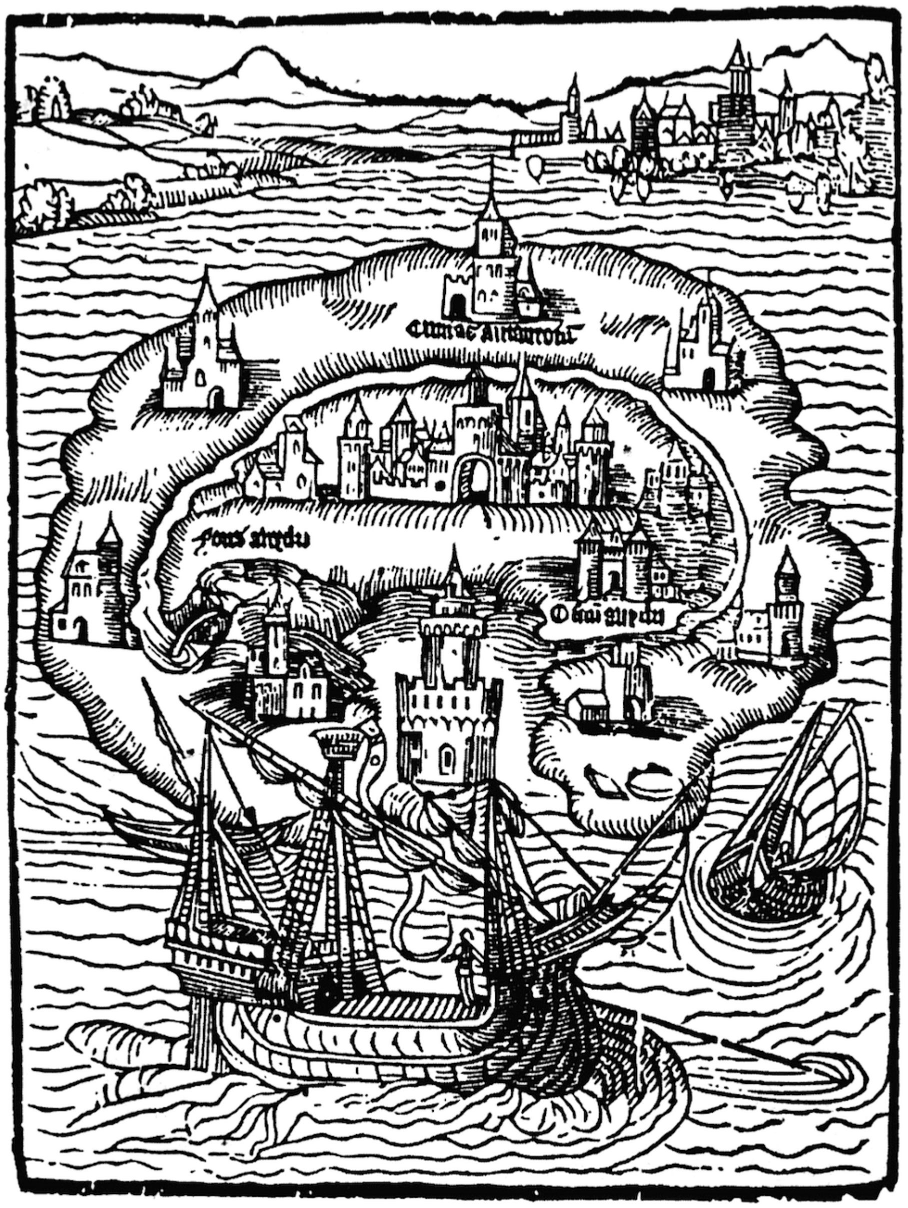


Stephen G. O'Kane completed his PhD in Political theory at LSE in 1979 and continues writing and research on an independent basis owing to health difficulties and autism. He maintains a website (moralphilosophy.co.uk) which includes essays, short comments, and a blog, as well as brief notes about his two books – Politics and Morality under Conflict (1994) and Ethics and Radical Freedom (2004).

Island Utopia

By Kathrin Schödel



When we hear the word utopia or, even more so, the adjective utopian, we are likely to have negative associations. Most dictionaries confirm that ‘utopian’ is used in a depreciative sense: “impossibly” or “impractically ideal” (*Merriam-Webster* 2024). However, the meaning and the connotations of the word, that is, the associations and implicit evaluation connected to it, are not fully fixed. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, for example, that utopian is “[n]ow also [used] in neutral or positive sense” (2023). This indication of time points to the question of the historicity of meaning and of utopia: despite seeming like a timeless ideal removed from history, utopia, too, changes with time, and it is possible to reclaim the word ‘utopian’ from its negative associations.

Speaking about utopia, however, still often appears as almost embarrassing: utopian ideas seem *excessive* or *naive* or even tending towards their opposite, *dystopia*, *totalitarianism*. Realism and to be realistic is often invoked as the opposite of utopianism. But is this such a clear opposition? If we look at reality today, at the political economy and social realities of capitalism, *excessive* can be seen as one of its main characteristics, excessive in its use and exploitation of resources, of nature, non-human and human. Could it also be *naive* to be pragmatically realistic? Realistic scenarios for the future have to be derived from what is already present today: the climate crisis, increased risk of pandemics and wars over dwindling resources, increased pressure because of land becoming uninhabitable and barren... In view of such realities, to think that it is politically realistic that things can go on as they are and that pragmatic solutions will be found within the existing framework, is, indeed, itself naive. It is obvious that climate crisis causes drastic changes for which there are no realistic answers as yet. So, one can say that realism today is either naive, or it means to accept *dystopic* scenarios of scarcity, conflict and suffering. Finally, to insist that pragmatic realism, understood in opposition to ideas of radical change, is the only rational worldview, is itself a *totalitarian* attitude, it sets the status quo as an absolute. Rather than utopia being an absolute ideal, the real appears absolute in such a perspective. Realism in this sense tends to be economic realism within the existing set-up, ‘capitalist realism’, as cultural theorist Mark Fisher has called it (2009). Therefore, it is not – as the word realism may suggest –

a neutral orientation towards reality, but an ideological framework, blocking other perspectives.

Can utopia be a perspective on reality, or a “form of knowledge about possible futures”, as Ruth Levitas writes in *Utopia as Method* (2013, p. XV)? Let’s start with the beginning of the word ‘utopia’. Thomas More’s invention of *Utopia* (1516) has profoundly influenced the notion of imagining better political systems until today, especially through the coinage of ‘utopia’ and through placing utopia on an island. More created the name for his imagined place from Greek *ού* and *τόπος*, which means *no place* or *non-place*. The word can also be interpreted as a pun with Greek *εὖ τόπος*, the good place. The name emphasises the fictional status of this good place – even though it is described as a real place by More’s narrator, who travelled to utopia... The name itself echoes this tension between the concrete reality of a place, *topos*, and its negation, *ou topos*. Utopia is fictional, but it is a concrete fiction, the fiction of a non-existent society which could exist, which might be placed somewhere instead of nowhere.

Ernst Bloch’s concept of ‘concrete utopia’ (1959, p. 258) makes this explicit; utopia is the concrete imagination of a better socio-political world, not a dreamlike paradise or magical Land of Cockaigne, but a world which functions according to the rules of possibility. The predominant negative view of utopia as impractical, in contrast, focuses on its irreality, its removal from existing places and historical time. This critique is often linked to the imaginary of utopia as an island. The island as a separate sphere where an autonomous, favourable order can be maintained only through a (seeming) removal from the uncontrollable world at large is a compelling and popular image. It corresponds to a predominant conception of islands as self-enclosed spaces in the Western cultural imaginary. This is also linked to negative views of utopia: the perfect place detached from the rest of the world and hence unattainable, an enclosed space of a totalising ideal, imagined, as indeed islands often tend to be, as removed not only in space but also in time, an unchangeable and ahistorical ideal. Island utopia, thus, appears as disconnected from the developments of history and the complexities of the socio-political world. Yet, a famous early illustration of *Utopia* (see image on p. 9) already suggests a different reading of island utopia: the ships in the foreground emphasise the connectivity of the sea, the settlement on the shore in the background shows the proximity of utopia to other countries. Island utopia can thus be seen as both separated from and linked to the outside world; it is characterised as much by openness and connection with its surrounding waters as by enclosure, as, indeed, islands usually are.

More’s Utopia is not a natural, but an artificial island, not only on the level of being a fictional invention, but also within the narrative: utopia is separated from the mainland through a political decision and through human labour (2016, p. 72f.).[1] This double artificiality of the human-made fictional island is significant because it highlights the creative act of utopia. Utopian thought stands for imaginative, experimental ideas. And more generally, utopian drafts of alternative socio-political worlds highlight the fact that human history is human-made – in the interaction between humans and non-human nature and between interests, forces, ideas, desires, practices and material conditions. Like the creation of an island from a peninsula, human activities shape landscapes and places – for better and for worse; in dialectical processes and struggles for power and hegemony, they make history, societies and politics.

However, this is not always recognised: the social world tends to be experienced as one of necessities; even when conditions are human-made, consequences appear as inevitable, and social realities are habitually referred to as ‘natural’ and ineluctable. In this way, for example, economic crises are often framed like natural catastrophes, not as the results of a specific economic system which could be changed, but as an inevitable consequence of the human condition. Similarly, poverty, for example, often appears as a natural given that can be *fought*, but not as something that has been *caused* in the first place. The proverbial ‘widening gap between rich and poor’ is pertinent here when being construed as a self-propelling phenomenon. Indeed, within capitalism the tendency towards increasing inequalities is structural, but this connection to a specific political economy is rarely emphasised; in contrast, the ‘widening gap’ and its resulting social consequences appear as necessities which need to be controlled but not as avoidable in the first place. This is ‘capitalist realism’: the inability to reach beyond capitalist conditions, even in critical analyses, let alone in visions for the future or practices for change.

Utopian thought, in contrast, insists that we can imagine otherwise, and that through political decisions and human labour in the broadest sense we can create different conditions for our societies and hence radically

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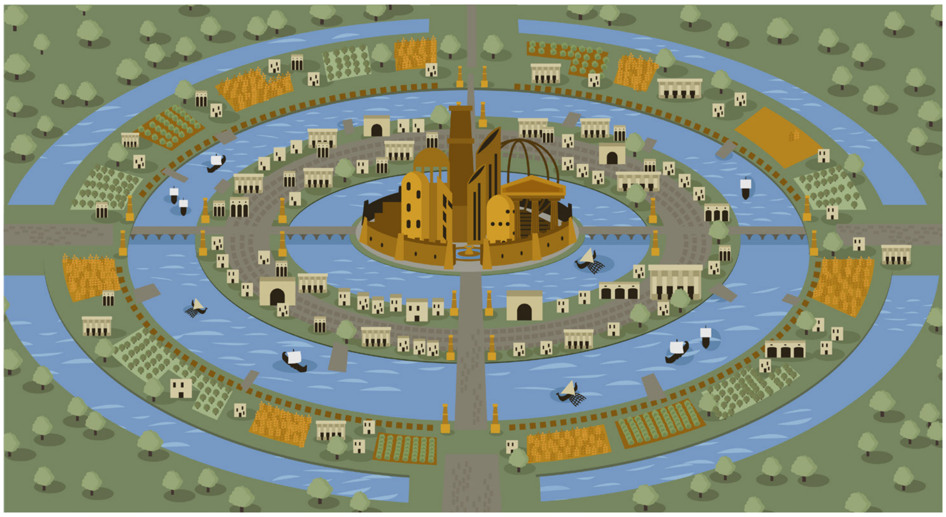
[1] For a critical discussion of this passage cf. Miéville, Introduction in: More 2016, p. 7f.



different social worlds, which seem utopian only as long as the perspective of the established status quo is set as absolute. Like More's artificial island, social conditions are human-made and therefore open to change and planned improvement. Of course, there will be unplanned effects, and complexities which cannot – and need not – be fully governed by conscious design. But the idea of change for the better itself is at the core of human culture: the basic idea that humankind can make things, including political institutions and social conditions, for its own benefit. An emancipatory tradition of utopian thought emphasises that *everyone* could be included in this benefit. From this perspective, a better social world designed for the few, for an elitist withdrawal from the rest of the world – an enclosed island utopia shutting itself off from its surrounding waters – is a dystopian inversion of the utopian impulse. Abandoning utopia or reserving it for select groups means to abandon the idea of a good life for humankind. As Oscar Wilde famously put it:

> *A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. (1900)*

Wilde both insists on the importance of utopia and on the importance of its constant remaking. U-topia always remains the 'no place' in relation to each 'place' – it remains the vantage point of a critical perspective on any status quo achieved. Despite its island setting, utopia carries the notion of a better world for all and made by all in a constant process of exchange, creation and critique. Utopian thought reminds us that there can be conscious, radical change: a departure from the established 'continent' of socio-political conditions towards new ones, an exploration of utopian islands – near and far, but not invisible or unreachable from where we are, yet beyond the horizon of 'capitalist realism' and its powerful bastions.

This article is an adaptation of the first part of my talk "Utopia Today. Towards Utopian Practices" given on 16th January 2023 to the Philosophy Sharing Foundation, University of Malta, Valletta Campus. Online: https://www.philosophysharing.org/videos.

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The Future of the Humanist Movement in Malta

by Christian Colombo

Context

Following several years of doubts, I still remember the early days when I had decided to move away from religion in 2007. The change was slow and deep-seated elements of religious faith such as the belief that 'everything happens for a reason' took much longer than I realised to shake off. This shift was like an earthquake for me, which left me feeling lost and isolated for a number of years: from someone who publicly dedicated his life completely to religion, to someone who had to make sense of life afresh in a world which seemed alien.

In 2010, it was a relief to learn that in Malta a new group, calling themselves Humanists, was forming. Their position seemed to make sense, they based their decisions on logic, reason, and compassion. Coming from the area of computing (where I taught computer logic amongst other mathematical subjects), it felt like a perfectly sensible life stance which I could adopt for myself. I followed the developments with interest through social media. In a few months, hundreds of Maltese non-believers had joined the newly formed Facebook group. At the time, there was not much of a distinction between atheists and humanists but lots of important exchanges were taking place through long discussions spanning hundreds of comments.

This short run-through of my experience would not be complete without also mentioning that initially I did not feel comfortable within the Humanist community. It felt like you needed to be careful what to say on the social media community group as the feedback you would get could be quite 'harsh'. Perhaps I am a little too soft but in time I came to know several others who were driven away by the group atmosphere. To be fair, most comments would definitely fall within the bounds of discussion or fair criticism but it required some getting used to. Moreover, there was a strong anticlerical sentiment which manifested itself in frequent posts making fun of religion. The context is that this was the first time non-religious people could meet each other in Malta on a large scale and vent off years of frustration and mistreatment by the mostly religiously influenced society. Yet, this was another reason that 'moderates' like me did not feel quite at home in the community that was forming.

What got me to take the plunge and join the Humanist community more closely were the celebrations. These acknowledge the human need for ritual and meaning making, something which was sorely missing for the local non-religious community. So, in 2015 I became one of the first group of celebrants of the then Malta Humanist Association.

By now, almost 10 years later, we have had hundreds of happy clients while proving to be a highly enriching experience for us as celebrants.

When in 2017, the association lost its co-founder and president, Ramon Casha, I decided to join the committee which at that point was desperate to fill the great gaps that had formed. A year later I was appearing on radio and TV shows to talk about Humanism. However, I soon realised that my knowledge of Humanism, its history and its underlying convictions was quite thin; I could talk about reason, science, and compassion, I could talk about our position on particular issues, but if you kept asking me "why?", I soon realised that I could not answer properly.

Questions about the origin of Humanism led me to delve deeply into philosophy - something which I had never done before: First I got really hooked onto existentialism, then poststructuralism, postmodernism and posthumanism! It was (and still is) quite a lot to take in! I felt earthquakes similar to the early days of questioning religion under my feet, each time losing more and more any hope of finding some solid foundation. However, through this journey I was finally encountering several others with similar values-including believers - with whom I felt comfortable exploring important existential questions. This is when several projects to facilitate dialogue were born, using tools such as theatre and experiential sharing to explore multifaceted topics (like resilience, AI, faith, values, terminal illness) amongst various target audiences, from 14-years-olds at school to audiences which could only be reached through radio.

This has been a truly exciting journey and I feel it is a good time to take stock and understand what can be learned for the future. In what follows, I will try to reflect on my experience and where it leaves the local Humanist movement.

Conviction is not exclusively the domain of religions

As much as I would have loved to find some kind of scientific and purely logical, self-evident, universal and eternal ethics, this just does not seem to be plausible. While the Enlightenment era did well to emphasise the importance of reason to drive away superstition, deifying reason comes with its own problems. If we look closely enough, we realise that we do not agree on the definitions and the axioms, if anything because of language and cultural differences. Therefore, while reason is crucial for any sound deduction, the conclusions cannot prove things universally one way or another.

