Social Philosophy
in a
Fragile World

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Rick Lewis

What Is a Point of View?

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Editorial
Social Philosophy in a Fragile World

This issue of **SHARE** is devoted to social philosophy, a field that revolves around the fundamental question of how human beings live together. It asks not only how societies are organised, but how they are experienced, sustained, and imagined by those who inhabit them. We have chosen social philosophy as the theme of this issue because the social itself has become increasingly fragile, even as our lives are more interconnected than ever. Proximity no longer guarantees solidarity. An abundance of information does not ensure understanding. Institutions designed to protect us can reproduce injustice, while appeals to neutrality often conceal ethical abdication. These are not simply political or technical problems; they are philosophical ones. Social philosophy examines concepts such as coexistence, care, power, knowledge, and peace — not as abstract ideals, but as practices embedded within everyday relations and institutions. Its concern is not merely what societies are, but what they ought to be, and what prevents them from becoming otherwise.

The issue opens with the problem of coexistence. *Godfrey Baldacchino* reflects on how contemporary forms of living—particularly within the Maltese context—oscillate between excessive isolation and intrusive intimacy. Spaces are increasingly shared without meaningful interaction; living together often stops short of truly being together. *Julie Reshe* illuminates this tension by arguing that care is not grounded in universal principles or heroic ideals, but in fragile and ongoing entanglement with others. Care arises not from moral superiority, but from the impossibility of remaining uninvolved, exposing the limits of ethical theory when detached from lived relations. *Nathalie Roudil* extends this reflection by advocating a return to the Greek concept of êthos. This concept should not be understood as a prescriptive moral system but as a way of dwelling in the world. To dwell, she suggests, is not to dominate space but to be affected by it, affirming modes of coexistence that resist reduction to universal ethical frameworks.

In response to widespread feelings of disconnection, *Robert Falzon* turns to Owen Barfield's idea that modern consciousness has shifted from shared participation in the world toward detached analysis, resulting in a loss of meaning and belonging. Barfield's vision challenges both materialist progress and rigid traditionalism, calling instead for a renewal of shared imagination. *Adrian Camilleri Chiaro* similarly emphasises shared meaning through art, arguing that its significance grows through collective interpretation. Meaning emerges not in isolation, but in acts of looking, reflecting, and responding together.

Questions of institutions and their effectiveness within society come sharply into focus in *Denitsa Markova's* reflection on social work. Examining tensions between bureaucratic professionalisation and commitments to social justice, she argues that neutrality and silence constitute ethical failures. Social work must reclaim its emancipatory roots and reaffirm solidarity as a moral imperative. *Yandiswa Shirley Mthembu* and *Thomas O. Scarborough* extend this critique by examining systemic social and economic gaps in the South African context. Housing, wage disparities, and justice deficits are not isolated failures they argue, but structural features of late capitalism. This demands a radical reimagining of equity. *David Bevan* reframes peace not as a stable condition, but as an ongoing practice sustained by critically engaged citizens who resist misinformation, uphold democratic values, and practise empathy and solidarity. Peace depends too on collective vigilance and participation.

If these contributions examine how we are currently living together, the question inevitably turns to how such fragile arrangements are being reshaped by rapid technological acceleration. Social philosophy must interrogate the forces redefining work, culture, and even what it means to be human.

Diana Corrato highlights a defining paradox of the digital age: unprecedented access to information alongside declining rational public discourse. Effective governance, she argues, depends less on data abundance than on cultivating intellectual virtue and civic literacy. *Krista Bonello* and *François Zammit* echo this concern in their critique on

the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace. AI is becoming less of an option and more of an obligation, as claims of productive efficiency mask cost-cutting strategies and the erosion of professional standards. They argue for the worker's right to refuse AI as an essential means to preserve human dignity and provide meaningful choice. *Neb Kujundzic* approaches AI from a cultural perspective, reflecting on how AI unexpectedly produced an insightful critique of his own music. If AI can convincingly emulate interpretive sensitivity, what distinctive role remains for the human critic, he rightfully asks?

From AI, the issue moves to a more profound transformation. *Corinne Othenin-Girard's* analysis of heritable genome editing (HGE) argues that this technology represents not merely a medical revolution to eradicate diseases and disabilities, but a redesign of the human being itself. While being framed from certain perspectives as an inevitable innovation that cannot be resisted, genome editing risks objectifying future persons and intensifying inequality. In the end this raises troubling urgent questions about free will, autonomy and moral limits. *Chengde Chen's* poem powerfully echoes this critique.

These reflections culminate in *Katryna Vella's* exploration of Conway's *Game of Life*, which asks what freedom means within rule-bound systems while challenging assumptions about consciousness, autonomy, and resistance. The problem, however, is not only whether we are free, but whether we can still agree on the reality within which freedom might be exercised. *Valdeli Pereira's* review of Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth* highlights the deliberate rejection of evidence that is fuelling science denial and political manipulation, and thereby posing a grave threat to democracy.

It is against this convergence of technological acceleration and social fragility that the interview with philosopher *Rick Lewis* finds its place. Rather than offering solutions, the conversation returns philosophy to its mediating role when confronted with differing points of view. In a fragmented landscape, philosophy's most vital task might lie in enabling us to understand the limits of our own subjectivity.

Ian Rizzo

Living Together

by Godfrey Baldacchino

Social philosophy asks vital questions about the nature of society. Human beings seem to be hardwired as a species to live 'together': we form bonds, friendships, functional relationships throughout our lifetime. Sexuality and reproduction are relational. As wilful singletons, pious hermits are the great exception. (But then, they too commune, with God.)

But how do we actually live *together*?

I live upstairs from you.
Yes, I think you've seen me before.
(Suzanne Vega, Luka, 1987

In large contemporary cities, we may find ourselves navigating a lonely crowd, with high density populations but low social interactions, other than for wants and needs. Most encounters are short, fleeting or repetitive. A 'good morning' to a bus driver; ordering a breakfast coffee and *pastizz* from a café. Approaching strangers is frowned upon,

and this 'xenophobia' – a fear of the Other – is instilled in children from an early age. For those many that we don't know, modern cultural stereotypes, steeped in nativism and too many movies, suggest that they are not to be known. They are intrinsically suspect, devious, even evil and untrustworthy; especially if they don't look or sound or pray like 'us'. Labels include parasites, leeches, welfare louts, criminals, rapists, and (the most recent term) terrorists. An individual-based lifestyle also maximises consumption: don't share stuff with your neighbour. A lifestyle that also privileges youth, business and careerism, will find it hard to accept and dedicate time to the old, the infirm and the chronically sick. These are, like death and dying, progressively institutionalised, away from public circulation.

Within the 'lonely crowd', there are many people living alone, in the company of solitude. Bachelors and spinsters, widows and widowers. Three women for every man. Their main company is probably their radio set, their TV, their cat or dog. They talk to their plants. The silence is deafening.

There is then the other extreme. In small communities, people live together *too much*. Intimacy is unavoidable. The threshold of secrecy and privacy is low. No wonder our homes look like fortresses: the ultimate redoubts of protection from society. Gossip, that cultural rumour mill, is rife with the baggage of personal information, and its consequences. It is hard to disentangle the message from its messenger. Ascribed (given) criteria trump achieved (earned) criteria. So much for schooling: just because one has the right skills or qualifications may not land you a good job; but having the right connections might. Lives are permanent struggles in reputational management.