Many other movements have tried to claim reasonableness, as happens through political ideologies which seem sensible to its adherents. Sadly, we all know how many lives have been rendered miserable or lost altogether because of the conclusions people reach.

As Humanists we cannot escape this either; as much as we would like to present our principles as the most 'natural', self-evident ones, philosophical tradition has shown that there is simply no basis for this. Of course, it is positive to try to spread an ethic based on tolerance and compassion, but this is more of a conviction rather than something that every reasonable person should automatically agree to (unless they are stupid).

Losing your 'faith' is not a one-time event

Being open to new ideas which challenge our own, is a life-long process. The more we can be aware that culture and religion are ultimately both ways of dealing with our mortality, the more we can see through our "illusions"[1]. Of course, not all illusions are made equal; illusions which cause people to hinder others' flourishing are dangerous.

While we may be tempted to opt for simple and elegant definitions and explanations, reality has repeatedly refused to be so. Even in areas such as mathematics and computing, we constantly hit paradoxes and limitations in our quest for understanding. While trying to expand our knowledge is certainly commendable, this needs to be done in a humble spirit, open for the next revolution[2].

Humanism needs to adapt

Since the early days of 2010, several battles have been won for Malta from a rights perspective, including divorce and same-sex marriages. Still, a number of rights still seem somewhat far away, particularly those related to bodily autonomy: assisted dying and abortion. Therefore, activism remains an important aspect of what we do. Yet it feels hard to find volunteers interested in joining and contributing to an association with such an open-ended mission. Most activists seem to prefer to join an NGO which focuses on their favourite topic, be it environment, abortion, etc. The idea of fighting 'against religion' which had brought most of the community together feels almost alien to the upcoming generation - religion is mostly a non-issue for them. Topics which used to garner lots of interest and input in the early days of social media, have by now been exhausted and our page posts now barely make it through to its intended audience as they drown in the recommendation algorithm's priorities. Still, there are several aspects of religion in Malta which put into question its secular credentials; perhaps the most notable ones being our constitution and from a more practical perspective, sex education in schools.

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[1] Becker, E. (1975). *The denial of death* (p. 188). New York, NY: Free Press.

[2] Kuhn, T. S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

In view of all the above, the role of Humanism as a bastion of reason against the superstitions of religion is not appealing to the upcoming generations who mostly do not care about religion anyway. The 'death of God' is no longer news and most people of good will have realised that the real divide is not between the religious and irreligious but the ethical and unethical. Along the same lines, we need to put into practice the realisation that humanity is not the centre of the universe.

The following are some of the questions that we could consider going forward:

- Can we present a less abstract Humanism which could be easier for a wider audience to digest?
- Could we base our convictions on more solid ground beyond simply an appeal to 'reason'?
- In what ways do we need to rephrase our positions to:
    - Acknowledge that the human being is far from simply an autonomous rational individual but rather also a product of their culture, experience, perception of reality, i.e., there are many issues on which reasonable minds may reasonably disagree (abortion, euthanasia, even multiculturalism).
    - Be non-human-centric and stop seeing the distinction between the human and 'the environment'.
    - Handle more complexity as new and smarter technologies are developed.
- Could we do more to foster a sense of commitment such that enough energy is invested into the Humanist movement to remain alive?
- Under what banner could we clearly bring together all that we do?
- Is the Humanist view about our innate morality over-optimistic? How far can we rely on this to ensure other living beings and the environment are cared for responsibly?

Without growth and adaptation, Humanism could end up mostly relevant in countries where religion is still strong and slowly dying out elsewhere, perhaps remaining only for servicing life celebrations.

Some ideas for the future

The question that comes to mind at this point is: “Is it worth building on Humanism as a philosophy, or should we just scrap it and start all over?” By the measure of most contemporary philosophers, Humanism is outdated following a wave of antihumanism and a more recent posthumanism. Yet, with all the structures in place under the banner of Humanism, I do not see why these cannot adapt and grow to learn from all the lessons learned. After all, the definition of Humanism is very wide, and others have already explained how Humanism can indeed include its own criticism within it[3] and can be seen as a contextual intervention to improve the human condition in a particular moment in time[4]. The wide variety of ways (e.g., focus on education, ceremonies, advocacy; related to whether their main concern is religion, other ideologies, or meaning making) in which members of Humanist International operate in their home countries is a testament to this.

Repeatedly, I have found it hard to explain what the Humanist movement stands for to those who have no idea what it is. Traditionally, Humanism seems to have been understood as an ‘alternative to religion’ with the consequence that if religion means nothing, humanism suffers the same fate. Worse still, it can be thought of as something to cling onto and/or comfort oneself with. Humanism needs to be presented as an open-ended challenge along the lines of:

> “There are many ways in which human flourishing can be hindered, including religious or political ideologies (which by the way could be atheist), the way we organise ourselves socially and economically, the way we organise our digital world, the way we think about reality through our various blind spots. In an increasingly complex world, we need to continually ask ourselves: What does it mean to flourish as human beings? In what ways are we limiting ourselves? In what ways can we help ourselves thrive?
>
> Importantly, our flourishing is interlinked. We cannot think of human beings as some autonomous units within society. If individuals or segments of society are struggling, the rest are losing out on a richer and healthier environment conducive to maturity and growth. Without any God or universally agreed set of values to guide us, we need each other to create a fairer society through openness and exchange of ideas.”

From this angle - borrowing the banner of “Humanising Humanity” from Rorty’s ideas[5] - all our efforts, which could seem disparate, fall into place: our activism, our celebrations, our projects. This alignment could bring Humanism more in line with contemporary philosophy by acknowledging more complexity within the situatedness of human reality and its interaction with the rest of the natural as well as the human-created world. By going in this direction, we will also be moving away from the focus on secularism, making it more accessible to atheists with no history of religion.

The implications of adopting this focus may seem cosmetic at first glance but one thing we saw changing for us in Malta is that religion does not remain ‘the enemy’. In fact, our experience has shown that open-minded religious individuals and communities have welcomed our efforts and collaborated with us in a number of projects e.g., exploring existential questions within a Church school. When the aim is that of humanising humanity, questions like the existence of God become less central and instead the focus shifts to other dehumanising elements in contemporary culture such as unfair capitalism, extreme materialism, harmful use of technology, and so on.

Conclusion

If Humanism is to survive and thrive beyond religion, it has to define itself without any reference to religion and without the presumption of having some privileged set of universal values. By continually asking the important question of what it means to be human in particular contexts in time, Humanists can provide much needed space for dialogue, be a nuanced voice of reason, and strive through activism and provision of services to protect and cater for humanity’s humanity.

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[3] Said, E. W. (2004). *Humanism and democratic criticism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

[4] Higgins, C. (2014). *The humanist moment*. Asia Pacific Education Review, 15(1), 29-36.

[5] Višňovský, E. (2020). Rorty’s humanism. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*.

Finally, Process?

by David Bevan

Since at least the time of Zeno (490-430 BCE), the record of Western philosophy has seemed to favour a view of time with what Bergson named as a cinematographic tendency. This term suggests that one state of nature succeeds another discretely and finally, as in Zeno's logically framed race between Achilles and the tortoise. The otherwise uninterrupted flow of time is totalised through our senses into a series of still images that can transform into a realistic, flickering cartoon of experience. Set against these hylomorphic attempts on finality, Process offers a philosophical disposition rather than a single, discreet model or theory. It is based on ideas like 'everything flows' emerging from Heraclitus, and taken up by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, William James and Alfred North Whitehead (among many others). Process proceeds – literally, moving towards and away – through a Heideggerian mode of 'way-finding' (Heidegger, 1953 (1977)), emerging into the unknowable without either expectation or any need to arrive at any final point.

Between the early, materialistic science of Heraclitus and Epicurus and now, there has been what Marx categorised as an "interdict" in his doctoral treatise at the University of Berlin (Marx, 1841: Foreword). This extensive and effective period of interdiction lasted for about 1,500 years, from the time of Cicero in conspiracy with Plutarch (between 50 BCE and 150 CE) to the finality of Immanuel Kant. Its project was to prefer the final vocabulary potential for rhetoric, politics and literature of Socrates, and to suppress the simple pre-Socratics along with the later Epicurus and his entourage. The following necessarily brief account draws on a general understanding of the history of philosophy with key appropriations from literature (Lucretius, circa 55BCE (1977), Diogenes, circa 250CE (2018), Kant, 1790 (1987), Ovid, circa 50BCE – 20CE (2004), Gassendi, 1649) and philosophy (Deleuze, 1968 (1994), Deleuze and Guattari, 1991 (1994)). So, here is an outline of this saga for this context.

Process, by its nature, is unceasing movement and change. Process is always becoming, rather than being some closed or final thing. Thus, the fragmentary materialist claims of the pre-Socratic atomists, such as 'panta rheī' (Kahn, 1979), are sufficient in their openness. Materialism is the view that the only thing that exists in the universe is matter along with the forces that act on matter, and together with the processes that those forces bring about in matter. By entailment, that means there is nothing that is immaterial: nothing that is *not* part of the physical universe. In such a perspective, there are, for example, no independently existing minds, deities, angels, or supernatural things of any kind. As Nietzsche reminds us in his summary of the same bracketed period (from Heraclitus to Kant):

> *let us be more wary of the dangerous old conceptual fairy-tale which has set up a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge', let us be wary of the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', ' absolute spirituality', 'knowledge as such': - here we are asked to think an eye which 'cannot be thought at all or an eye turned in no direction at all, an eye where the active and the interpretive powers are to be suppressed, absent, but through which seeing still becomes a seeing-something, so it is an absurdity and a non-concept of an eye that is demanded. There is only a perspective seeing, and a perspective 'knowing'. (Nietzsche, 1887 (2006); Third Essay, #12)*

For Process, there is only material. That includes ideas – which are a certain kind of matter formed by and between brains and a central nervous system, and which in their operations give rise to mental phenomena like thoughts and memories and desires, etc. Pre-Socratic materialists of classical antiquity found the universe to be fundamentally material and recognised human beings as part of a material world distinguished from other animals only by reason. Reason, too, arises only as a result of the howsoever complex functioning of the materials from which we are made. More and more sophisticated ideas about this 'material', its structure and properties – such as cause and effect relations – have emerged. Especially after Descartes in the early modern period when the materialist hypothesis was revived by Pierre Gassendi (1649) as a model for explaining how physical objects interact with one-another according to the principles/laws of mechanics. That materialist notion is an important component of early modern science and has remained with us since but with increasing sophistication, and our understandings have evolved accordingly.

Epicurus was important in developing the original, materialist model of the world/universe realised by the forces of matter and divisible according to matter. All material made up of indivisible atoms is continuously changing – combining and recombined to produce and reproduce the things we see – and there is nothing permanent. Further early material claims include the physics that:

- Religion (*qua* literally superstition) arises from fear – a lack of information – rather than from any true causes.
- Atoms come in two forms: one is purely material, another produces ideas. Thus, materialism appropriates ideas of consciousness.
- Death is nothing to fear because we only have any experiences when the atoms that constitute us are all bound together and interacting with other atoms. After death, the materials that constitute us break down. They move on in other directions that are not 'us'; there is no longer any experience.

This materialism is hostile to the *idea* of final causes, a world of permanent substances and essences suggested by Aristotle ("Posterior Analytics"; "Physics"; "Metaphysics"), in which Nature is an interlocking system where each thing and each part of each thing had its own purpose within the whole. This system *might* have been designed by an intelligent designer. These ideas of purposes and intelligence underlying the universe were most congenial to Christianity. Thus, during the Christian era, science and thought generally were dominated by Aristotelian ideas of purposes, intelligence and final causes.

An effective Christian hegemony – a repressive consensus about the way of the world – dating from around the Aryan persecution of the fourth century for 1,200 years, blocked out or repressed most other thoughts and strenuously deprecated materialism. This was less Aristotelian and had more to do with Plato (Circa 370BCE (2002)), who said that there certainly is matter, but there is also mind. And the immortal soul, which forms and occupies certain kinds of matter like the human being. Mind, soul, and spirit are 'good' because they can aspire to some understanding of the highest and eternal truths that constitute the world and being. Matter – the world of the body – is 'bad'. This sentiment infuses Christianity with an ethical determinism regarding the nature and contrasting values of spirit versus matter, reinforced and penetrated Christian values through at least a millennium: body and soul were strenuously distinguished by the church until the early modern period – when some separation between the ways of thinking about the realm of matter and the realm of spirit was made possible by Descartes's approach to dualism.

Finally, in the late 16th and early 17th century, in the period labelled the scientific revolution – Gassendi and Descartes varyingly defend advances in science and it becomes possible to think about the physical realm and processes separate from the spiritual realm: in this way the church could continue its rule about the great truths of the spirit, but science could (once again) investigate the material universe albeit treating it as if it were a kind of clockwork machine. The principles, mechanisms and laws that govern activity in the material realm could be understood without impugning any of the truths of religion. The eternal truths preserved by the Church appeared to be under attack by Galileo, urging science to concentrate on measurable qualities such as location, motion and size, and arrive at the essence of things by material examination. Descartes offered a philosophical justification of this as the right way to proceed via a science based on mathematics stretched from a focus on pure/ideal Euclidian principles to an empirical focus. Materialism strikes back with Gassendi (1649) an astronomer with an empirical approach who simply asserts that spirit cannot be logically defended if it cannot be seen. D'Holbach (1770 (1889)) would later assert that if you are a materialist, you can only be an atheist, and rediscovering the suppressed and banned Epicurus, he publicly pours scorn on all forms of repression of natural desire/inclination, which are all part of the material, natural world. So, in this immediate pre-Kantian moment, the materialist ideas from classical antiquity were liberated to be applied to the scientific revolution in the late Reformation spirit of free thinking. We are once again back to the possibility of a universe that is only material and the open rubbishing of claims to immateriality as complete nonsense.

This scientific materialism of the 18th century permitted the organised rise of psychology. With advances in physiology, it becomes possible to consider that/how material in motion is competent to produce mind/consciousness. The excitations of gelatinous material inside the cranium produce vivid images and thoughts. We still do not know (today) how this happens except through some correlative interaction and activity, but in the 18th century, the focus of attention was on how ideas combine with one another by the process of association, how thoughts occur, what place reason occupies alongside our emotions in giving rise to our overall conception of the world; and how we act in it. Psychology explores with trepidation the material relation between matter and mind.

To summarise this rushed history developed here from Marx, it records an apparent project detailing the capture or suppression of natural materialism dating from the Neo-Platonists through the Christians to the early 18th century. An epochal monolith of logical idealists dominating thought and knowledge has stood for 2,000 years and more. Communities of it still thrive where people customarily, culturally and largely have neither choice nor inclination to think otherwise. For the rest of us, Process philosophy offers open access to at least an organic reality of creative, interdependent, material discontinuity.

In contemporary philosophy, Process is a modern term. Secular Process philosophy draws extensively on Whitehead's later work (1929). There are many takes on Process and you can read more about it in the continuing work of neo-materialist Thomas Nail, and many others.

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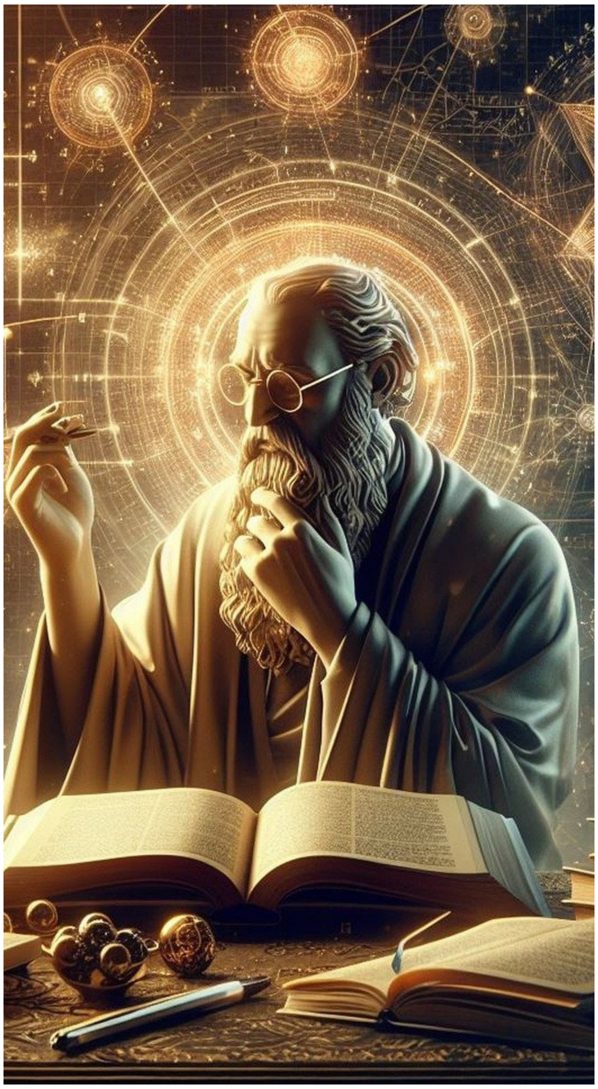

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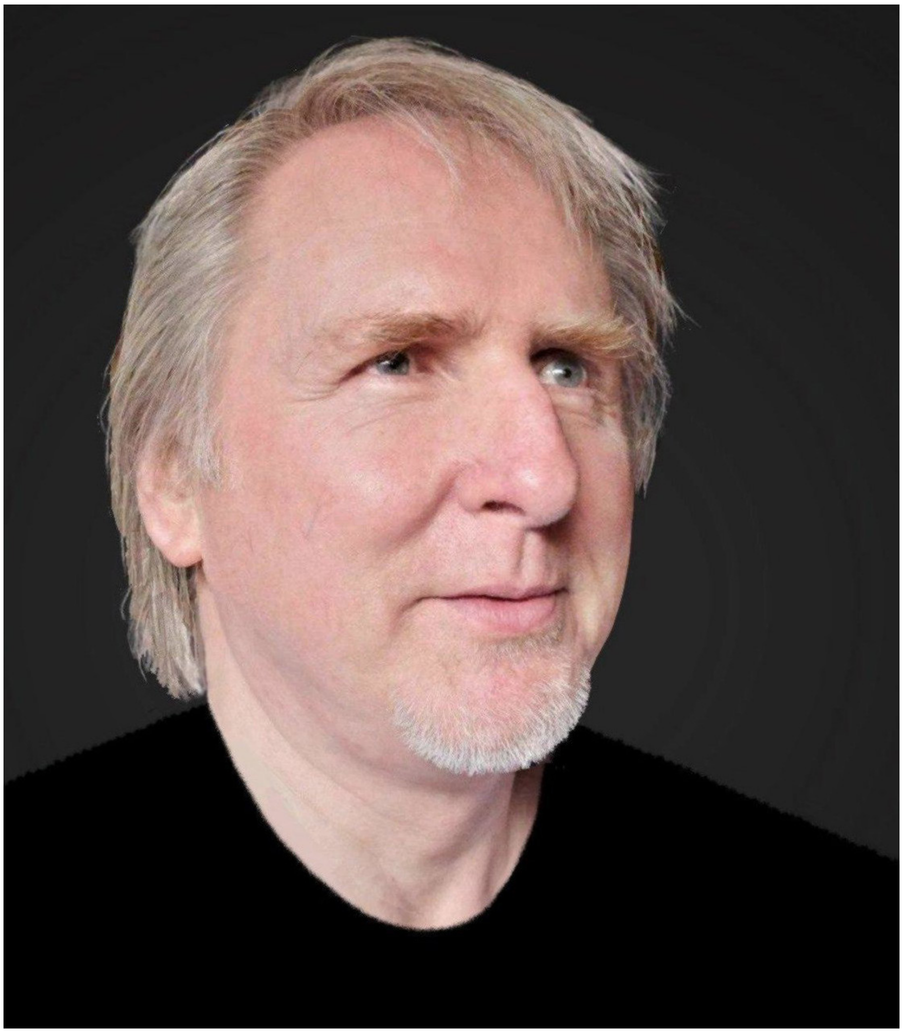
An Interview with Thomas O. Scarborough on Holism

by Ian Rizzo



Thomas O. Scarborough is a Congregational minister, author, and former UK philosophy editor. He lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and holds two master's degrees spanning three fields: theology, linguistics, and local and global leadership. He has published in peer-reviewed journals across six disciplines: philosophy, theology, electronics, gnomonics, organology, and optics. He is also the author of *Everything, Briefly: A Postmodern Philosophy and This Town: A Complete Metaphysics* and has been invited by the Philosophy Sharing Foundation to deliver the annual philosophy lecture on 20 March 2025, focusing on the theme of holism. In this interview, Ian Rizzo engages Thomas O. Scarborough in a discussion about his philosophy and insights into this vital aspect of metaphysics.

1. Where did your interest in holism begin?

My interest in holism may well have started in my childhood. I was born to parents whose contexts were worlds apart, having grown up in democratic and fascist countries respectively. Then, before I turned five, I had visited four continents, and lived in various cultures old and new. I began to wonder how it all fitted together. By the time I entered university studies, I was on a serious quest.

2. How would you describe the core of your thoughts on holism?

To put it simply, imagine that a professor writes an 'x' on the blackboard. Let us assume, too, that he *defines* it. As soon as he does that, his x rigorously and ruthlessly excludes everything that is not x. To imagine this, we may draw a circle around the x. Everything outside this circle is now unnamed and undefined. This unnamed and undefined, I call the *nameless Whole*. However, this is to put it too simply. Our world contains, so to speak, many x'es. Yet even if one multiplies x'es, they *collectively* exclude everything they do not name and define.

3. You make a distinction between two kinds of whole. Could you expand on this?

We tend to define a whole in terms of its parts. This is the kind of whole that one tends to find in dictionaries. I shall call it a *finite whole*. As an example, the Collins Dictionary states that a whole is "a single thing which contains several different parts". With this kind of whole, we can name the parts, and define them. We can even name the whole: "This whole is the environment," or "This whole is an engine." The nameless Whole is quite the opposite. It is everything that is not named, and not defined. Therefore it cannot have any parts, because parts have names and definitions. We now have two kinds of whole. The nameless Whole (capitalised), and the finite whole (not capitalised). The nameless Whole lies beyond all finite wholes.

4. In holistic thinking, how do we objectively define what constitutes 'the whole'?

My view of the whole differs from the standard view of the whole. Encyclopedia Britannica offers another definition of the whole as 'having all the parts'. My own definition is far more expansive. One could describe reality as a photo with a photo negative. The standard view sees only the whole that is the photo. My concept of the whole includes both the photo and the photo negative. It is a rough analogy. We can objectively state that the terms and concepts we use (the photo) exclude everything they do not include (the photo negative). Unfortunately it is not easy to determine what the 'photo negative' is. It requires effort. But once we see the need to understand this, we apply the effort.

5. It has been said, intriguingly, that you unite Eastern and Western thought. How is this?

Lao Tzu said, "The Nameless is the beginning of the ten thousand things." The origin of things is beyond names. It is beyond definitions. Out of this Nameless, then, the ten thousand things emerge. That is, *uncountable things*, since Lao Tzu had little idea of any figures larger than ten thousand. Let us call those things which emerge from the nameless Whole x'es. Everything beyond our x'es is unnamed and undefined. In one way or another, we find this written all over Western philosophy. For example, contemporary philosopher Brian Cronin writes, "Data of sense … is undifferentiated, unquestioned, preconceptual, unnamed …" Thus with the help of the simple logic of x and not x, we unite the 'Nameless' of the East with the 'unnamed' of the West.

6. You have said that this is not about mere abstractions, but applies to the world as we know it.

Philosophy needs to apply to the world, otherwise it cannot be of much use to it. I think the reason why many people find, say, Aristotle or Kant so interesting is that they see how the thought of these philosophers applies to the world. A part of one's growing maturity in philosophy is one's growing understanding of what all the abstractions mean in our everyday lives.

7. Could you give us some examples as to how the nameless Whole applies to reality?

Most basically, it means that there are things which exist beyond our x'es which are unnamed and undefined – if then we may still call them 'things'! They are out of the picture. They are off the charts. They are out of the discussion. One may take, as a major example, language – and every *kind* of language – say, the languages of maths, science, or ordinary English. Imagine language as a great assemblage of x'es – or a great assemblage of words. Words are like x'es, in that they, too, rigorously and ruthlessly exclude everything that does not belong to them. Given that this is true, whenever we speak words, we cut off a vast amount of our reality. All of a sudden, we realise that we exclude dangerous amounts of things from our thinking.

8. Could you make this more concrete?

A major example is big data. Science, within our own generation, has quietly entered a major new phase. We had Newtonian physics, Einsteinian physics, quantum mechanics, and now, big data – which is extremely large data sets which we analyse computationally. The more data we have, and the more processing power, the more perfectly we can tailor any number of things and processes to our needs and desires. Insurances, medicines, travel routes, and so on. But our computations – our algorithms – are interested only in those things that the algorithms include. Everything else, they cut off. It is excluded from our thinking, and from the thinking of our machines. This means that *nature* is excluded, which suffers greatly as a result.

9. How does your view of the finite whole apply to reality?

I focus in particular on the tendency of finite wholes to be *myopic* – which is to say, short-sighted. Finite wholes lose touch with the nameless Whole. They forget, as it were, that there is anything which exists beyond their own names and definitions. To give us some examples of such finite wholes, I take ethics, education, and God. Ethics may become myopic – for instance, focusing only on my own self, my own tribe, on elites, ideologies, and many other x'es. Education may become myopic, where the words that we find in textbooks cut off the world. So may arguments for God – focusing very narrowly on the bare existence of God. In the process, they lose a God who could ever be relevant to us.

10. Is there something good in all of this?

Yes, certainly. We have run into enormous troubles in our time, because we have failed to look up and see the limitations of finite wholes, and failed to see the nameless Whole beyond them. All that glitters has not been gold – and careful consideration of the nameless Whole suggests why. As soon as we understand our blindness to things unnamed and undefined, we may begin to understand what our problems are. And when we understand what our problems are, we begin to work on better solutions.

11. In today's world of hyper-specialisation, how can holistic thinking maintain relevance without diluting the depth of knowledge required in specific disciplines?

Everywhere, we have specialisation and hyper-specialisation. A hyper-focus omits everything it does not include. This poses a huge threat, especially to nature, but also to society. An early problem was the internal combustion engine. We discovered that our specialised focus on the engine missed a Pandora's box of problems. Since then, we have many more examples, such as radioactive contamination, and SF6. While we may try to remedy the narrow focus we had, this only goes so far. I propose that we hand over nature to itself, to such a large extent that our specialisation is too small for it to matter what humans are doing. This has been proposed before, with different reasoning, for example by Edward O. Wilson.

12. Considering the vastness of the whole, do you think focusing on it risks overwhelming us, making it difficult to know where to begin? Would starting with the study of particulars offer a more grounded approach to understanding the whole?

It often happens in life that we make a finite whole our focus. We erase all other things from our awareness. We focus on a tree, for instance. We focus on a motor car, or a camera. And all too often, we let a pot boil over because our focus was too narrow! Sometimes, it is necessary to have a narrow focus. However, I emphasise in my philosophy that we dare not exclude that which lies outside entities or concepts – outside terms and words – that we use when we focus. We must always be aware of the pot on the stove. It is about awareness.

13. Considering the interconnectedness of systems, doesn't a holistic approach sometimes slow down decision-making due to its complexity? How do you propose leaders or policymakers balance holistic understanding with the need for timely decisions?

In my philosophy, all of our thinking is reduced. Even so-called holistic thinking is reduced. It is reduced because its terms and concepts are named and defined, and deliberately limited. They exclude all that lies outside them. In fact, to try to open ourselves up to all considerations is impossible. We must reduce. The interconnectedness of systems may make things impossibly complex – yet I know from leadership that seemingly simple judgement calls may draw on vast intuition. We need to develop the 'holistic' minds that fuel the intuition.

14. What significance might your thinking have for Malta?

Malta seems to me to be an enormously diverse and cultivated society. One can hardly imagine a place with a greater richness of history, culture, and industry. Malta could reach out to the unnamed Whole by introducing philosophy as a required subject in schools.

Étienne de la Boétie's Mark on Continental Thought

by Karl Baldacchino

The 18th of August 2024 marked 460 years since the death of French jurist, humanist writer, poet, political thinker and friend of Michel de Montaigne, Étienne de la Boétie. La Boétie is most famous for his investigation of tyrannical power, which he elaborates in his famous *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, written around 1549 and first published in 1577.

In questioning what truly hinders one's capacity to resist a tyrant, in his short text La Boétie problematises what he perceived as an odd natural desire to conform to power. Put differently, he took issues with how someone is not strictly coerced into obedience but is rather inclined to do so 'freely.' Accordingly, La Boétie wondered why the masses voluntarily sacrifice their freedom by choosing to live in servitude to a single individual. In awe, he posed the following problem:

> *For the present I should understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation (The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude, p. 42).*

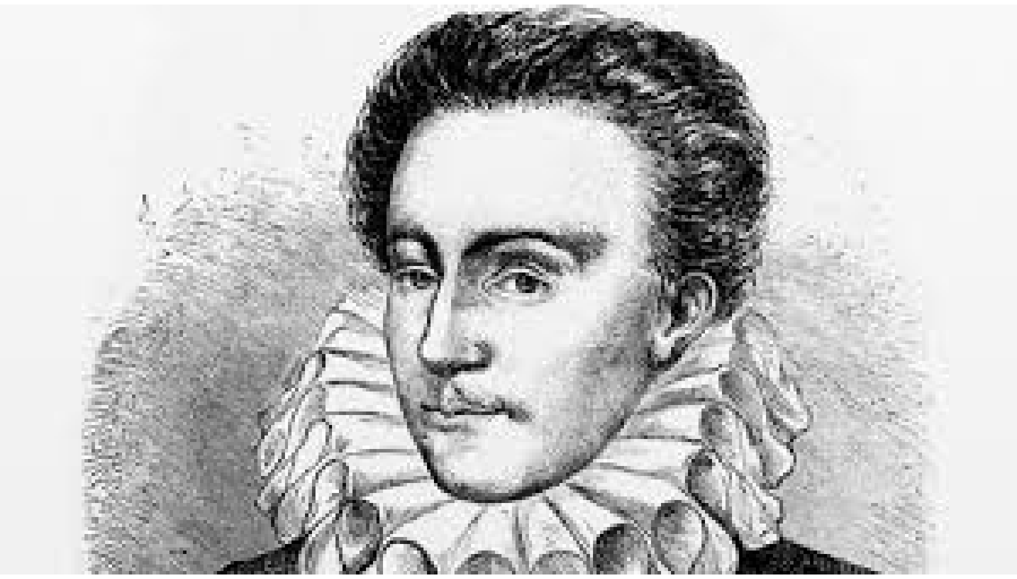
The solution La Boétie proposes is, in his view, a simple one. He writes:

> *there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement: it is not necessary to deprive him of anything, but simply to give him nothing; there is no need that the country make an effort to do anything for itself provided it does nothing against itself. It is therefore the inhabitants themselves who permit, or, rather, bring about, their own subjection, since by ceasing to submit they would put an end to their servitude (The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude, p. 46).*

It is precisely through the withdrawal of popular support that La Boétie identifies the most effective form of political resistance. Power becomes powerless the moment individuals relinquish their active support.

Yet why does this solution seem so simple, and at the same time so difficult to achieve? La Boétie explains that this is because power ensures its preservation in multiple ways. Besides the fact that servitude often becomes habitual, long before Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), La Boétie notes how the spectacle is used to maintain the status quo:

> *Truly it is a marvelous thing that they let themselves be caught so quickly at the slightest tickling of their fancy. Plays, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange*



> *beasts, medals, pictures, and other such opiates, these were for ancient peoples the bait toward slavery, the price of their liberty, the instruments of tyranny. By these practices and enticements the ancient dictators so successfully lulled their subjects under the yoke that the stupefied peoples, fascinated by the pastimes and vain pleasures flashed before their eyes, learned subservience as naively, but not so creditably, as little children learn to read by looking at bright picture books (The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude, p. 65).*

Furthermore, akin to Max Weber's bureaucratic theory, La Boétie also cites the extensive network of hierarchies and specialisations that sustain power structures, making many complicit in ensuring each other's obedience (see *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, p. 71-72)

La Boétie's pertinent critique of voluntary servitude has both directly and indirectly influenced the work of many thinkers who came after. Nearly a century later, in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), Spinoza lamented that people seem to fight for their own enslavement. Similarly, 19th-century anarchist thinker Max Stirner, in *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), emphasised that state power is upheld by voluntary servitude. In 1849, Henry David Thoreau wondered what would happen if the masses stopped paying taxes at once. Wilhelm Reich, in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), analysed the dimension of servitude in the context of the rise of fascism in 20th-century Europe.