Agħtini l-fama u itfagħni l-baħar (Maltese proverb)

Locals fear 'the public eye', and not so much if they break the law: the important thing is not to get caught. Shame is a burden worse than guilt. Politics is ubiquitous: you will meet your local politician at the supermarket, or on the promenade (and certainly for the annual local festa). To *not* live together so intensely, one must really pack up and leave, perhaps for good, and just come back to visit.

At 316 km^2, Malta may be the tenth smallest country in the world by land area; but it now provides us with a bewildering juxtaposition of these two societal scapes.

Increasing numbers of senior citizens coping with grief, loss of a lifelong partner, and a gradual decline in their ability to fend for themselves. With declining birth rates, the 'only child' is common, as are childless couples. These are likely to be financially better off, but socially poorer. Perhaps for Gen Zs, their digital lives make up for their lacklustre uni-generational social ones?

Then there is the cosmopolitan mass of non-Maltese workers. Some (Somali, Indian, Chinese, Nepali, Filipino, Swedish ...) are immediately and visibly so. Others (Serbs, Albanians, Italians, Colombians, Libyans ...) are identifiable as '*barranin*' once they start talking. They are our neighbours; their children join ours at school; they sit with us at Church (that is, if we do); they shop, they go out with their families ... They have names. But, we tend to essentialise them and relegate them into the double pigeon hole of anonymous 'migrant workers'. Which means two things, really: they are only here to work, and they are only here for a set period of time, after which they presumably leave. And don't come back. Both observations limit and nuance our ways of living *together* with these people. They are generally consigned to our unconscious, breaking surface and capturing our attention briefly, when we hear of a fatal accident: a construction worker falling from a roof; a motorcyclist on a delivery errand involved in a tragic traffic collision. *Jaħasra* . We may spare a thought; and life goes on. The *barranin* tend to respond in kind: why invest in a relationship if it is not meant to last?

Meanwhile, perhaps at another level, the Maltese network dynamo goes about its daily routine, in top gear. Its flow and direction are as twisted and unpredictable as the branches of a grapevine. Friends of friends. Connections and introductions. With or against. Labour or Nationalist. GWU or UĦM. St George or St Sebastian. Liverpool or Manchester United. Juventus or Inter Milan. Hamrun Spartans or Valletta City. Bl-Ingliż jew bil-Malti. The sublime art of *nirranġaw*. A spoils-based and hyper-personalised politics unfolds at local and national level. Where are you from? Who is your father (and rarely, your mother)? Which school did you go to? How do we also feed at the trough?

Jismagħna, jisqina, jaqdina, jlibbisna (Aħn'aħna jew m'aħniex, Allelulja, Allelulja Onorevoli, 1988)

It is hard for these two social circles to ever meet. They operate largely in parallel. They can and do cross, for example, when migrants learn and speak enough Maltese to understand what is really going on here.

We may deploy our social skills to reach out to foreigners (in spite of some early apprehension). Meanwhile, we skilfully exercise caution with how much and which information to divulge to local colleagues. (Mind you, they will be keen to know *how* we got the information in the first place: *Kif taf*?)

The science of proxemics forecasts that we get closer and even closer physically when with people we love. Sure. But that doesn't really apply when you are standing in a bus that is 'full up' and you end up smelling someone's armpit for 30 minutes.

We live together. But we don't like living together *together*.

Godfrey Baldacchino is Professor of Sociology at the University of Malta. He is still trying to understand why and how people live together.

Care Beyond Ethics: The Tragedy of Involvement

By Julie Reshe

This essay begins from a provocation: care is not ethical. Not because it is wrong, but because ethics requires distance, and care refuses to step away. Care is not an ethical stance. It is a condition of entanglement—one that exposes the impossibility of moral clarity.

The moment we force care into the framework of ethics, we lose what care is. Ethics, in its conventional form, is not about being with others but about standing apart from them. It suggests that one can step outside involvement, consult principles, and act with clean hands. Ethics exists to regulate conduct, distribute blame, deliver verdicts, and preserve the illusion of goodness. But what if the desire to be good is how one escapes the discomfort of being implicated? What if ethics, in its very structure, depends on the false promise that knowledge, detachment, and rule-following can keep us untouched by the consequences of proximity?

It is by extending feminist ethics that care reveals what conventional ethics conceals: that moral purity is a fantasy sustained by distance. Care does not emerge from the position of the judge, but from within the inescapable proximity of the other. To care is not to stand apart, but to inhabit the mess of relation without the distance needed for clarity. One does not care out of goodness, but because they are already entangled. And once drawn in, there is no clean way out. The more you care, the more you become implicated. Care is not a guide to what should be done—it is a way of being with others when nothing is clearly right, and everything might go wrong.

This is what makes care not a noble stance but something necessary—and tragic. Unlike the neat calculations of consequentialism or the tidy imperatives of ethics of duty, care does not promise that good intentions lead to good outcomes. More often than not, they lead elsewhere. Despite all care, people still suffer and die—no matter how carefully we try to hold them. Sometimes, suffering is the unintended outcome of our care. Yet we go on caring. Not because a philosopher told us to. Not because it is the right thing to do. But because we cannot *not* care. And this, I will argue, is precisely why care cannot be contained within ethics—it exposes the limits of what ethics can do.

Ethics as a System of Escape

Traditional ethics is built on the fantasy of moral distance. Whether it's Kant's categorical imperative, utilitarian cost-benefit analysis, or liberal human rights discourse, these frameworks assume that one can step outside, detach from involvement, and make moral judgments from a place of neutrality. To be ethical, in this view, is to act according to generalisable universal rules—rules that apply to anyone,

anywhere, as if from nowhere. The self becomes a kind of purified agent: rational, distant, and morally intact. What kind of person could this possibly describe? Someone who remains separate, who stays clear and at a safe distance. Someone never too close to others, never too confused, never too implicated. In other words: someone who doesn't exist.

One can find a version of this critique in Emmanuel Levinas, who grounds ethics not in principles, but in proximity to the other. Not with abstraction, but with exposure. Once you're truly inside a relation, there is no outside from which to weigh options. And if you try to step out of that involvement—to speak the language of neutrality and rules—you are already doing violence.

As Simon Critchley summarises Levinas' stance on ethics: "Strictly speaking, ethical discourse is nonsense" (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002, p. 19). Ethical discourse is "nonsense" because it replaces the unsettling proximity of the other with systems of judgment and justification. For Levinas, the concept of ethics grounded in abstract rules is already a betrayal—it begins with separation, not relation. Levinas shifts the site of ethics from detached calculation to the raw exposure of being-for-the-other, which is not about being right but being responsible beyond measure. The moment we begin to talk about ethics as a system or

doctrine, we have replaced the trembling nearness of demands and responsibility with the comfort of concepts. Ethics becomes something like mathematics or law: a way to regulate conduct rather than to stay within the relationship that care requires.

The ethical discourse is a form of cowardice disguised in the language of reason. We create ethical systems because we cannot bear the ambiguity of closeness. We want to know that we are doing good. We want to measure it, justify it, polish it into something clean. Levinas's thought suggests that the will to goodness may already conceal a turning away from the other. It makes ethics about *you*— your moral integrity, your virtuous position. And the other becomes just a stage for your performance.

The moment we turn ethics into discourse—into a system of concepts, norms, and rational procedures—we lose it. We turn away from the other and back toward ourselves. We use ethics to manage guilt, to sanitise involvement, to perform virtue. The ethical fantasy, then, is not just about distance—it is also about reassurance. We do not seek ethics to confront the other—we seek it to protect ourselves from them. Ethics becomes a mirror, reflecting back a clean image of oneself. But the other is not a mirror, but a presence that unsettles, beyond what any principle can contain.