La Boétie's work played an especially seminal role in the French political discourse of the 1970s. In the aftermath of May '68, the question of power became central for French intellectuals, with many agreeing that power resides in everyday life and that the ruled masses sustain it through their complicity. In this context, the same bewilderment that struck La Boétie persisted. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari famously asked how come

> *after centuries of exploitation…people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they actually want humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves (p. 31)?*

RÉVOLUTION

AUX ARBRES CITOYENS
SYSTEME CLIMAT
SAUVONS NOUS
TOUS DANS LA MÊME MERDE
Pour la justice sociale et climatique
ZAD PARTOUT
ILS COUPENT LES ARBRES

In the same period, Michel Foucault was particularly interested in how "docile bodies" contribute to their own normalisation as subjects (See *Discipline and Punish*, 1975). While in his prominent 1978 lecture, titled *What is Critique*?, he went on to elaborate critique as an act of "voluntary inservitude." Still, no one after the events of May has been perhaps as explicit about the influence and importance of La Boétie than Pierre Clastres. The influential French political anthropologist underscored how La Boétie challenges "the general conviction that we cannot think of society without its division between the dominating and the dominated" by strongly believing that "something else is possible" (*The Archeology of Violence*, p. 172).

La Boétie's presence continues to be felt in more recent works of critical thought. In a 2011 essay, titled *Political Disobedience*, Bernard Harcourt draws parallels between Foucault's idea of "voluntary inservitude" and the "political disobedience" of movements like Occupy. Harcourt notes that political disobedience "resists the very way in which we are governed" and "refuses to willingly accept the sanctions meted out by the legal and political system" (p. 34). Interestingly, beyond the scope of this article, in contemporary Western societies, social phenomena such as the 'Great Resignation' and 'quiet quitting' might also serve to highlight a growing awareness of one's voluntary servitude to the labour market.

In conclusion, even if at times overlooked, La Boétie's assertion that power derives its strength from the voluntary consent of the governed remains a cornerstone for radical critiques of power, inspiring enduring debates about political resistance, freedom and the mechanisms of control throughout the various fields of continental thought.

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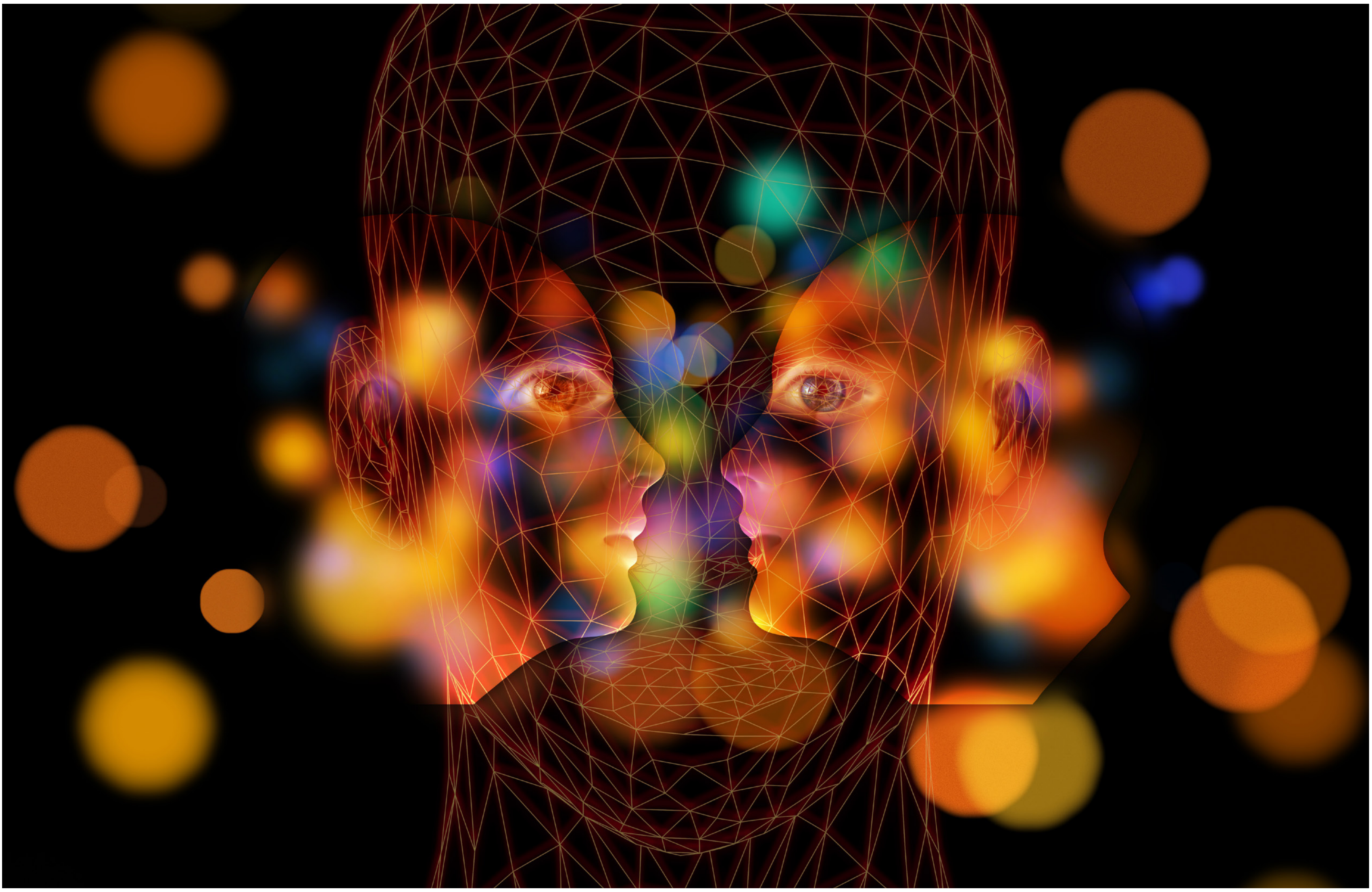
The Desiring Self

By Inger Cini



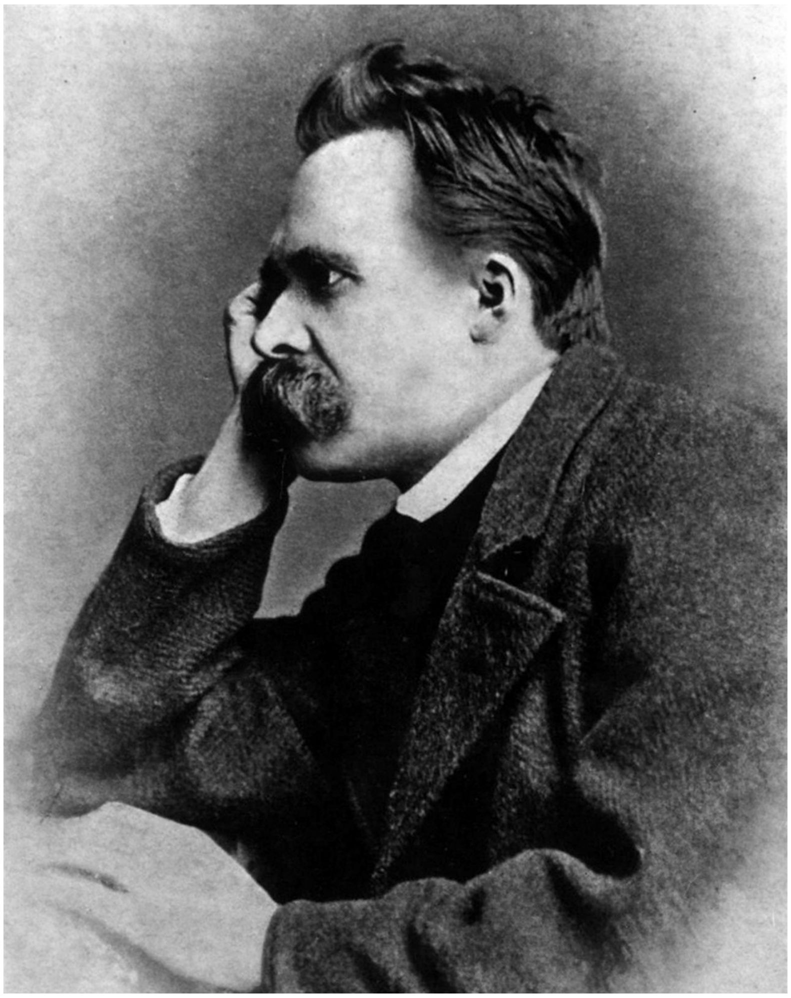
Philosophical works on desire have consistently treated it both as a lack, and a resource, sometimes a strong motivational force. The aim of this essay is to bring together different interpretations of desire with the hope that readers will broaden their interest in the subject as an exploration of their self-knowledge. The brevity of the essay only allows me to touch upon these concepts fleetingly; however, the works on desire are rich, diverse and substantial. As desire is an inherent characteristic of human reality, most of these works remain relevant and insightful.

Our mental life emanates from a duality of reality and wish fulfilment according to Freud. Referring to this concept, Pataki (2014) uses the terms 'wish' and 'desire' interchangeably as he elicits Freud's theory that it is the task of the mind to ease the tensions created in individuals by unsatisfied wishes. Freud's theory sees desire as a sexual relation and claims that when this action of the mind is frustrated by other realities, then neuroses ensue (Pataki, 2014, pp. 3-4). In turn, Lacan, also from the psychoanalytic tradition, looks at how language shapes a subject and defines desire as a "state of loss" which divides the conscious from the unconscious in an individual (Ahmadzadeh, 2007, p. 135). Unlike Freud who was inspired by the Cartesian ego in his formulation of the unconscious, Lacan finds desire to be more telling of experience rather than cognition (Alvis, 2016, p. 12). Freud, Lacan and the psychoanalytic movement generally have contributed extensively to the notion of desire in terms of its effects on the individual, but so has the philosophical tradition.

From the early Greek philosophers, the notion of desire was associated closely with the roots of the human condition. It was identified by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* as both lack and resource (Alvis, 2016, p. 8). Rousseau, then writing in the early eighteenth century, recognised the role of desire in shaping both the personal as well as social and political realities. This shaped his conception of modernity and the way desire divided as well as positively contributed to his contemporaries' way of living (Blackell, Duncan, & Kow, 2009, pp. 3-4). Rousseau apart, Alvis argues that desire was not given much importance in the Western philosophical tradition for some time during which the focus in philosophy was on reason and cognition. However, later, with the move towards the more experiential approaches to philosophy, desire became one of the central nodes of debate. Georges Bataille was one of the first figures who looked at desire as a means to turn from metaphysical inquiry to reflection on the 'inner experience' (Alvis, 2016, p. 10). He articulates desire as the want of the singular individual to identify with being in its infinity which is impossible since "life passes like a current or like a sort of streaming of electricity. Thus, there where you would like to grasp your timeless substance, you encounter only a slipping, only the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements" (Bataille, 1988, p. 94). He concludes therefore that human beings are 'nothing'; a concept which is later picked up by Sartre in his major work *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

Nietzsche contested this. He refused the idea of desire as coming from some metaphysical place and instead argued that desire is shaped by the positive affirmation of the 'will to power'. This 'will to power' is for Nietzsche the desire to attain our utmost interest, which is consequently the desire for creative transformation (Hill, 2007, p. 65). Therefore, Nietzsche associates desire with a productive force (Hill, 2007, p. 83). This force is a source of pleasure in two ways, one in the feeling of power within oneself and the other in the feeling of value in satisfying a desire which is deemed to be valuable (Langsam, 2022, p. 3). This classification of desire as power, is according to Hugh J. Silverman, one of two formulations of desire in twentieth-century continental philosophy, the other being desire as sex. This association of desire as power can be traced back to Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), whereby in the master-slave relationship, the slave desires to be the master and in so doing gives the master power over him. Silverman argues that in this context, desire as power infers 'domination and control', but also enables the achievement of self-consciousness, since we can only notice ourselves when others notice us (Silverman, 2000, p. 1).

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre distinguishes between the self 'in-itself' and the self 'for-itself', attributing consciousness to the latter as opposed to the former, which, in fact, 'just is'. Consciousness divides the reflecting self from the reflected self but has nothing to identify with, as for Sartre, consciousness is 'nothing': Its self-relation therefore excludes every form of self-knowledge and remains dependent on its intentional relationship to a foreign object. Therefore, for Sartre consciousness can never be complete and this is exactly what it desires. The deepest desire of the human condition in its conscious state (the for-itself) for Sartre is to be equivalent to the ontological status of the 'in-itself', which has no consciousness. Desire therefore springs from this fundamental lack which is inherent to the human reality (Bernet, 2022, pp. 5-9). This lack as the source of desire had been historically brought up by a number of philosophers including Socrates, Hobbes, Descartes and Locke. The latter associates the lack inherent in desire to temporality; the fact that desire is always futural, implies a wish for what is missing (Silverman, 2000, pp. 173-174).



This discourse associating desire with productive force is extensively elaborated on by Gilles Deleuze who was highly influenced by Nietzsche and Spinoza (Schrift, 2000, p. 176). It is Spinoza, writing before Nietzsche, who “first raises the potential productivity of desire as an issue requiring examination”. He mentions striving [*conatus*] as that which makes an individual persevere in its being, which in its essence is desire. Spinoza further distinguishes between active affects and passive affects – the former are generated within oneself from self-knowledge whilst the latter are generated by external elements (Schrift, 2000, pp. 176-178). It is in this spirit that Deleuze reads desire to be a productive force. Going further then in his *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), he directly confronts this view with the Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory of desire, concluding that the lack emphasized by the psychoanalytical tradition can also be seen as a positive force of creation which desire seeks to attain (Schrift, 2000, p. 181).

The discourse in Deleuze and Guattari turns much more complex, their project being to extend the relevance of desire to all social fields, unlike the psychoanalytic view which limits it to the family context. To me, this can be traced back to Rousseau’s contribution, which linked desire to the social aspect centuries before. While not alluding to the fact that the theories are in any way related, the association of desire with social reality is not entirely new in Deleuze and Guattari. For them, lack is created, organised and planned by society and is a social product (Schrift, 2000, p. 184). Rousseau in turn was critical of society insofar as it promotes artificial desire which displaces the inherent desire to care for oneself. For Rousseau, desire was part of the problem of the modern individual as it fragmented the self. Still, Rousseau speaks of an authentic desire too (Blackell, Duncan, & Kow, 2009, p. 1).

The desire for others and sexual desire are two other broad notions under which most of the debate around the subject can be categorised, albeit somewhat loosely. However, having reached the word limit, I am precluded from tipping into these. It suffices, to conclude, that one is aware of the ramifications and implications of the desire element within human beings, such that one can question and relate to this inherent characteristic ideally to fuel productivity in a Nietzschean-Deleuzian fashion. Naturally, this does not do away with the experience of desire as a lack. Should we rather question how we can use feelings of lack such as longing and nostalgia to create a positive, productive experience? I encourage the reader to dig deeper into other texts and relate to them from personal experience and with such questions in mind. Ultimately, in the words of Nietzsche, every philosophy is “the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir (Nietzsche, as cited in Silverman, p. 143)”. It is through our personal experiences that we connect both to others (including different philosophies from different philosophers) as to ourselves.

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Dusk Dialogues

By Ian Gauci and Gordon J. Pace

On an idyllic terrace in Athens, the sun casts playful shadows on an elegantly set table. Lush vines drape around marble columns, and the gentle hum of cicadas fills the air. In the distance, the Acropolis stands tall as if eavesdropping on this lively gathering. Six of history's greatest thinkers, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Albert Camus and Nick Bostrom are settling in, wine glasses in hand. A young, witty waiter who has just quit his software developer job is tending to their needs, placing a fresh bottle of wine on the table with a flourish, and leans in just slightly.

Socrates rises, glass raised, a mischievous grin playing on his lips. "Gentlemen, I trust you've all brought your appetites for both food and wisdom! Plato insists we delve into this 'Human-Centric AI' business. I suspect it's just another attempt to prove that the young never tire of rebranding old ideas."

A slightly exasperated Plato responds, "Honestly, Socrates, must you always be so cynical? This idea is truly revolutionary, designing AI that prioritises humanity's wellbeing. Even Immanuel Kant would give his approval."

Kant, nodding with a deadpan expression, adds, "Quite right, Plato. Yet, I fear that in reality, AI is being developed by people who prioritise their wellbeing over the categorical imperative. If only developers would read more about morality and ethics instead of coding jargon. Imagine the wonders we'd achieve if they treated us as ends in ourselves rather than mere data points to be monetised!"

The waiter laughs to himself: "There we go. Philosophers saying how things they have no hands-on idea of should be done. Spoken like a scientist calling for evidence-based philosophy." But he limits his words to "More wine, sir?" He does not want to risk being fired to return to his previous life as a programmer.