Care Without the Comfort of Goodness

The ethics of care emerged as a challenge to the dominant moral frameworks of the twentieth century—those that emphasised reason, autonomy, and universal law. It came from the feminist voice that challenged the ideal of the isolated, self-governing moral subject, insisting instead on the reality of embedded, relational life. At its core, the ethics of care sought to shift moral attention toward the ethical weight of empathy, responsiveness, and the particularities of lived experience over abstract principles or impartial rules.

Carol Gilligan, one of the first to articulate this position, wrote:

> "As a framework for moral decision, care is grounded in the assumption that self and other are interdependent, an assumption reflected in a view of action as responsive and, therefore, as arising

in relationship rather than the view of action as emanating from within the self and, therefore, "self-governed" (Gilligan, 1993, p. 471).

This emphasis on responsiveness and interdependence already marks a break with the dominant view of ethics as a matter of self-governed action. But in my reading, this shift goes even further than what is usually captured by care ethics discourse. What care ethics brings into view is not a better moral framework, but the undermining of the very foundation of ethics and morality, since they are fundamentally rooted in the self. When the focus shifts from selfhood to relationship, ethics—foundationally a project of individual virtue—begins to collapse. What remains is solely the ambiguous space of involvement—with no possibility of a good self anymore. The very notion of an ethical subject—the kind of person who could be "good" in any stable, measurable sense—begins to dissolve. There is no isolated agent who acts ethically, only an endlessly unresolved tension of being-with-others.

I'm thinking of maternal care as an example—where the very acts required to raise a child, even those the child demands are often precisely the things they will one day blame you for. And they may be right. Somehow, by doing what is necessary, you are also doing it wrong. The contradiction is not the exception—it is the structural ambiguity of relationships. It is those who are not involved, who are not exposed, who can judge whether you were too caring or not caring enough—sometimes delivering both verdicts within the same day. Their ability to judge depends on their distance, on their freedom from entanglement. Inside the position of care—inside the mess of relation—there is no clean vantage point, no clarity, only the uncertainty of doing your best and failing all the same.

Care, in this problematic sense, is not simply an alternative ethics—it reveals the impossibility of ethics altogether, at least where ethics is framed as a system of individual virtue or abstract justice. For me, care does not come from the self, and it does not improve the self. It unravels the self, implicates it, and leaves it entangled in the ambiguities of relationship. There is no moral high ground here, no outside position from which to measure or judge. There is only involvement—messy, endlessly failing, but necessary.

The Tyranny of Moral Absolutes

As Drew Dalton demonstrates, the pursuit of ethical absolutes—the effort to anchor morality in universal, context-independent principles on which ethics has historically been grounded—serves not to prevent evil, but to justify it (Dalton, 2018). He traces this perverse logic through both religious and political history, showing how violence is routinely committed not in spite of ethics, but in its name. Eichmann's bureaucratic efficiency in organising the Holocaust is one of the most striking examples, Dalton shows how obedience to the absolute easily collapses into a violent transcendence of the ordinary responsibilities we have to others. Such cases reveal that atrocities are driven not by personal hatred or malice, but by ethical conviction—a belief in submission to a higher, unquestionable good. Evil, in this reading, does not arise from moral failure, but from moral success: success in serving an absolute value without regard for proximity or relational responsibility.

This is not, Dalton argues, a distortion of ethical reasoning, but its logical conclusion when the moral absolute is held as the highest good. The true horror is not the absence of ethical deliberation, but its triumph, where duty to abstract ideals overrides the messy, ambiguous demands of human involvement. Dalton's conclusion is not to abandon ethical reflection, but to abandon the worship of absolutes. Where traditional ethics demands obedience, Dalton calls for resistance—as a necessary condition for preventing ethics from becoming the engine of atrocity.

Dalton's analysis resonates deeply with me, up until the moment where he reaches for resistance as a response. In my reading, the appeal to resistance undercuts the deeper implications of his own critique, which I regard as not only correct but critical. It seems Dalton, in offering resistance as a solution, becomes unsettled by the scale of his own critique—disturbed by the evilness of ethics—and reaches for a way out. Resistance, in this framework, feels like a final moral safeguard, an effort to avoid succumbing entirely to the logic he has just exposed. It functions almost as a last attempt to salvage something "good" from within the ruins, as if resistance could serve as a corrective to the corruption of moral absolutes.

Dalton frames this resistance as the demand to "pursue the good negatively" (Dalton, 2018, p. 120), but to me, this already signals a return to the very structures his critique dismantles. Yet in a further, less overt strand of his argument, Dalton arrives at a conclusion I fully embrace: one that remains honest in its tragedy. He begins by exposing how ethics, grounded in moral absolutes, ends up justifying evil; he then introduces resistance as a possible counter-move. But beneath this, Dalton leaves something else— less openly stated, but nonetheless present: the recognition that resistance itself is condemned to failure. There is no refuge, no guarantee of escape. In his own words, "The ethics of resistance is an absurd task, not unlike Sisyphus's— one destined to eventually collapse back into the very darkness it strives to move beyond" (Dalton, 2018, p. 120). It is in this final, tragic admission—less exposed, but present—that his analysis reaches its most truthful point. After ethics and after resistance, there is only care—messy, failing, and without promise of redemption.

Conclusion: Care Beyond the Good

Care is not a guide to being good. It does not promise salvation, or redemption, or even relief. It does not make one ethical. If anything, it undoes the very fantasy of ethics—revealing that to care is not to stand tall in virtue, but to kneel in uncertainty. It is not to know, but to remain. Not to act rightly, but to stay when there is no right thing to do.

This is why care cannot be captured by moral philosophy. The moment we try to make it ethical—structured, rule-bound, judgeable—we betray it. We step back into abstraction, and we leave the other behind.

The ethics of care is not an ethics. And in this refusal, it becomes something truer, more honest, more fragile. It does not allow you to be good, it just does not let you leave. You stay, not because it's noble, but because there's nowhere else to go. You are tied to the burden of shared existence. You already care, like you already breathe—always, simultaneously, too much and too little. Yet you do it anyway.

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Ethics or Êthos?
How to Dwell, Where to Dwell

By Nathalie Roudil

If ethics (ethikē, via Latin ethica) claims to be normative, rational, prescriptive—anchored in systems whether deontological, utilitarian, or Aristotelian in virtue—then êthos (ἦθος) in ancient Greek refers to the way of inhabiting, the sojourn, the dwelling. It is a mode of *being-in-the-world*, a climate, a tone, a style—not a rule, but a resonance. In Heraclitus: êthos anthrōpō daimōn—"man's êthos is his daimon"—not a moral choice, but an ontological inscription.

Êthos

I therefore prefer to approach ethics through the term êthos—akin, but more archaic, more subterranean. Êthos is pre-discursive, embodied, atmospheric. It cannot be deduced: it is perceived, intuited, shared—or even betrayed. It engages gestures, habits, affects. It speaks less through concepts than through intensities. Where ethics prescribes, êthos exposes: it is the very site of exposure, of disposition, of cohabitation.

From êthos, then, I wish to sketch a reflection on human dwelling—not as mastery of the world, but as fragile, situated, traversed inhabitation. Not a morality to implement, but a way of being-in-the-world, in resonance with what speculative realism teaches us.

Speculative Realism and Dwelling

Speculative realism is a contemporary philosophical movement seeking to overcome the anthropocentrism still pervasive in modern philosophy. It opposes traditions that place humans at the centre or as the measure of all things—especially those that claim we can only know the world through our perception or cognition. Speculative realism asserts that the world exists independently of us, that objects, entities, phenomena—living, inert, technical,

Ethics

We've never spoken more about ethics. And yet, as the word circulates, it seems to hollow out, to lose its substance. Like self-awareness or values—those we claim or those that claim us—ethics fluctuates, shifting with time, culture, and sensibility. It enters contemporary debates, finds its way into the human sciences, the medical field, bioethical controversies, and end-of-life questions. It is embedded in treatises of moral philosophy as much as in corporate codes of conduct. But by occupying every terrain, ethics begins to take on a spectral form: omnipresent, elusive, often debased. The more we try to apply it, the more it slips away. Behind the discourse, it becomes a slogan, a posture, a polished surface. Beneath rhetorical weight, its true density evaporates. A refuge-word or a mask-word, the ideal it carries disintegrates into a proliferation of norms without a world.

or atmospheric—possess their own irreducible reality, beyond our mental frameworks. It is not a return to naïve realism, but an invention of speculative thought—creative and non-anthropocentric—which accepts that the real withdraws even as it acts. It means thinking from the retreat of things, from their plural existences, their silent relations, their autonomy.

To dwell is not to possess a territory, but to be affected by it; not to shape space to our norms, but to be shaped by its resistances, silences, non-human rhythms. To dwell is not to impose order, but to attune oneself to a plurality of presences—objects, materials, climates, images, ghosts.

From this perspective, êthos becomes atmospheric. It does not impose by force, but infuses, unfolds in sensitive intensities. No longer the law of the subject, but the tonality of a world where the subject falters. A world in which everything —house, wind, shadow—has its own irreducible way of being.

To think êthos speculatively is to accept dwelling in a world that eludes us. It is to cultivate fragile attention, listening, an art of sojourn in a real that cannot be owned. It is to recognise that the house itself, far from being a domesticated extension of ourselves, is a presence, an object, a threshold.

Dwelling becomes an experience of speculative coexistence. Not because all is mysterious or distant, but because all, in the end, resists capture. The world is not given to us like an open book. It signals to us, without ever revealing itself fully. And it is in this interval—in this chiaroscuro of being—that êthos emerges as a way of living with the world's strangeness, not to dispel it, but to attune to it.

From Êthos to a Plurality of Êthē: The World as an Open Dwelling

Very concretely, ways of living and dwelling are not universal. There exists a plurality of êthē: a diversity of ways of *being-in-the-world*, of inhabiting it, of feeling it, shaping it, or vanishing into it. Every human being, group, or culture dwells in a world that is their own. Each has its own êthos—a singular way of relating to earth, sky, objects, and others.

One might speak here of a plurality of sensitive installations, of styles of existence, of ways of being at home or being estranged from oneself. Strange kinship, familiar estrangement: walls define our own peculiar way of inhabiting.

Are we capable of dwelling in a common world beyond our walls, unless we use "wall-ears"— clandestine listening devices to capture what is not ours? And what of place itself?

Sometimes, it takes only a few steps, sometimes thousands of kilometres, to separate two visions of the world. Each culture governs, senses, interprets, and defends its own world. It is difficult—perhaps illusory—to gather all these êthē into a unified ethical framework.
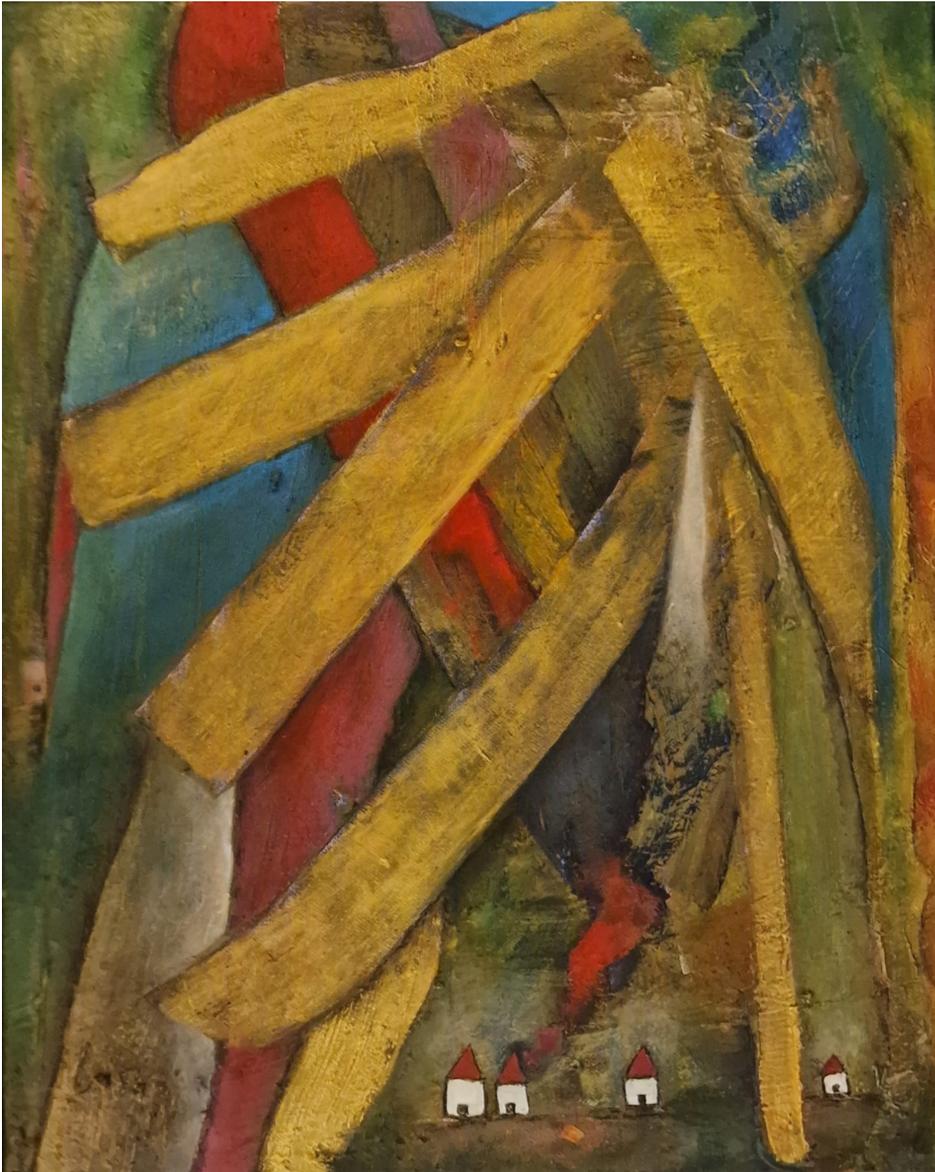
From this tension arise countless human conflicts. Hegel's dialectic of master and slave may now be no more than a philosophical fantasy: masters no longer free slaves, nor elevate themselves. They subjugate, exploit, destroy— caught in the blind mechanics of capital, production, extraction. The world is no longer a shared dwelling, but a field of ruins inhabited by orphaned powers.

Yesterday as today, the human ethic we seek—universal, benevolent, rational—trembles. And êthos, that fragile site of the world as presence, is sullied with filth, pollution, denial. Earth is no longer habitat: it is an outside that precedes us, exceeds us, will outlast us.

In this light, ethics would no longer consist in imposing a universal truth or model of life, but in recognising the plurality of human and non-human objects—not merely to "coexist ecologically," but to unfold among them: wild, fragile, enigmatic, open to contingency, curious about forces that sustain one another without ever fully recognising each other.