Camus, seated at the corner, taps his glass and thoughtfully interjects. "Ah, but Plato, my friend, isn't your notion of human-centricity just another myth? Like Sisyphus, we endlessly push the boulder of our own flawed ambitions. The question is not if AI can prioritise us, but why it should care to do so at all."

Plato looks intrigued. "And what would you suggest, Camus? Should we embrace the absurdity of it all, or throw our hands up in despair?"

A wry smile tugging at his lips, Camus replies, "Neither, my dear Plato. We must recognise the absurdity and then live with it. AI or no AI, the human condition remains. It's not AI we must fear, but the reflection of our absurd desires within it."

As the philosophers engage in their debate, the waiter hovers near the table. “If only these philosophers were to spend a year or two of coding before they speak.” Not spoken words, mind you, but his thoughts, as he limits his words to “Here is your wine, gentlemen. This wine has no AI additives.”

Socrates chuckles, enjoying the jest. As though reading the waiter’s thoughts, he turns to him: “Tell me, my good man, what’s your take on this ‘human-centric AI’ debate?”

The waiter raises an eyebrow, “It is not really my place to debate these lofty matters.” But he cannot help himself but continue, “But since you ask, I find many philosophical discussions about AI to be rich in grand structures, yet poor in terms of practical foundations and relevance. Can you tell me what you concretely mean by human-centric AI?” Despite that, or perhaps precisely because he realises that he has overstepped the line, he goes on, “How many of you have ever written a single line of code? Designed and built complex systems? Let me make it simpler for you: Just give me a recipe of how to live well and serve society and the wellbeing of humans. No grandiose polysyllabic nonsense, please. A simple, easy to understand and follow recipe which the common person in the street and we unsophisticated programmers behind our screens can follow. Nothing else…”

“The Golden Rule – do unto others what…” starts Plato.

All too conscious of the fact that he may soon have to start seeking a new job, perhaps to return to his former life as a developer, the waiter interrupts Plato midsentence. “Oh, come on! You should know better! Would you like me to swap that fine wine you are sipping for the cheap beer I drink? That is what I prefer, and I would like others to serve me. Not to mention that knowing what others think, feel, like and want is rather ambitious, given that many of you even doubt we know that of ourselves.”

Aristotle, savouring a piece of bread, chimes in. “We are not asking for AI to grasp the inner workings of thy soul or for virtue to be programmed! You can cultivate it, nurture it… like a fine wine. Teach it from instances, as I have always argued. Isn’t that what you mean by machine learning?”

The waiter smirks. “Ah, I forgot you are also a sommelier of virtue. It is hard to conceive how much data is required to make such a judgement possible. And even if that were possible and the economics of building such a system were to be conveniently ignored, I’m afraid that by its very nature, AI as we know it learns to build approximations from the data, and it is practically impossible to ensure that the outcome will never perform anything deemed sinful by its teachers.”

Bostrom, sipping his wine as the exchange intensifies, interjects with a dramatic sigh. “Ah, you mention the economics of building such systems. Therein lies the rub! AI doesn’t have years, it has milliseconds. And in that time, it might decide we’re as important as ants are to a toddler with a magnifying glass. Human-centricity, you say? I’d be content if it merely avoided turning us into paperclips.”

Camus, with his existential flair, gestures with his wine glass. “And yet, Bostrom, even if it does… isn’t that just another absurd outcome? Perhaps we are the paperclips in this grand machine. The question is not whether AI will care, but whether we ought to care enough about the lives we are living.”

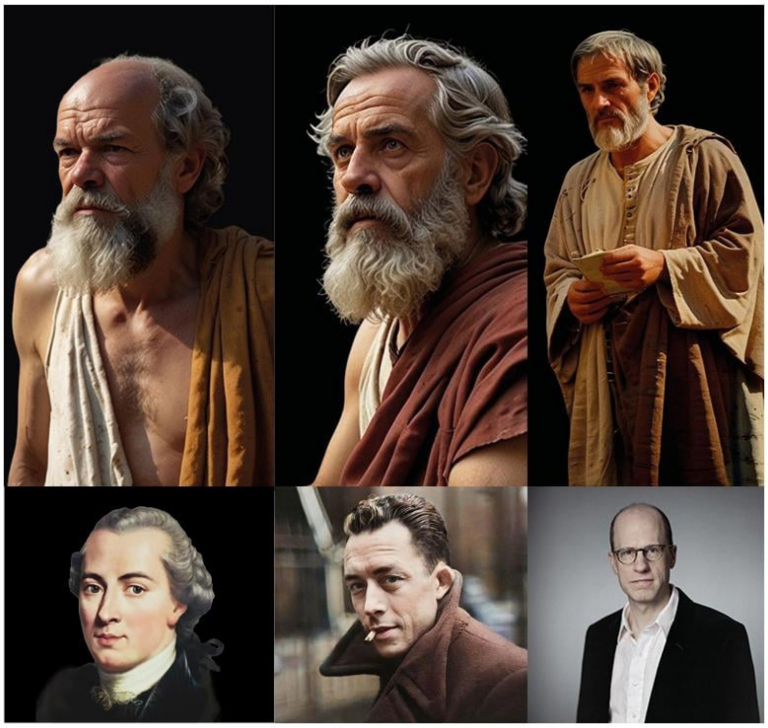
Aristotle, having just finished his second glass of wine, declares, “The answer is clear, gentlemen: we need to make virtue look more appealing than vice! Start with a little

Socratic questioning, sprinkle in some Aristotelian ethics, and voilà we have an AI more human than most humans I know.”

Kant raises an eyebrow, a playful smile creeping in. “And what happens when it asks why it should be virtuous, Aristotle? Will you offer it a lecture on eudaimonia?”

Socrates bursts into laughter. “A fine suggestion! But, knowing Aristotle, he’d start with, ‘My dear AI, let me first define what I mean by “good.” This may take a while.’”

The waiter collecting the empty glasses starts walking away, but not before throwing another jab. “Perhaps you can start by defining what makes a ‘good’ plate of pasta. You love to argue over grand nebulous definitions posed in ambiguous language and then expect that others can give precise and concrete meaning to your statements and integrate them into their code. Remember that while you’re busy fighting the giants you perceive, the rest of us keep ourselves busy building windmills.”



Socrates, still grinning, responds, “Then perhaps the answer isn’t in teaching AI but in teaching ourselves. After all, we’ve been at this ‘civilisation’ thing for a while now, yet we still struggle to define what it means to be human.”

Aristotle, raising his third glass with a flourish, declares, “And therein lies the beauty, my friends! We are always becoming, always striving. Perhaps AI will never truly understand us, because we don’t fully understand ourselves.”

After a contemplative pause, still thinking of the waiter’s words, Kant sardonically adds: “It is in the nature of reason to strive for clarity even in the face of ambiguity. Let us concede, with a measured resignation, that if such a moment arrives with AI, even if it systematically trumps efficiency, it should not devoid us of our capacity for self reflection, however imperfect it may be. After all, if we are to be outdone, let it be in method, not in spirit.”

Bostrom, laughing heartily, agrees. “Maybe we should teach AI to appreciate irony. If nothing else, it’ll keep it from taking over the world out of sheer confusion.”

Camus, smiling now, raises his glass. “Or, at the very least, it will keep us entertained while we continue our absurd dance with technology.” The waiter, shaking his head with bemusement. “Absurd or not, the windmills continue to turn, and the dance goes on – the eternal dance between the technology, developers and requirements engineers. Perhaps you should consider deserting your career and joining the dance. But you cannot have your cake and eat it. Now, who’s ready for dessert?”

Socrates, now content, raises his cup high. “Happiness, my dear friends, is not in the desire to seek more but enjoy less. Let us toast to that, to the absurdity, the hope, and the sheer joy of it all.”

And with that, they all lift their glasses, laughing and toasting to humanity and whatever comes next.

As the company stands up, preparing to leave, the waiter scoffs and approaches, “Right then, my dear gentlemen, it was a pleasure serving you, but if you allow me, it’s time for me to put some order to this mess you left behind.”

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An interview with Kenneth Wain

By Kurt Borg

In this interview, Kurt Borg engages with Kenneth Wain, a philosopher and writer, to explore his recent novel *K: The Letter Writer (Book One: Felice)*, the first in a trilogy that delves into the life of Franz Kafka through the lens of his relationships with three significant women: Felice, Milena, and Dora. Wain, a long-time admirer of Kafka, discusses the motivations behind his unique approach to writing a biographical novel about the iconic author. He reflects on his decades-long fascination with Kafka, tracing it back to the early 1960s, when he first encountered Kafka's work in a Valletta bookshop. This novel is not just a creative endeavor for Wain but a culmination of years of reading, contemplation, and philosophical inquiry into Kafka's life and literature.

Kenneth Wain is a Senior Fellow in Education Studies at the University of Malta and former Dean of the Faculty of Education. He has played a pivotal role in shaping Malta's national educational policies and curriculum development and has been a strong advocate for lifelong education in his works.

1. Your novel, *K: The Letter Writer (Book One: Felice)* is the first of a projected trilogy that focuses on the life of Kafka, particularly three of his loves: Felice, Milena and Dora. What motivated you to approach the subject – or, rather, the person – of Kafka in this way?

My acquaintance with Kafka goes way back to the early 1960s when I first encountered him or, more accurately, picked up a small selection of his stories from a shelf in a Valletta bookshop. The name Kafka was new to me and its sound intrigued me. And that curiosity has continued undiminished since then.

2. In an interview with me from 2016, you had said that "one of my ambitions has always been to write a book about Kafka. Kafka is very special for me. ... The problem is that I don't know quite what kind of book on Kafka I want to write." Why was it hard for you to settle for the type of book you wanted to write about Kafka? What other types of books did you consider writing on him? And why did you settle for this type?

In 2016 I was struggling with what to do with the vast amount of reading I had done on Kafka over the years, biographical and critical, and everything available he had written, of course, and drawn; stories, diaries, letters, aphorisms, reflections, sketches, and so on – so much did he intrigue me. In the process, I had accumulated notes I made of all kinds, and I felt that I had to do something with them. My first idea was to write a philosophical book about his work. I struggled then, and decided to write this trilogy of novels first instead. But I still have my notes and still want to put them together in a philosophical book eventually.

3. Why is Kafka so important to you? How has he been relevant to your own formation as a philosopher, as a writer, as a human?

Kafka it was who first got me interested in philosophy. I discovered selections from his writing, *The Bucket Rider* and *The Metamorphosis* for instance, included in collections of Existentialist literature, including philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers and Sartre, besides. This got me interested in Existentialism which, with its concern with the absurdity of the human condition, ties philosophy with literature. I thought, in the late 1960s, of writing an Existentialist novel that would bridge the two – the yet to be published *Sirocco*. Before that, I had self-published a book of short stories, *Tall Buildings*, which didn't do terribly well, sales-wise – perhaps I gave up on it too early. In any case, I tried a publisher for *Sirocco*, Hutchinson, in the UK who rejected it. The experience greatly discouraged me. I decided to turn to philosophy to help sophisticate my writing and try again. By the way, Kafka himself was deeply interested in philosophy in his student days, and once defended Nietzsche's merits against Brod who defended Schopenhauer's.

4. The book is described as a 'biographical novel'. To what extent do you agree with this characterisation? How would you describe the book in your own terms?

I described it that way myself, but it is unfamiliar to many. Still, it's an accurate description of the genre I'm interested in. The historical novel is, on the contrary, well-known and popular. A biographical novel is historical in the sense that individual events are historical of a life, and to the extent that the individual's story always evolves in a historical context – as mine does with Kafka. But the context is only the story's setting, not its protagonist, and the hero is a real not a fictional individual as it usually is in a historical novel. Biographical novels can be scripted for the cinema, a very different medium. I watched one featuring Chaplin last week, a couple of weeks ago I watched another on Oppenheimer, and I've watched others too. Scripts are frequently cinematic or theatrical renderings of biographical novels. I think it would be delighting if someone was tempted to do a script for a film from the book, fictional parts and all, naturally – it would be quite a challenge for anyone who undertook it, I think.

5. Were you inspired or influenced by any other similar attempts to write a novel about a writer's life?

No, not really. Though I am aware that there are some, I've not read a biographical novel written by someone else. Certainly, I know of no other written about Kafka beside mine, though I have read four or five biographies about him – which are an altogether different matter. I think that if the object is like mine, to bring him to life to the readers, to appeal to the reader's imagination rather than to their curiosity, the novel is a better medium than a biography.

6. So much has been written about Kafka: from literary criticism to philosophical texts (such as Gilles Deleuze's) to commentaries about his sketches (such as Judith Butler's) to cinema and theatre adaptations of his life and works. What does *K: The Letter Writer* add to that voluminous literature? How does your approach to Kafka differ from the more scholarly approaches?

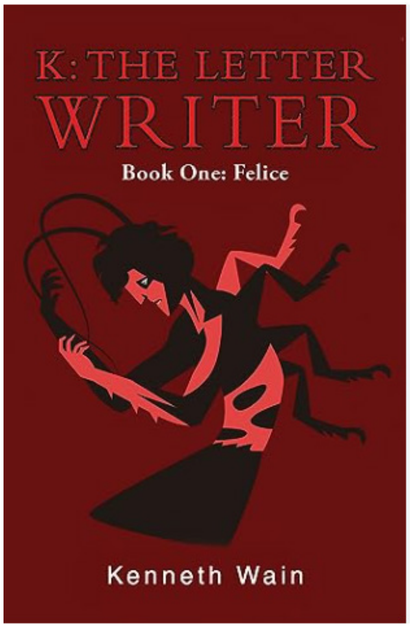
My answer coincides with the one I've just given to your previous question. Nobody before me, to my knowledge, has attempted a biographical novel of Kafka. And that, I think, makes it a unique addition to the 'voluminous literature', in being a literary creation of him rather than a critical commentary on his writing, or a scholarly or theatrical work. Other fictional writers have used Kafka for their fiction in interesting ways, Philip Roth repeatedly, W. G. Sebald, and J. M. Coetzee, for instance, but that's very different from what I've done

7. Could you describe your writing process for this novel?

I wrote it much the way I write everything else. In this case, it being a novel, my first concern was to get the story down from beginning to end, just as it came to me – that always relieves me of the tension of uncertainty whether the project is actually doable. Kafka's negative experience with his three unfinished novels, opened my eyes to this danger. Then the usual re-writings of this first text followed, several of them, honing it into a novel form; adding, deleting, modifying, refining, transposing texts until I was satisfied with it. Or, more accurately, until I decided that enough was enough and published what I had.

8. What drew you to Kafka's letters? Or, rather, why did you choose to foreground Kafka as a letter writer? To what extent did you draw on the actual letters in your novel?

I was drawn to them by my interest in his writing. Reading his letters provides clues for understanding his writing because they include much about it. Meanwhile, I read his diaries and notebook too besides the letters and stories. These too, as well as his letters, are literary works, a part of his literary oeuvre not something apart from it. Kafka was one of those who shows that letter writing could be a literary genre. One that we have sadly largely obliterated today thanks to our computer technology. Not just his letters to Felice are published, there are the letters to Milena, to members of his family and friends, to his publishers. His copious correspondence with Felice compensated, very badly, for their very rare meetings; it literally constituted their relationship. That was how he knew her mainly until that fateful ten-day tryst in Marienbad when he finally discovered her in every way and proposed to her a second time. Hence the novel's title. Of course, the story draws substantially from the letters, but also from his diaries with which they ran parallel.



9. What's the criterion of truth and truth-telling that applies to your novel? Is it loyalty to episodes from Kafka's life that can be corroborated with evidence? Is it your own playful engagement with real events? Or is it something in between? That is, to what extent can a reader of your novel say they know the real Kafka after reading it?

There is no 'real Kafka' waiting to be known, to be excavated through diligent scholarship, no truth about him that critics can uncover – as the likes of Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari, and Blanchot, among others, tell us. There are episodes in his life that are recorded in biographies. They provide the bare skeleton of my novel, its factual truth if you like. The challenge of the novel is to flesh them out with necessarily fictional accounts of what happened in them. And to devise incidents that never happened but that serve their literary purposes. The inventing and fantasizing that goes on, the use of the imagination, the poetic license employed, distinguish the book as a novel not as a biography, which is primarily concerned with factual precision. 'Playful engagement' is, I suppose, how one could describe it.

10. Do you think that something is lost in today's world where – in the age of immediate communication, texting and emailing – letter-writing does not occupy the position it once did in sustaining human relationships at a distance?