Thus, ethics would no longer be a rule to follow, but a disposition toward opaque cohabitation. A way of living in and with distance—not to bridge it, but to respect it.

"Societas," in this sense, is no longer a human association alone, but a fabric of influences, affects, and co-affectations between humans, non-humans, animals, plants, stones, technological objects, climates, viruses, artificial intelligences. The socius is no longer just a

redemptive projection or centralised guilt? A responsibility no longer based on the sovereign subject, but awakened in the attunement to what exceeds and decentres us?

To Dwell in the Irreconcilable

The call would no longer arise from a moral imperative, but from the collapse of our position. The point would no longer be to "save the Earth" as an object external to us, but to attune ourselves to its elusive, multiple dimension— to its inaccessible objects, to its hyperobjects. Ethics would no longer respond to a debt, but would become a resonance, a tremor in the shadow of things.

To dwell in the irreconcilable, in the tension between known and unknown, between presence and absence, between the human and what is not human.

companion: it can be a volcano, a fungus, a drop of oil, a radioactive cloud, a painting, a dream.

The Call of Responsibility? From the Anthropocene to the Necrocene

It was once thought that naming the human as a geological force would spark ecological awareness. The human became the central organiser of the Earth— namer, agent, decider, even ruler of endings. Thus, the Anthropocene narrative often becomes a tragic staging in which the human, having caused everything, is also solely responsible for fixing everything. This injunction to responsibility—even well-intentioned—reinstates the hegemony of the subject: it is still from him that salvation or collapse depends.

Could a speculative realist ethics open a wholly different space: one of responsibility without mastery, without

This requires a radical ethical gesture: not to close the place, the êthos. An unconditional hospitality, which neither begins nor ends with us. A manner without guarantees—but inhabited. This is the êthos of ethics.

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Owen Barfield's Vision of Society and Consciousness Evolution

By Robert Falzon

In a time marked by rapid technological development and social fragmentation, many people get the sense that something is missing. Upon introspection, the missing element is often revealed to be that intangible connection that once bound communities and gave life a shared meaning. Loneliness and a deep sense of "cut-offness" characterise our societies. The philosopher Owen Barfield (1898-1997), often overshadowed by his more famous Inklings peers C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, offers a powerful reading to understand these modern issues that seem to have started before the 21st century. Barfield's work can hardly be considered social philosophy, as its focus on the evolution of consciousness brings it closer to metaphysics. Barfield was a solicitor in a family law business in London before retiring and dedicating himself entirely to his academic research. In instances where he discussed law, politics, and the economy from a scholarly perspective, he still approached them from the standpoint of the evolution of consciousness (e.g., 2013a, pp. 63-93).[1] Yet, as he himself recognised, if taken seriously, his philosophy would have significant implications for societies (2012, pp. 61-63). Barfield saw the evolution of self-consciousness as a process intimately linked to the development of language and meaning (2010), and hence, indirectly, as having an influence on our way of living together.

Since Barfield is not among the most well-known philosophers, it is worth

looking briefly at the core of his work before proceeding to its social implications, the illustration of which is meant to be the main objective of this article.

At the heart of Barfield's thought lies a radical insight: human consciousness was not always in the same form as we know it today. He argues that early humans experienced the world in what he calls a state of "original participation" (2011, pp. 38-45). In this mode of awareness, the boundary between self and environment, subject and object, was fluid and permeable. In original participation, people felt intimately connected to nature and to each other, not as interested, detached observers, but as full participants in a living, sacred cosmos. The paradox, so to speak, was that being so immersed in it, they were not aware of this participation.

An evolution of consciousness led this original participation to gradually give way to a new mode of consciousness, which may be termed "onlooker consciousness" (see Loftin & Leyf, 2023, p. 73). For Barfield, the last vestiges of original participation were eradicated with the scientific revolution, and the new mode of consciousness that resulted is the mode we live in now: analytical, scientific, and objectifying. We see the world as made up of independent objects that exist "out there," separate from our minds and feelings (2011, pp. 144-145). For Barfield, this form of giving things a self-sustaining rather than a participatory value, is the

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[1] Given that, apart from two references, all citations are from Barfield's texts, the author's name will only be shown when it is the exception.

new form of idolatry precisely because it makes things absolutes in themselves (2011, pp. 66-67). The pretence of objectivity of scientism, while forgetting that the observing subject is necessarily part of the observation, becomes reductive of the value of the necessary human element (2013b, pp. 259-275). Thus, for Barfield, the new mode of consciousness came with a significant cost: a sense of alienation. The world feels cold and mechanistic, and we feel isolated from and within it (2012, pp. 34-35). Needless to say, this alienation is not just between humanity and the rest of the world, but to a greater extent, within humanity. This accounts for the substantial reduction of the community quality of contemporary societies.

The evolution of consciousness does not end here, however. For Barfield, the evolution of onlooker consciousness, typical of modernity up to our time, was necessary because it can now evolve into a final participation consciousness, where this time, participation is wilful and aware (2011, pp. 153-164). Its potentiality has long been present but not fully actualised. Yet, to grasp what he means by saying that the alienation from original participation is necessary for final participation, by analogy we can look at the example of the emergence of the welfare state as we know it today. This welfare state was necessarily a product of modernity and could not have emerged in the Middle Ages or before, when humanity was viewed largely as a microcosm within the macrocosm, which is the universe. Of course, Barfield is talking about how trends of societies in different times would look at the world, rather than at the thoughts of singular individuals, like philosophers, who might have become famous precisely for the uniqueness of their thought.

To recapitulate what has been said so far, Barfield laments the sense of alienation that is typical for individuals of our time, especially because of the pain it inflicts on individuals. But he does not long for a return to original participation; rather he looks to the future.