I already remarked about the loss of letter-writing to the world as a literary genre earlier on. What I think is lost to today's world more generally is the value of the 'at a distance' you refer to. We are used to seeing distance as a negative condition, a barrier or impediment to communication we need to overcome – and that's true to an extent. But I think pursuing its elimination can diminish the quality of our lives because it can give rise to an excess of its contrary, immediacy. People today are impatient with distance because it delays, defers, creates gaps, spaces in their lives that they desperately try to fill with their activity on their mobile phones, messaging, texting and so on. Texting is the activity that has replaced letter-writing. Has the change improved the quality of our human communication, has it improved human relationships? It has certainly democratised communication, but I doubt that it has improved human relationships or the quality of human life generally, never mind the quality of the actual communication or the quality of how people communicate and what they communicate about, given the technology's inbuilt constraint of telegraphic brevity.

11. What do you think that Kafka, the writer who went to such lengths to try to prevent his fiction from seeing the light of day, make of your novel publicising his life, and especially his private letters, in this way?

I don't think he was that determined to destroy his unpublished writings really, otherwise he could have done it himself while he still lived. I think that, in his heart of hearts, despite his low self-esteem, he knew enough about literature to sense their value. The responsibility he laid on Max Brod was terrible because Brod sensed that value too, and thankfully disobeyed him. If, unlike Brod, I wanted to abide with his wish, I wouldn't have written a novel that goes deep into his life and relationships of course, or even read his literary work. But then, I'm not the first to publicise his life or his relationships. Brod must take that responsibility. So, I feel no guilt about it – I am only retelling what was already known. On the other hand, it would be very interesting to have his literary opinion on the novel were he able to speak to us from his grave. But that won't happen.

12. You dedicate the book to Franz Kafka: the writer and the man. What is the meaning of such a distinction?

The 'and' can be a distinction, but it can signify an inclusion too. Indeed, at bottom, the novel brings out the impossibility for Kafka to be both, given the kind of writer he wanted to be, however ardently he wanted it to be possible. My novel wants to do justice to how he lived that impossibility.

13. As I opened the book to start reading it, right after the dedication to Kafka, I stumbled upon the copyright notice and that standard, perhaps legalistic, note saying that "names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead or actual events is purely coincidental." I smiled as I read this note. How is the reader to interpret this note of caution?

As you rightly say, the note is standard and designed to protect the publisher from any possible legal action by surviving relatives – and that is how, I think, anyone who bothers to read it will regard it. On the other hand, it could arouse the curiosity of some about the history of the characters themselves in real life, what happened to them later, though obviously they are long dead now. Felice herself and Brod escaped the Holocaust that was to come, one by escaping with her family to England, the other to Palestine. But, tragically, Kafka's sisters and their families, and many of his friends died in the extermination camps in World War II. A fate he would have suffered too had he lived.

14. Your writing output includes anything from academic articles and books, reflections on policy documents, art critiques, poetry and short stories, and now a novel. Do you, or would you even want to, see this writing as having anything in common, besides their author? Do you draw on different forms of writing in order to tap into different facets of your self? Is writing a style of living for you?

To reply to your last question first. Yes, of course, writing and everything that goes with is a style of living with me – a large part of who I am. I write nearly every single day when my laptop is about. What my writings have in common I think, is that they are all reflections, in both senses of the word, on what interests me in life. In this respect they reflect different facets of myself – I'm not sure that the process is best described as 'tapping' into. But they certainly narrate how I have evolved as a human being, challenged by my humanity and the different roles I have taken up or fallen into over the years, as we all are, in my times and circumstances, and how I have experienced them, trying to make sense of it all.

15. How is the work on the remainder of the trilogy progressing?

I'm working on my second novel now, which coincides with the period of Kafka's relationship with Milena – a very different woman from Felice, a much shorter relationship (and volume of letters) – problematic for him in a different way; a way that is making it more challenging to write, I think. On the other hand, my novel-writing machine is much better oiled now than it was when I started out with Felice – the process is a bit smoother in that respect. I have written some preliminary drafts for the third, about Dora too, but they are very partial. My first plan at the outset was to write one novel, before I realised that that would create a volume of impossible dimensions. So I broke the one novel into three.

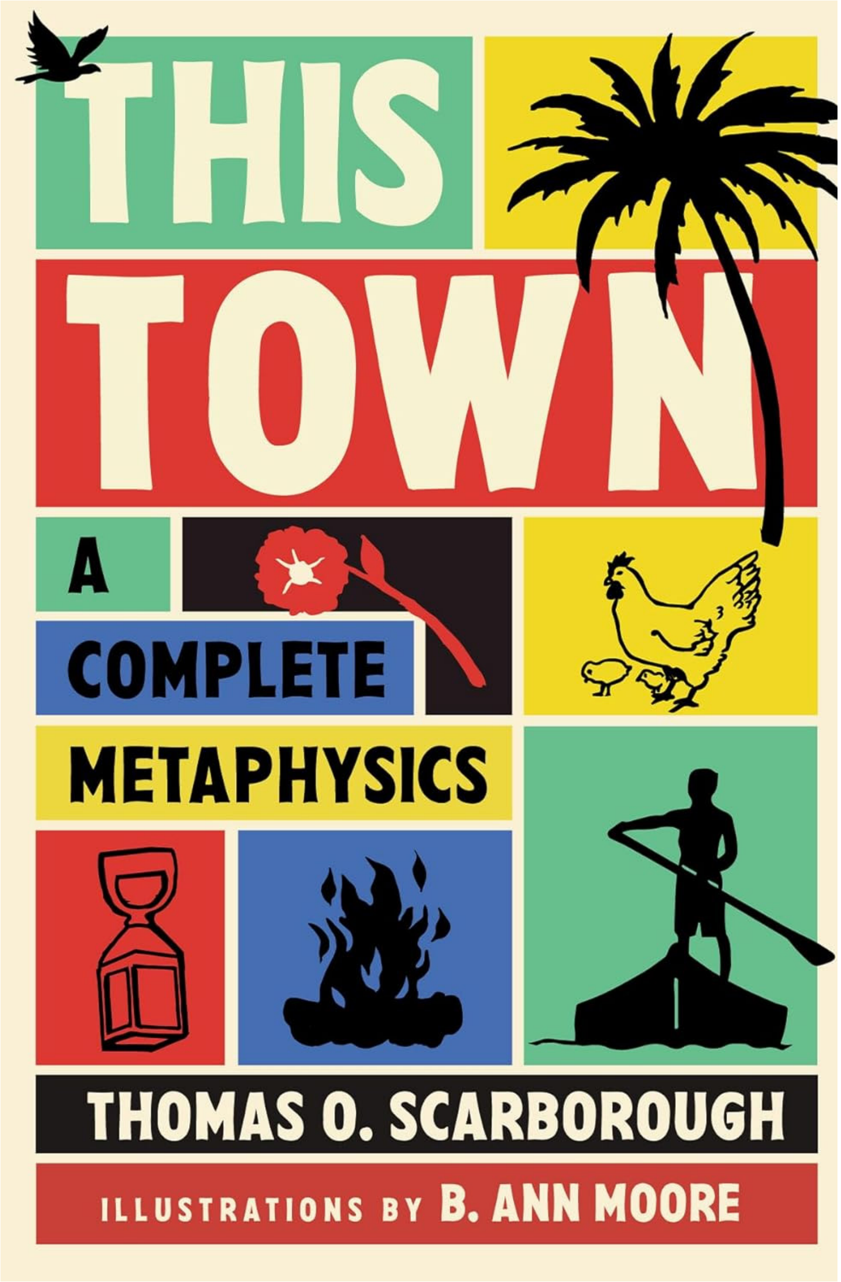
Kurt Borg is a Lecturer in the Department of Policy, Politics and Governance at the University of Malta. His research interests include continental philosophy, social theory and politics. He has published work on Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the politics of trauma, and the essay. He is also the author of Sens ta' Ħarifa, a collection of personal and philosophical essays.

Book Review

This Town: A Complete Metaphysics

Author: Thomas O. Scarborough
Publisher: Resource Publications
Year: 2023

By Valdeli Pereira



Thomas O. Scarborough, a philosopher known for his work on holism, will be delivering the Annual Philosophy Lecture of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation in Malta this coming March. This event provides a timely opportunity to explore his recent work, *This Town: A Complete Metaphysics*, which offers a thought-provoking exploration of existence through the lens of a single, seemingly ordinary town.

Scarborough's book is a carefully structured exploration, divided into a series of vignettes that reflect various aspects of life in *This Town*. Although the illustrated format may initially suggest that it is aimed at a younger audience, it quickly becomes apparent that this is a sophisticated philosophical work. The book consists of eight interconnected chapters that delve into the following metaphysical themes: language, ethics, reality, abstraction, meaning, God, holism and becoming.

The author's narrative style evokes classical metaphysical inquiries, yet it introduces a fresh perspective. By grounding abstract ideas in the tangible world of *This Town*, Scarborough renders complex concepts accessible without diluting their intellectual rigour. His prose is both poetic and precise, enriched with imagery that breathes life into the town and its inhabitants. This vivid storytelling is a key strength of the book, keeping readers engaged while promoting deep reflections on profound philosophical questions.

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Scarborough utilises a trialogue format—two people and their environment— to explore issues of existence, identity, purpose, and reality. The town itself becomes a microcosm of the universe, with each chapter serving as a piece of a larger metaphysical puzzle. This approach allows Scarborough to examine topics such as causality, time, and the nature of the self, often challenging readers' preconceptions.

The characters in *This Town* are not simply individuals but representations of metaphysical principles. Their lives reflect the broader philosophical inquiries the book undertakes. The town, with its layout, history, and daily rhythms, almost functions as a character in its own right, contributing significantly to the overarching metaphysical narrative. The book's ability to blend the mundane with the profound is one of the most compelling features, keeping the readers anchored while exploring grand ideas.

This Town is not a light read as it demands active engagement and reflection. Some readers may find the philosophical depth challenging, especially if they are not familiar with metaphysical discourse. However, those who commit to the book will find a rewarding and enriching experience. Scarborough's work illuminates the human condition and stands as a significant contribution to contemporary metaphysical literature.

In summary, *This Town: A Complete Metaphysics* stands out in the way Scarborough weaves complex philosophical ideas into a compelling and accessible narrative that challenges, enlightens, and transforms the reader's understanding of existence. For those interested in metaphysics or philosophical fiction, this book is a must-read.

Valdeli Pereira is a philosophy graduate and editor of SHARE.

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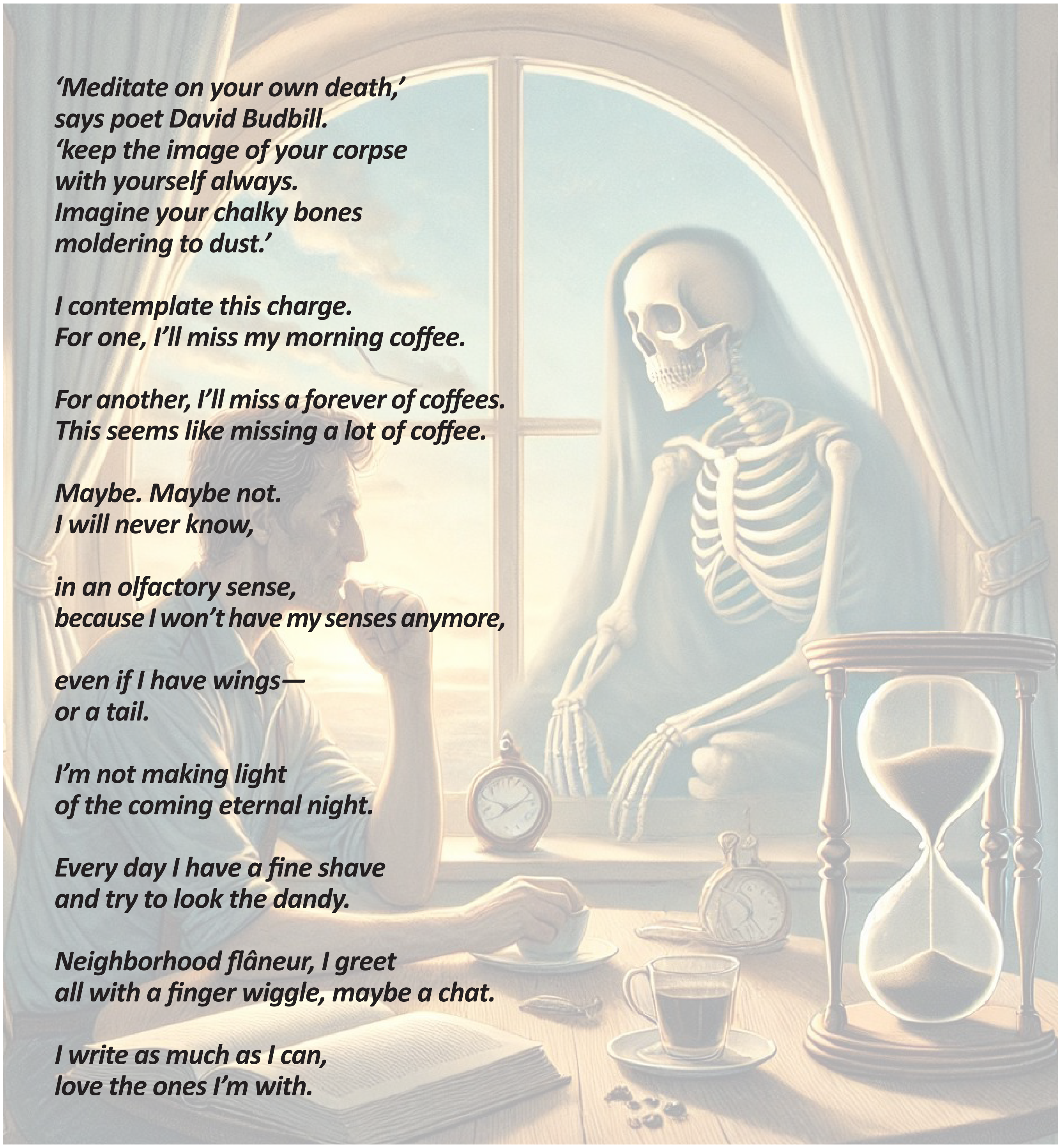
Memento Mori

By Mike Lewis-Beck



'Meditate on your own death,'
says poet David Budbill.
'keep the image of your corpse
with yourself always.
Imagine your chalky bones
moldering to dust.'

I contemplate this charge.
For one, I'll miss my morning coffee.

For another, I'll miss a forever of coffees.
This seems like missing a lot of coffee.

Maybe. Maybe not.
I will never know,

in an olfactory sense,
because I won't have my senses anymore,

even if I have wings—
or a tail.

I'm not making light
of the coming eternal night.

Every day I have a fine shave
and try to look the dandy.

Neighborhood flâneur, I greet
all with a finger wiggle, maybe a chat.

I write as much as I can,
love the ones I'm with.

Mike Lewis-Beck writes from Iowa City and his poetry and essays have been published in numerous journals. His poetry collection, *Rural Routes*, was published in 2019, and his novel, *Death Walks the Riviera*, was reissued in 2022. His works have earned several finalist awards and notable recognitions.

SHARE gratefully acknowledges the permission given by Mike Lewis-Beck to publish the poem *Memento Mori* from his work *Marcus Aurelius and Me*.

philosophysharing

Philosophical Manifesto

On Health - Part 6

By Ian Rizzo

Figure 1: Taking a multifaceted approach to health is crucial for integrating the body, mind, and environment to ensure longevity.

Health is very often taken for granted. It is perhaps when we witness others battling illnesses or facing premature death that we begin to appreciate its value. Yet it is when we experience even the slightest pain – be it in a toe, finger or our tooth – that we truly comprehend the necessity of good health.

Ancient philosophers recognised good health as a pre-requisite for a good life. Aristotle was among the first philosophers to highlight the significance of health in achieving eudaimonia, which he described as flourishing or well-being. Similarly, Hippocrates and Plato viewed health as the attainment of a harmonious balance between the mind, the body and the environment. For Epicurus, the pursuit of a good life centred around the achievement of mental tranquillity- peace of mind – a goal far beyond the hedonist label he is often given.

From the insights of these philosophers, it clearly emerges that every individual must take responsibility for managing their health to lead a fulfilling life. However, the first question that arises is: what are the top causes of death in the world today due to health issues?

According to the data published by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the following health issues are the top ten worldwide causes of death[1]:

1. Ischaemic heart disease
2. COVID-19
3. Stroke
4. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
5. Lower respiratory infections
6. Trachea, bronchus lung cancers
7. Alzheimer disease and other dementias
8. Diabetes mellitus
9. Kidney diseases
10. Tuberculosis

Causes of death can be grouped into three categories: communicable (infectious and parasitic diseases as well as maternal, perinatal and nutritional conditions), noncommunicable (chronic) and injuries. At a global level, seven of the ten leading causes of deaths in 2021 were noncommunicable diseases, accounting for 68% of the top ten causes. Although certain noncommunicable diseases such as heart diseases, diabetes and cancer stem from inherited genetic conditions, our lifestyle choices can significantly contribute to these diseases. Factors such as obesity, smoking, drug and alcohol use, unhealthy diets, excessive sugar consumption, and lack of physical activity play a critical role in the onset of such illnesses.