Going a step further, it is worth pointing out that Barfield's point of departure for his thoughts on the evolution of
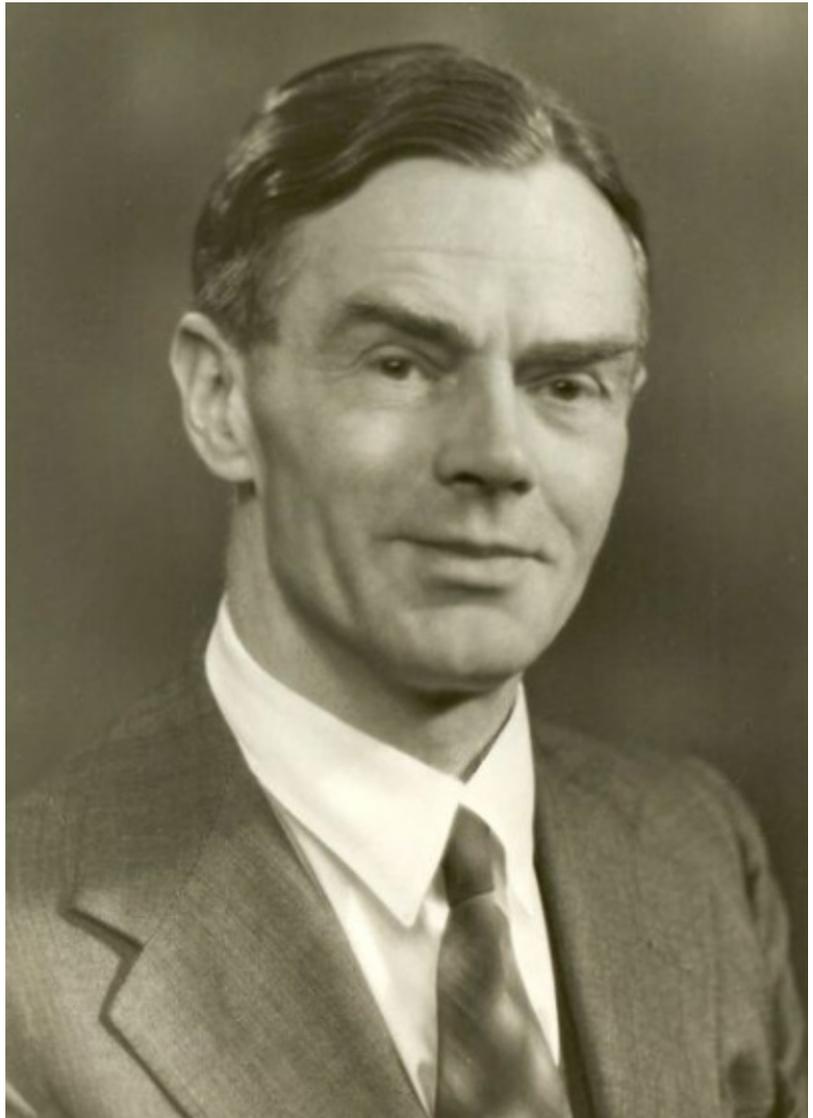
consciousness was the history and the development of language. This was coupled with his views on the movement from unitary meaning to the fragmentation of meaning, and the recovery of meaning through metaphor (see 2010). In fact, for Barfield, language is not just an instrument we use for communication, but a reflection of self-consciousness. For Barfield, it is through language that reality is shaped. The link between language, meaning, and consciousness evolution has deep social implications: if people have transitioned from a participatory meaning to a situation where meaning is not immediately found in nature, then it must be consciously recovered, as this process of recovery is not automatic. Yet, on this recovery of meaning, will depend the cohesion and sense of community of a society.

In July 1940, Barfield published an essay titled "An Effective Approach to Social Change." Some parts of this essay sound uncannily relevant to our time. In this essay,

Barfield criticises his contemporary people's inability to use reason soundly due to an unconscious impulse to individualism. Yet, for Barfield, the problem was not so much individualism as such, but rather its equation with freedom and wealth, and, in his context, the confusion caused by Hitler's and Stalin's collectivism. Here, Barfield opposes the economy to the spiritual life. He writes that in a community, the economic life is not the locus where individualism can find its expression. He continues: "the true vehicle for the impulse to individualism is men's spiritual life. That part cannot *fail* to express individualism and remain human. We should see that man must be free, not because he is a trader, but because he is a spirit" (1940, as cited in Hipolito, 2024, pp. 142-143). Moreover, the individual spirit achieves its full potential in a free spiritual life through creative thought and moral imagination, which not only leads to moral well-being, but is "necessary for the growth and development of society" (Hipolito, 2024, p.143).

Reconnecting with what was said about the link between the evolution of consciousness and the development of language, Barfield saw the link as having originally taken the form of myth (2010, pp. 69-85). In antiquity, therefore, myth was the foundation of the evolution of humanity as we know it today. For Barfield, myth itself, although it has largely transformed into philosophy, has not entirely disappeared, but has taken new forms (see 2013c). Moreover, once again, myth signals paradigm shifts in the evolution of consciousness. This time, however, to move out of alienation into final participation, the shift can only be conscious and self-aware. It will start in the lives of individuals, who will affect their environment and pull others into the same movement (2012, pp. 54-55). These individuals would make use of the imagination as an epistemological means that links reason and spirit (2011). This imagination would, knowingly and actively, draw out and enhance new myths from the current society. Once again, these new myths will be instruments of community cohesion within society. Notably, Barfield, in his time, signalled the Inklings, especially Tolkien, as undertaking this imaginative effort (2013c).

An obvious but necessary clarification needs to be made here. Barfield can be labelled "original" because he neither aligns with a liberal progressivism that puts the economy or new technologies as the new messiahs for the (or some) individuals of today's societies; nor with conservatives or totalitarians (like Hitler in Barfield's time, but also like certain religious fundamentalists) who resort to old myths that have lost their spiritual power and serve only for social indoctrination and anonymous collectivism.

Barfield points to a sense of *community* within societies that can be achieved through the spiritual enhancement of *individuals* through the use of the *imagination* and creation of *new myths*. Having lived and worked in the 20th century, Barfield emerges as a prophetic figure in a biblical sense, in that his work appears to be still relevant today, and especially because, to this day, he is not a mainstream thinker.

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The Social Life of Art: Being Beyond the Artist

by Adrian Camilleri Chiaro

We've all been there. Pacing through an art gallery, looking at the works, thinking, *What is this about*? *What does it mean*? Mysterious, they beckon us.

To understand such works, we tend to search for clues in context: Who made this, why, for whom? What was the artist thinking, what was his background? What sort of world did he live in? We often find meaning in the work because we find answers to such questions. It's almost as if the artwork exists because of the web of relations it spawns – between the artist who intended it and the viewer who encounters that intention. To understand the work is to understand its genesis.

And even if we don't have that information to hand, we tend to shelve the artwork as something *still to be understood*, if we only dig deeper or in the right direction. We assume the meaning is there somewhere, buried within the work, waiting for us to uncover it. We become archaeologists of intention, chipping away at layers of form and history in search for the artist's intention expressed and made manifest in the work. It's an attractive image: the artwork as a vessel containing meaning, the viewer

as some sort of codebreaker. But that image rests on the quiet assumption that meaning is fixed, stable, like a diamond in the rough, steady and resilient.

This way of thinking lingers today. We often approach art as if meaning were a fixed essence for us to discover. Yet around the middle of the twentieth century, philosophy began to unsettle that assumption. Among them, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that meaning is not written in stone but shaped by use. It changes as words and actions are used in different situations.

To show this, Wittgenstein asked what we mean by the word "game." At first, we might look for a clear definition. Perhaps games always involve competition, or rules, or fun. But then we realise that no single feature fits them all. Football has teams and physical effort. Chess has none of that, and nor does solitaire, but both share strategy. Solitaire may not have teams, but it has rules. On the other hand, a child playing make-believe may not have rules, yet we still call it a game.

We recognise 'games' through shared habits of speech and behaviour, not through any essence that all games possess.

This shift in thinking about language changed how we think about art, too. If meaning comes from use rather than some fixed essence, then couldn't a work of art free itself from what its maker intended? Meaning begins to move *between* people. Each viewer brings a different background, mood, and history to what they see, and these encounters colour the work in ways the artist could never predict.

This does not mean that meaning becomes random, or that anything goes. Society, with its shared habits and shared ways of speaking, tends to steady interpretation. We look together, talk together, and our conversations slowly form what we take a work to mean.

Yet even within that shared ground, each response remains personal. You may look at Picasso's *Guernica* and see the horrors of war, just as the artist intended, while I might feel a wave of nostalgia because that same image — trivialised, commodified — was printed on a fridge magnet at my grandmother's sunny house. That nuance reveals the complexity of what a work means. Meaning moves away from the genesis of the work, the moment of creation, from what the artist may have wanted to express, and towards what continues to happen between us and the work. It is not a message delivered once and for all, but an ongoing exchange.

This changes how we understand not only the artwork but the artist's role. No longer tethered to the artist, no longer an extension of the artist's will, the work becomes something that could exist in its own right. Once created, it begins to live a separate life — seen, discussed, copied, reimagined by others who bring it into new contexts. The artist sinks into the remote background, and the work begins to speak for itself.

This has been called the 'death' of the author, but what it really describes is the birth of the artwork as independent. No longer simply a trace of who made it, it gains a kind of selfhood, becomes an object encountered, interpreted, but never fully contained by any single act of interpretation.
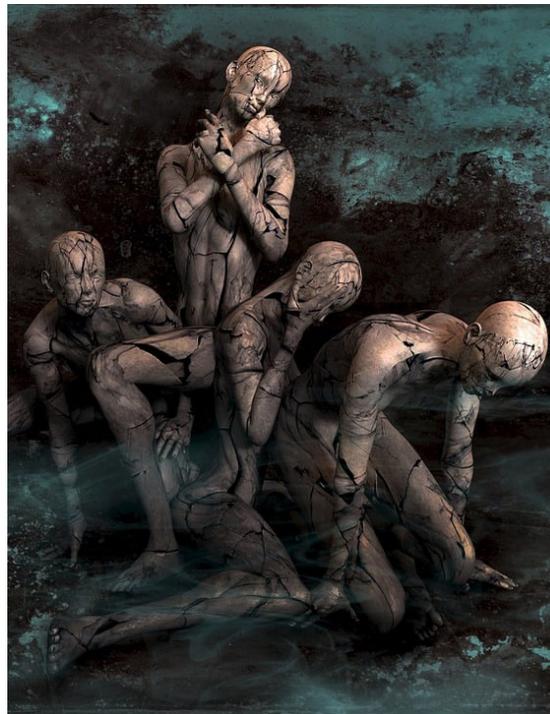
When we recognise this independence, something else comes into view. Artworks are not only things we respond to, they are also objects that exist beyond our response. Even when we are not looking, they persist; their being does not depend on our attention; they are objects-*in-themselves*. And there's always something in them that escapes us, resisting our full knowledge and understanding. This withheld, hidden side keeps drawing us back, giving art its mystery, the sense that there is always more to it than what we can say. Artworks, therefore, live in relation to us, but also apart from us.

An artwork, then, stands at a distance from both maker and audience. It belongs fully to neither. Its being unfolds in the space between what it is and what we take it to be, a gap that keeps it alive, allowing new relations to emerge over time.

Something similar holds for people themselves. We never completely understand one another, yet this very distance is what makes shared life possible. If we were to know each other entirely, nothing new could happen between us. The space of not-knowing is what leaves room for conversation, change, and flourishing. It allows relations to grow rather than collapse into certainty.

Art reminds us of this. Meaning does not arise from control or possession because to control something is to stop it from speaking back. Possession ends dialogue. Relation, by contrast, keeps the exchange alive. To relate to art, as to others, is to reach toward what we do not fully grasp and find. In that reaching we find a form of understanding that is never final but always shared.

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On the Couch with Social Work and the Harb al-Ibadah

by Denitsa Markova

I would like to begin by positioning this text in the space between opinion and knowledge, that is to say, neither entirely subjective nor fully objective. From this vantage point, I explore the trajectories of social work in Malta through a critical social work perspective, drawing briefly on two events that took place on July 29, 2025, both of which I was able to 'attend' from my couch at home.

To orient the discussion, I will try to broadly define what constitutes the coordinates of social work. At its core, social work engages with the social context, that is, the unique conditions, tensions, and contradictions experienced by individuals and communities within their lived environments [1]. When these conditions disrupt daily life or undermine human dignity, they are regarded as social issues. Social issues today are increasingly complex, global, and interconnected. People experience rising inequalities, a growing lack of housing solutions, systemic discrimination based on race, gender, disability, and immigration status, mounting mental health challenges, the urgent need for climate and environmental justice, forced migration and displacement, threats to children's wellbeing, the pressures of ageing without adequate support, and the devastating impacts of war. The social worker's role is to address social issues at both individual and collective levels, using a range of methods such as emotional and practical support to those affected, peer support, community mobilisation, prevention, advocacy campaigns, to name a few.

Critical social workers, in particular, trace the link between personally experienced problems (e.g., being homeless, being jobless, being hospitalised) and the broader socio-economic structures that produce and perpetuate these conditions [2]. They connect the personal with the political, analysing it to identify possibilities for change, while critically reflecting on their own practices, autonomy, and power [2]. In other words, critical social work goes beyond individualised forms of helping; it confronts and seeks to transform the very systems that create

The peace bench at the inner Cyprus divide in Nicosia, 2025. Photo taken by the author.

and sustain injustice. The knowledge to inform this understanding is derived from the mission of social work in its earliest times as well as the influence of philosophers such as Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, each of whom, in distinct ways, examined the operations of power and social struggle: Marx through the lens of class and economic exploitation [3], and Foucault through discourse, institutional control, and everyday practices [4]. This is how the critical social work perspective aligns closely with the theme of this magazine issue – social philosophy. Both are concerned with interrogating social structures and human relationships, uphold a commitment to justice, and embody a reflexive and politically engaged spirit that aims to stimulate meaningful change.

As social issues grow and narratives frame them as matters of individual responsibility, examining the state of social work is important not only for understanding how the profession responds to them, but also because it functions as a barometer of how justice is understood, valued, and enacted within a given society. In this text, the reflective insights specifically relate to the context of Malta and, as mentioned, are based on a brief discussion of two events that took place last summer. The first was a local solidarity demonstration protesting Israel's mass starvation of Palestinians in Gaza [5], while the second was an in-country meeting of social workers, offering insight into current discussions within the field.

The activist group *Moviment Graffitti* led a march through Valletta, urging the Maltese government to take a firm stand against the starvation crisis, where Israeli authorities have imposed a blockade on all humanitarian aid [6], abandoning people to obvious and cruel forms of violence – *Harb al-Ibadah* (war of ethnic cleansing, genocide), as the Palestinian poet Omar Hammash helps us name [7], echoing the position taken by the International Court of Justice [8] and the UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese [9]. Slipping quietly under the radar, on the same day and at the same time, a meeting was held behind closed digital doors by the Malta Social Work Profession Board, the authority regulating social work practice in the country. Social workers, mostly female, were summoned to discuss the new ways they are expected to prove their

skills and knowledge. A lavish parade of professional development activities were discussed – conferences, trainings, the reading of professional literature, among others – which now fall within the list of compulsory tasks social workers must engage with and document 'properly'. What had long been an organic process was now a formal requirement for warrant renewal, as if professionals could no longer be trusted to guide their own growth. The meeting proceeded without any reference to the march unfolding alongside it, a choice made by the organisers.[1]

Surreal as it was, my passive posture of sitting *on the couch* and following both events online offered a glimpse into a strange combination of languages: one voice declared 'Gaza, we see you', while another recited a cryptic passage about a 'fast-track warrant procedure'; one spoke of erasure and the oppression of the Palestinian people, the other described, with elegant eloquence, a set of 'temporary measures'. The decision not to mention the march, and the implicit pressure on social workers to prioritise attendance at the meeting under the guise of policy compliance, was more than a problematic omission. The counterargument that the march should be dismissed as a mere disruption to preserve the meeting's focus fails the moment it is genuinely considered. Such reasoning is not only dismissive; it deletes the core values that define social work. While some were marching, others were on a social justice diet, consuming the sterile language of bureaucracy. Amid the noise, Hannah Arendt's voice cuts through. The 'banality of evil' does not scream, it whispers through silence and conformity.