Another cause of death that is found in the top ten of low-income countries is HIV and AIDS, which results from unsafe sexual practices and needle exchanges. Even our sexual and social lifestyles are crucial determinants of our health.

Mental health also plays a vital role in this equation. Research has shown that poor mental health can lead to cardiovascular diseases, cancer and other infections. Chronic stress or anxiety weakens the immune system and complicates the management of chronic diseases. Mental disorders like depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder can lead to suicide, substance abuse and physical health deterioration. The relationship between mental health and our lifestyle choices influences the quality and longevity of our lives, underscoring the importance of integrating mental health services into primary healthcare for holistic treatment.

These reflections concur with the views of Hans-Georg Gadamer, known for his work *Truth and Method*[2], where health is not seen as the absence of disease but rather as a state of balance and harmony within the body. He believed that health involves a dynamic equilibrium that allows individuals to engage actively and meaningfully with their environment.

The quality of the environment significantly impacts health. Air pollution and crowded living conditions increase the risks for respiratory diseases and tuberculosis. Malaria, one of the greatest causes of death in tropical countries, is primarily transmitted through infected mosquito bites.

One can also add the effects of climate change when analysing the impact of the environment on health. The number of people exposed to extreme heat is growing exponentially due to climate change in all world regions. High intensity heatwave events can bring high acute mortality. Between 2000–2019, studies show approximately 489,000 heat-related deaths occur each year, with 45% of these in Asia and 36% in Europe[3].

All of this implies that the community and the state have a moral responsibility to safeguard the health of their citizens by ensuring the protection of environmental health from a holistic point of view- whether it be through clean water and sanitation, pollution control, healthy and urban planning or addressing climate change.

Another factor to be considered in the assessment of our health is food consumption. In *The Ethics of What We Eat*[4], Peter Singer and co-author Jim Mason argue that our present consumption based on meat products - which mostly include beef, chicken, veal and pork - are contributing to animal suffering and to environmental degradation. They strongly highlight that adopting a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle is one of the keys to reducing our significant ecological footprint. In the Netflix documentary, *You Are What You Eat*, it presents evidence suggesting that plant-based diets can lead to improvements in heart health, reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases, and promote better gut health. For instance, the Stanford study featured in the series found that participants on a vegan diet experienced reductions in biological age and improvements in markers related to cardiovascular health within just eight weeks. However, both

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[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/the-top-10-causes-of-death

[2] Gadamer, H.-G. (2004). Truth and method (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.; 2nd rev. ed.). Continuum. (Original work published 1960).

[3] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-heat-and-health

[4] Singer, P., & Mason, J. (2006). *The ethics of what we eat: Why our food choices matter*. Rodale.

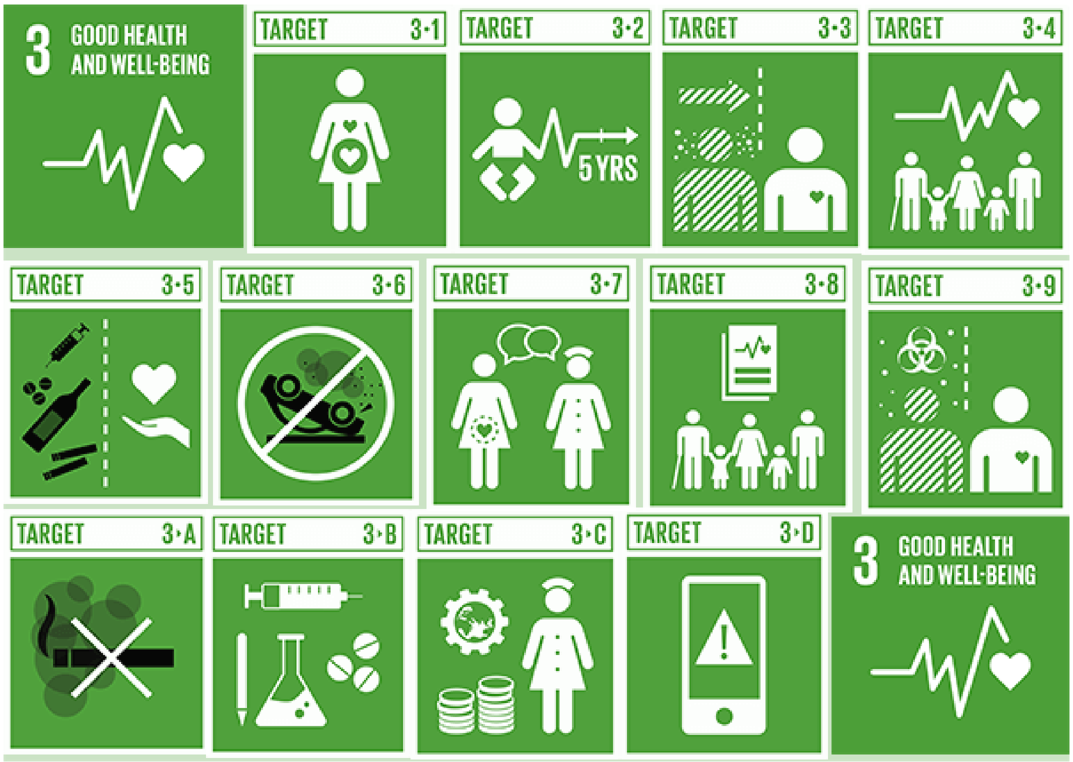

Figure 2: United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3

Singer and Mason recognize that cultural traditions, personal preferences, economic constraints, and social norms can all pose significant barriers to adopting a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. They acknowledge that large-scale agribusinesses and industrial farming operations have significant economic interests in maintaining the status quo and engage in extensive lobbying efforts to protect their interests, shape public policy, and resist regulatory changes that could impact their profits. Governments must become aware of this issue and give the highest priority when encouraging individuals to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Any incremental change would be a great step forward both for health and for the environment.

The necessity of state intervention became evident during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted global society for two years and caused widespread loss of lives. Despite debates surrounding the origins of the virus, it is undeniable that COVID-19 quickly escalated into a pandemic, creating chaos through its rapid transmission.

In light of the fact that COVID-19 emerged the second worldwide cause of death in 2021, state responsibility regarding public health extends further. Governments must establish regulations and legislations that uphold the highest healthcare standards. Health care systems should be designed to effectively address natural and man-made disasters, pandemics and other health emergencies. Additionally, governments have the collective power to encourage investment in research and innovation, which along with digital technology and AI is essential for predicting health trends and personalising care.

Access to essential health services without any financial hardship is a human right. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[5] states that:

1. Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
2. Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

In 2015, the United Nations established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. SDG Goal 3[6] aims to achieve certain targets in ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for people of all ages. These include universal health coverage and access to essential quality health-care services, medicines and vaccines.

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[5] https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

[6] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/health/

Targets of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3

Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

3.1. Maternal mortality

By 2030, reduce the global mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births.

3.2. Neonatal and child mortality

By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5-mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.

3.3. Infectious diseases

By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases, and combat hepatitis, waterborne diseases and other communicable diseases.

3.4. Noncommunicable diseases

By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being.

3.5. Substance abuse

Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol.

3.6. Road traffic

By 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents.

3.7. Sexual and reproductive health

By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes.

3.8. Universal health coverage

Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

3.9. Environmental health

By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contaminations.

Goal 3 – Means of Implementation for the targets

3.a. Tobacco control

Strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in all countries, as appropriate.

3.b. Medicines and vaccines

Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries. Provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines in accordance with the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which affirms the right of developing countries to the fullest use of the provisions in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights regarding flexibilities to protect public health and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all.

3.c. Health financing and workforce

Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing States.

3.d. Emergency preparedness

Strengthen the capacity of all countries, in particular developing countries, for early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks.

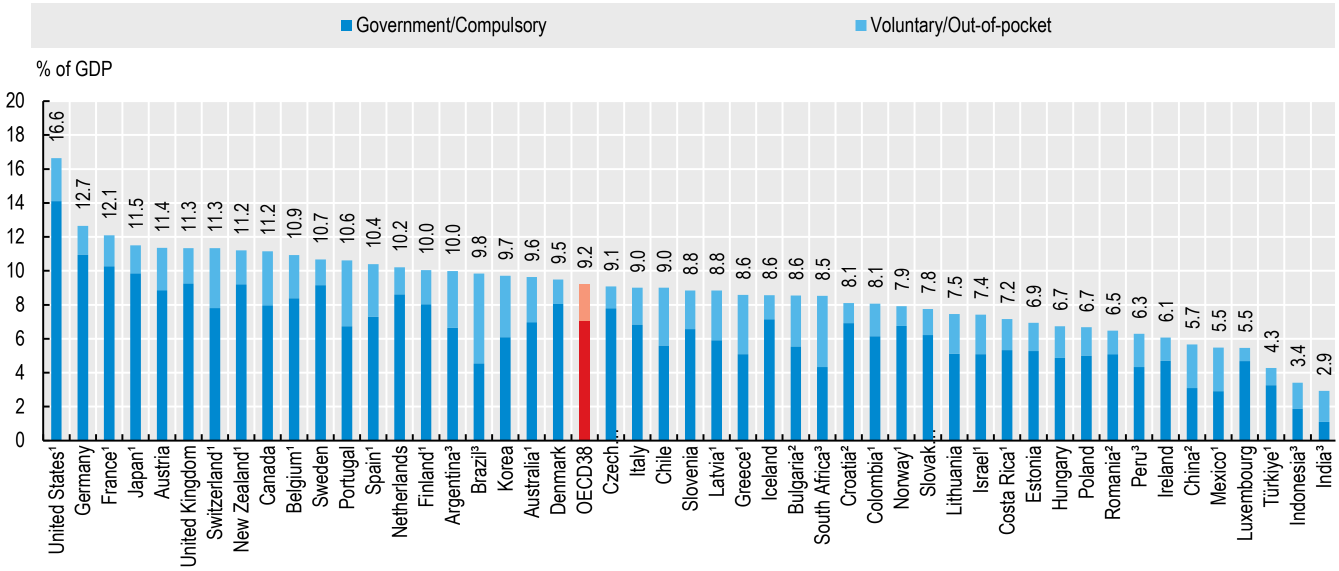


Figure 3: Health expenditure as a share of GDP, 2022 (or nearest year).

The footnotes (1 to 3) near the countries on the x-axis indicate that the data varies from actual 2022 values, with note 1 being OECD estimates for 2022, note 2 representing 2021 data, and note 3 representing 2020 data

Source: Health at a Glance 2023 OECD INDICATORS (p.155)

https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/health-at-a-glance-2023_d5dbe32a-en

But while there is universal consensus on health coverage and non-discrimination, political philosophy often sparks debates over the extent to which health services should be provided through public funding.

Many countries adopt the European model wherein the state guarantees basic health services funded primarily through taxation and running parallel to private sector practices which offer additional and alternative medical services to those who can afford them.

Conversely some nations like the United States rely predominantly on health insurance provided by employers or purchased individually. Public funding in the United States primarily supports the elderly (Medicare), low-income people (Medicaid) and children.

The United States model is criticised on the grounds that although the country spends the most on healthcare per capita as a percentage of GDP when compared to other OECD countries, (it was the highest at 16% of GDP in 2022; refer to figure 3) its life expectancy tends to be lower than many other developed countries. The United States ranked in the 48th position for life expectancy during 2024. Malta stands far advanced than the United States in the eleventh position (refer to figure 4).

Many Americans politicians tend to view the European model of health as a form of government welfare that would increase the federal deficit. The ongoing controversy surrounding the enactment of former President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act (ACA), commonly known as Obamacare, exemplifies the intense debate over healthcare policy, the role of government, and the balance between individual rights and societal responsibilities. Republicans made numerous attempts to repeal the ACA, arguing it was an example of government overreach. Many Republican-led states opposed the proposed expansion of Medicaid under this Act, arguing it would place a long-term financial burden on state budgets. The Supreme Court later ruled that states could opt out of expansion.

Nevertheless, in countering such arguments, it is worth noting that countries with the highest level of life expectancy such as Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Switzerland, Australia, Italy, and Spain have health systems whereby government has an influential role in emphasising preventive care, access to services, and healthy lifestyle promotion.

So, the government's role in healthcare does matter in contributing towards better outcomes. But the European model of healthcare should take heed of two criticisms that cannot be ignored by people who believe in free markets and in a lesser role for the state.

One of them is that public expenditure on healthcare can lead to wasteful expenditure when citizens take advantage of the provision of certain free services, such as the collection of medicine or the demand of screening procedures. Such unappreciated and uneconomic use of services comes at a cost that either requires higher taxes or forgoes other important expenditures.

No.	Top 20 Countries	Life Expectancy (both sexes)		No.	Bottom 20 Countries	Life Expectancy (both sexes)
1	Hong Kong	85.63		181	Kenya	63.83
2	Japan	84.85		182	Burundi	63.82
3	South Korea	84.43		183	Mozambique	63.80
4	French Polynesia	84.19		184	Zimbabwe	63.06
5	Switzerland	84.09		185	Togo	62.93
6	Australia	84.07		186	Liberia	62.32
7	Italy	83.87		187	Côte d'Ivoire	62.11
8	Singapore	83.86		188	DR Congo	62.07
9	Spain	83.80		189	Sierra Leone	61.96
10	Réunion	83.67		190	Niger	61.43
11	Malta	83.47		191	Burkina Faso	61.29
12	Norway	83.46		192	Benin	60.96
13	France	83.46		193	Guinea	60.90
14	Sweden	83.42		194	Mali	60.68
15	Macao	83.23		195	Somalia	58.97
16	United Arab Emirates	83.07		196	Lesotho	57.80
17	Iceland	83.01		197	South Sudan	57.74
18	Martinique	82.74		198	Central African Republic	57.67
19	Israel	82.73		199	Chad	55.24
20	Canada	82.72		200	Nigeria	54.64

Figure 4: Life Expectancy in 2024 – Top and Bottom Countries
Source: https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/life-expectancy/

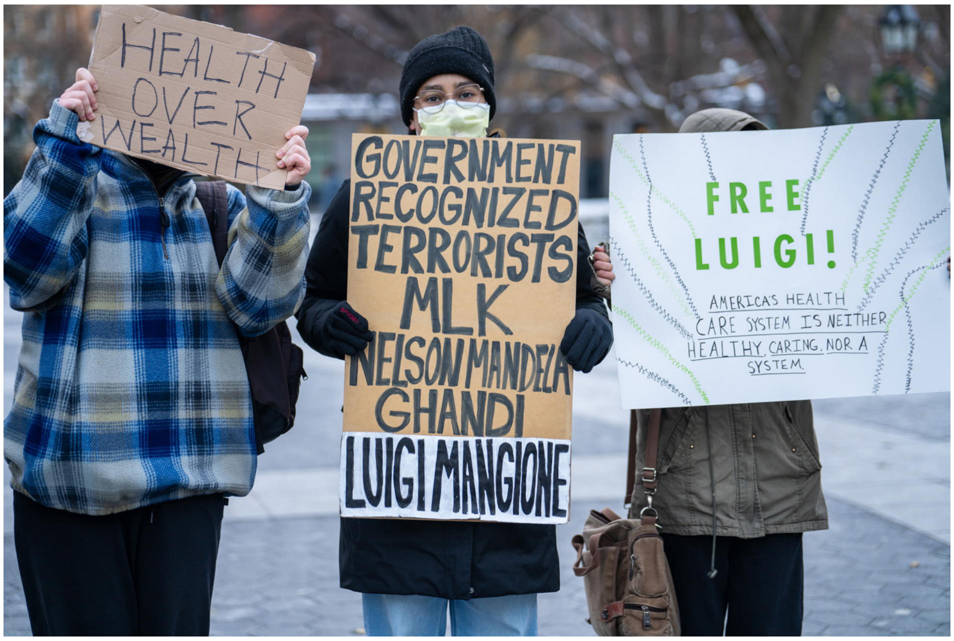

HEALTH OVER WEALTH
GOVERNMENT RECOGNIZED TERRORISTS
MLK
NELSON MANDELA
GHANDI
LUIGI MANGIONE
FREE LUIGI!
AMERICA'S HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IS NEITHER HEALTHY, CARING, NOR A SYSTEM

Figure 5: **December 21, 2024**. Supporters of Luigi Mangione, accused of murdering United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, rallied in New York's Washington Square Park. Among the evidence found by the FBI was a handwritten note stating, "*I do apologise for any strife or traumas, but it had to be done. Frankly, these parasites simply had it coming. A reminder: the US has the #1 most expensive healthcare system in the world, yet we rank #42 in life expectancy...*"

This tragic incident underscores the manifesto's central argument: the interconnectedness of social and political issues must always be considered to ensure security and justice for all.

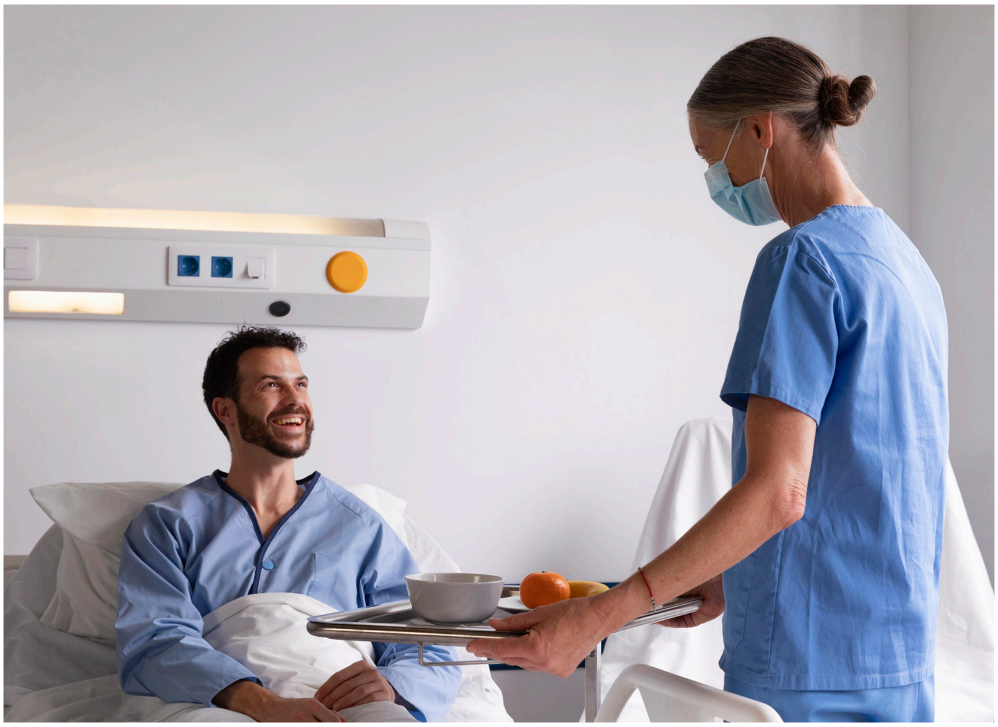
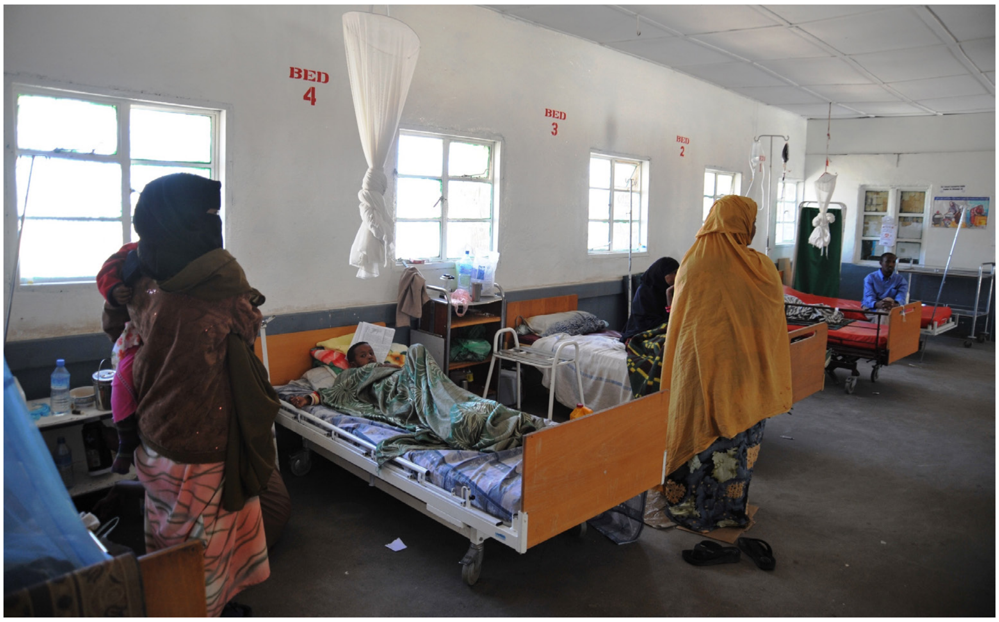


Figure 6: The difference in hospital treatment in these two images is glaring evidence of global inequality in health. As long as this disparity persists, we can never fully diffuse the tensions that arise from it.



Secondly, the claim that the European model ensures equal access to healthcare is challenged by the fact that individuals who can afford private healthcare often receive faster treatment. Disparities also manifest themselves in vaccination programs, health screenings and public health campaigns where wealthier and more educated individuals have better access to preventive health measures. This results in the possibility of longer lifespans for such people compared to those with limited financial means.

We may therefore conclude that generating high healthcare spending is not necessarily corelated to a higher life expectancy. Much depends on the efficiency and effectiveness of government spending on public healthcare as well as the response of government to a wider range of related issues to healthcare such as social inequality, education, urban planning and poverty alleviation to raise the life expectancy ratio.

One further analysis from the life expectancy table is the evident disparity between rich and poor nations. The lower life expectancy in African countries and war-torn regions is indeed a sad reflection of global inequality. Economic disparities, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, lower levels of education, and the impact of conflicts all contribute to this inequality. If there is a lesson to be learned from COVID-19 and other potential pandemics, it is that the whole world is interconnected. It is, therefore, a key global interest for all nation states to ensure equality of access to healthcare in order to secure the future of humanity. In this regard, it becomes a moral responsibility for the wealthiest countries to assist and support low-income countries to reach SDG 3.

However, beyond the moral imperative for governments to provide equal access to healthcare services to their citizens, we must consider philosopher Michael Foucault's critique that health institutions created by governments have become not just places of healing but also sites of power and control. He believed that the medical profession exerts power over individuals by defining what is normal and abnormal, healthy and unhealthy. This power is rooted in the knowledge that health professionals possess, which allows them to categorise and control patients. In *Discipline and Punish*[7], Foucault explored how modern institutions, including hospitals, use surveillance to monitor and regulate behavior. He described how the architecture of hospitals is designed to facilitate constant observation of patients, leading to self-regulation and discipline. This surveillance extends beyond physical health to encompass mental and behavioral norms. In particular, asylums and mental hospitals, could serve to exclude and marginalise individuals deemed mentally ill, often exacerbating their conditions rather than providing genuine care.

On a similar wavelength, Austrian thinker Ivan Illich[8] views medical establishments as contributing to over-medicalisation of our lives and making us increasingly unwilling to face the realities of coping with illnesses, pain and death. Illich argues that the medical establishment has become a serious threat to human life because in conjunction with capitalism it is an institution that serves itself and tends to make more people sick than it heals.

These two critiques underscore the need to have a strong worldwide ethical system in healthcare that respects the patient's right to make their own decisions regarding their health and medical treatments while maintaining their right to privacy and confidentiality. Philosophy can provide profound insights and guidelines for practice, aiding both healthcare professionals and patients in navigating such complex issues, ultimately aiming to improve the quality and humanity of healthcare delivery.

The issue of ethics in healthcare has become even more paramount as the future of healthcare is relying more strongly on digital technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI). In the last issue of SHARE, two articles welcomed advances in technology for leading to early detection of health issues, more effective monitoring and better disease management.

Figure 7: Foucault's critique highlights how surveillance in hospitals can act as a site of power and control, resembling a prison state.

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[7] Foucault, M. (2020). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1975).

[8] DK. (2015). *The sociology book*. DK Publishing, p. 261.

There seems to be no doubt that AI is expected to revolutionise healthcare, as the analysis of vast amounts of health data can help to identify patterns and predict outcomes that can lead to earlier and more accurate diagnoses. However, both articles raised concerns about data privacy and security as well as the accuracy and reliability of such systems which can be prone to errors and ethical dilemmas. In particular, when it comes to end-of-life or other complex treatment decisions, human empathy and judgement remain critical.

Core principles established by the Manifesto

1. **Individual responsibility**: Individuals must take responsibility for managing their healthcare.
2. **Universal access:** Regardless of socioeconomic status, race or location, every person must have access to high quality healthcare provided by governments.
3. **Holistic health approach**: Health must be seen as a multifaceted approach that encompasses physical, mental and social wellbeing. A holistic approach must recognise the interconnectedness of these models and promote comprehensive care models. Mental health issues must be integrated into primary healthcare to ensure holistic treatment.
4. **Dismantling health disparities**: True equality in health requires the dismantling of barriers that lead to health disparities. Government policies must focus on ensuring equitable distribution of health resources and services to marginalised and underserved communities. This principle should also be applied at an international scale- assisting countries with low indicator scores in SDG 3 to reach the world average – if we wish to safeguard the future of humanity.
5. **AI and Digital Technology**: AI and digital technology hold immense potential for enhancing diagnostics, treatment and patient care. However, AI systems should be transparent, accountable and free from bias. Continuous monitoring and validation are essential to maintain trust and efficacy. Moreover, the benefits of AI should be accessible to all, to prevent a digital divide in healthcare.
6. **Ethical considerations:** Ethical considerations must guide all health-related decisions. This includes respecting people's autonomy, ensuring informed consent and upholding privacy and confidentiality. Healthcare providers must be held morally responsible to act in the best interests of patients, fostering trust and empathy.

Recommended action for Governments worldwide

1. **Policy reform**: Advocate for policies that ensure universal health coverage and address the physical, mental and social determinants of health.
2. **Healthy lifestyles**: Encourage citizens to adopt healthy lifestyles, undergo screenings and engage in preventive health measures.
3. **Taxation on harmful products**: Implement higher taxes on items with negative health consequences– such as cigarettes, alcohol, sugary food and drinks. Meat production should be taxed by moderate incremental increases to encourage individuals and businesses to move to plant-based diets.
4. **Public participation**: Foster individual and community participation in all health-related decision-making processes.
5. **Investment in healthcare:** encourage investment in hospitals, healthcare professionals, and technological advancements, to promote funding and research that lead to innovation.
6. **Value for money principles**: Manage healthcare according to value for money principles – economically, efficiently and effectively – that deliver expected outcomes. Cut bureaucracies that contribute to wasteful expenditure or lead to longer waiting times.
7. **Technological skills:** Equip healthcare professionals with the skills to use new technologies ethically and effectively. Digitalise patients' medical records and provide modern appointment booking systems for medical treatments or screenings that can be accessible online.
8. **Social determinants of health:** Address the social determinants of health, including poverty alleviation, education, housing, sanitation, and cleanliness.
9. **Regulations and legislation:** Enact regulations and legislations that ensure the highest healthcare standards – particularly concerning food safety, clean water, sanitation, and urban planning.
10. **AI and Big Data:** encourage investment in the use of AI and big data to predict health trends and improve personalised care, always giving top priority to human empathy and judgement for controversial or complex decisions.
11. **Ethical framework:** Build an ethical framework that protects patients' autonomy against any overbearing powers from health bureaucracies, authorities and professionals. Safeguard the rights to privacy and confidentiality.
12. **A home first approach patient:** Enable individuals to live independently as long as possible.

We must not forget that any improvements in healthcare being called for, will complicate the management of aging and death. Many critics of AI and digital technology fear that exponential advances in technology may lead to humans playing God in dabbling with nature to eliminate pain and suffering once and for all. Perhaps the day is not too far when humans conquer death and become immortal either through artificial devices that replace faulty body parts; or through the removal or repairing of genes associated with ageing, genetic disorders, cancer cells or damaged tissues;

Figure 8: A futuristic healthcare setting. Will it continue to drive our quest to prolong life and achieve immortality? Are we mindful of the consequences?

or through the uploading of human consciousness into an eternal digital format before cessation of bodily functions.

Until we continue further with this discussion on the future of humanity in the next issue of SHARE, humanity has to face an immediate question as AI and digital technology become increasingly embedded within our lives. Are we ready to accept death as a natural condition of life? Or should we continue the subtle relentless pursuit of prolonging life at any cost? The answer to these questions will profoundly impact not only the future of humanity but also our current approach to healthcare which sometimes favors the prolonging of life at the expense of the quality of life. In his discussions on health, philosopher Gadamer also touched on the concept of finitude, recognising the limits of human life and the inevitability of aging and death. He suggested that accepting these limits is part of achieving a balanced and healthy life. Atule Gawande, a surgeon who published a book *On Being Mortal*[9] calls for a re-evaluation of how society handles aging and death, urging a move towards care that prioritises the quality of life, respects patient autonomy, and integrates palliative care into standard medical practice. We must somehow respect the realities of aging and death and limitations of medicine if we wish to retain what it means to be ‘human’.

Ian Rizzo is by profession an auditor and accountant who enjoys reading and writing about philosophy in his free time. He is currently the Deputy Chair of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation and editor of SHARE magazine.

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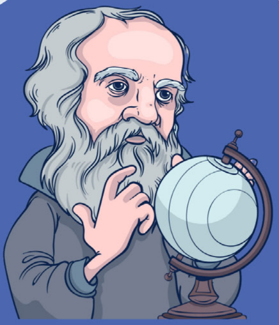
[9] Gawande, A. (2014). *Being mortal: Medicine and what matters in the end*. Metropolitan Books.

12 Laws of Philosophy That Will Make You Stronger



1 **The Law of Impermanence**
Everything changes, nothing lasts forever.

2 **The Stoic Law of Control**
Focus only on what you can control.

3 **The Law of Polarity**
Every positive has its negative.

4 **The Law of Cause and Effect**
Every action has consequences.

5 **The Law of Suffering**
Pain + Resistance + Suffering.

6 **The Law of Perspective**
Your mindset is your superpower.

7 **The Law of Virtue**
Character is destiny.

8 **The Law of Dialectics**
Truth emerges from the clash of ideas.

9 **The Law of Autonomy**
You are responsible for your life.

10 **The Law of Moderation**
The middle way is often the wisest.

11 **The Law of Presence**
Now is all that exists.

12 **The Law of Unity**
We are all connected.

2024 - The Year at a Glance

08.01.2024

L-Università ta' Malta

Francois Zammit
The Politics of Technology

16.02.2024 | 23.02.2024

Evarist Bartolo
Reading Class on
Viktor Frankl Man's Search for Meaning

15.03.2024

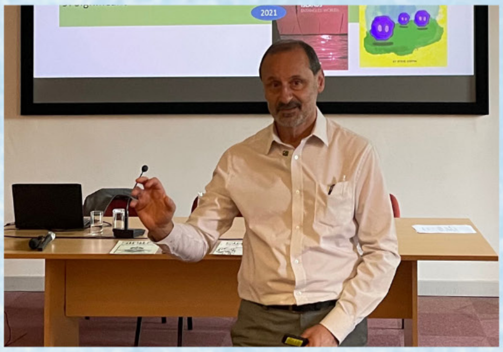
THE WAY FORWARD

Matt Qvortrup
Annual Philosophy Lecture
The Democratic Brain: Body, Soul
and the Politics of Listening

05.04.2024 | 12.04.2024 | 19.04.2024

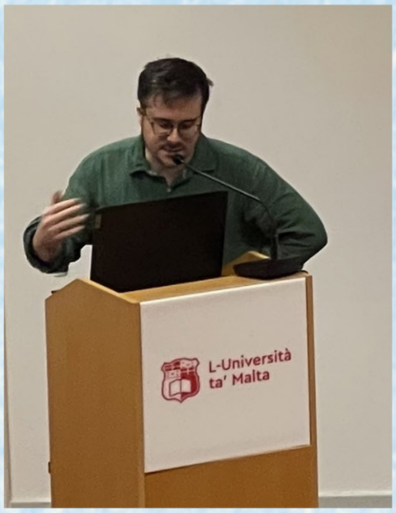
Gail Debono
Reading Class on Sigmund
Freud's Civilisation
and its Discontents

06.05.2024



Godfrey Baldacchino
Smallness - Some Critical Reflections

18.09.2024



Guillaume Collett
Between Communication and Sensation:
Radiohead's Resistance to Control

05.11.2024

David Bevan
An Introduction to
Secular Process Philosophy

31.10.2024

Claude Mangion
Reading Class on Nietzsche's Paper
On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense

27.11.2024

Mark Vella
Reading Class on Leli ta' Ħaż-Żgħir

07.12.2024

Niki Young
Rethinking the Human of Humanism

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