The failure of social workers to publicly and collectively express outrage over the *Harb al-Ibadah* invites reflection on the historical foundations of social work, both internationally and locally. Contemporary social work bears the imprint of early Western pioneers – Jane Addams (USA), Alice Salomon (Germany), and Mary Richmond (England) – who approached the social terrain from distinct angles. Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (1931), adopted a politically charged stance, advocating for social and economic rights for the working class, the propertyless, women, and migrants. Her opposition to U.S. intervention in the

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[1] While omitted here for the sake of brevity, the context of the new professional development requirements and the gendered factor they entail deserve their own dedicated exploration.

First World War led to her being regarded as a traitor by the mainstream public, investigated by legislative committees, denounced as subversive by political and civic leaders, and relentlessly attacked in the press [10]. Similarly, Alice Salomon campaigned against the Second World War and, as a result, the Nazis banned her from the school of social work she had founded, burned her books, and ultimately expelled her from Germany [10]. In contrast, Mary Richmond's contribution to social work was rooted less in political activism and more in professionalisation, focusing on the development of a systematic framework for practice. Her seminal work *Social Diagnosis* (1917) codified the individualised logic of social work and remains a cornerstone of the field. This divergence reflects competing visions of social work: one oriented toward systemic transformation, the other toward individual adaptation within existing structures.

Locally, the originating narrative of Maltese social work has historically leaned toward the latter vision, one that places considerable value on institutional and colonial legacies. The profession's roots are commonly traced to church-led welfare initiatives and British influence, particularly through the promotion of social casework in child protection [11]. Central to this account is the frequently cited *Ross Report* (1956), which positioned the British model as the ideal framework for developing social work in Malta [12]. In aligning itself with Mary Richmond's legacy, Maltese social work embedded an understanding of its mission in highly individualised forms of helping, shaping its formative experience around casework and personal intervention.

This underlying vision – one that frames social work as individual adaptation within existing structures, under the guise of introducing more 'effective' measures – leaves limited room for upholding the principles of social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility, even when these are formally enshrined in legislation [13]. Current directions in social work act as a barometer, showing justice reduced from a collective pursuit of solidarity to a technocratic function of efficiency and compliance. In *The Rebel* (1951), Albert Camus [14] writes:

"...If one believes in nothing, if nothing makes sense, if we can assert no value whatsoever, everything is permissible and nothing is important ... Since nothing is true or false, good or bad, our principle will become that of showing ourselves to be the most effective, in other words the most powerful. And then the world will no longer be divided into the just and the unjust, but into masters and slaves..."

War erodes the very foundations on which social work depends [3], and that is why social workers must be calling for peace. This is not merely a political stance, it is a professional imperative. The assault on our principles is an assault on social work itself. Social work was built on the courage of pioneers who stood up for peace and justice, often at great personal cost. Today, the push for 'safe', professionalised roles risks turning social work into a distant, bureaucratic system that loses touch with human suffering, and cedes civil and political rights to governing institutions. To preserve its legitimacy and dignity, Maltese social work must reclaim its voice, articulate a collective position rooted in justice, and transform academic and professional spaces into sites of emancipatory knowledge. Without such a shift, we risk a deeper erosion of our values – individually, professionally, and socially.

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When the Path Forward Is a Circular Trap

by Yandiswa Shirley Mthembu and Thomas O. Scarborough

Why do systems that promise freedom and mobility so often result in entrapment and exclusion? This central paradox of our time finds a powerful answer in the work of the Polish-British sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman. His penetrating metaphor of the tourist and the vagabond serves as an indispensable philosophical lens for diagnosing the human condition in what he termed the "liquid modern" society. He noted that economic systems, immigration policies, and social structures privilege certain groups while marginalising others – more than that, creating a large no man's land in the middle, from which there is often no exit or escape.

In our consumer-driven world, Bauman states that old class divisions have morphed into a fluid chasm where mobility is the defining form of capital. This is not merely the freedom to travel, but the capacity to shape one's identity, social standing, and economic future at will. Bauman exposes the central paradox of liquid modernity – that the very pursuit of mobility creates new forms of entrapment.

Consider the "American Dream" as a quintessential example of the myth of universal mobility. A narrative that sees equal opportunity as being available to all, permitting the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved. Yet, this myth obscures a rigid reality where systemic barriers, such as student debt and skyrocketing costs of living, ensure hard work that rarely yields ownership or security.

The same crisis is mirrored in cities across the Global North. In Berlin and Barcelona, rampant gentrification and the "rent gap" have driven out long-term residents, creating a class of working professionals who cannot afford to live in their own cities. In London, even those with solid middle-class incomes are locked out of homeownership, becoming a generation of perpetual renters.

The logic of exclusion inherent in the housing "gap market" proliferates throughout postmodern society, manifesting as a series of structural divides. The wage

gap, for example, reveals how the market itself is a discriminatory engine, ensuring equal work does not yield equal pay, thus codifying gender and racial inequity into the economy itself.

These are not isolated issues but interconnected symptoms of a system that champions theoretical freedom over tangible equity. They reveal a global consensus that prioritises market efficiency over social solidarity, inevitably producing a liminal class, too rich for help, too poor to thrive.

This article uses the South African "gap market" housing trap as a critical case study to examine how well-intentioned policies can generate new forms of exclusion. By examining this specific phenomenon, the article shows that individuals are deemed too affluent for state aid yet too poor for market-based housing. The discussion expands to challenge the broader ideological function of the belief in universally accessible opportunity. This belief does more than offer optimism; it naturalises inequality by attributing social outcomes primarily to individual agency, thereby obscuring structural impediments. Moving beyond the South African example, I argue that a truly equitable society requires the deliberate dismantling of systemic barriers, rather than the mere assertion of their absence.

The "gap market" phenomenon is not a uniquely South African legacy of apartheid, but rather a global hallmark of neoliberal governance and postmodern capitalism. It is a stark, early manifestation of a worldwide condition where the promise of mobility masks a reality of engineered exclusion.

Historically, South Africa has grappled with entrenched housing challenges that have stemmed from the 1920 Housing Act: a housing system later engineered by the apartheid regime as a primary tool of social control and racial capitalism. Through the Group Areas Act (1950), it forcibly removed non-white populations from designated "white" areas to peripheral, under-serviced townships and homelands. Thus, the apartheid housing legacy is one of spatially engineered inequality, systematic disenfranchisement, and the deliberate prevention of Black capital formation.

The 1997 Housing Act marked a decisive break from apartheid-era legislation, aiming to dismantle the spatial and racial inequalities engineered by the former regime. Despite this successful political transition to democracy, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal nations, grappling with persistent high unemployment, poverty, and extreme income inequality. Consequently, a significant portion of the population remains dependent on government assistance for essential services, with housing being a primary need.

Initially, post-apartheid housing policy focused on providing fully subsidised homes for the poorest citizens. However, it became evident that the housing crisis extended beyond the destitute to encompass a growing "gap market". This group, often termed the "working poor", comprises individuals with a steady income who are nevertheless systematically excluded from the formal property market. They earn too much to qualify for a full government subsidy yet too little to qualify for a traditional mortgage, trapping them in a cycle of rental or informal housing.

To address this specific challenge, the South African government introduced the Finance Linked Individual Subsidy Programme (FLISP) in 2012. FLISP was designed to act as a bridge, providing a subsidy to improve this group's "bankability" and increase their chances of securing mortgage finance. However, the programme's effectiveness is hampered by a fundamental contradiction: the very demographic it targets is often over-indebted and thus considered a high credit risk by lenders. This reality undermines the core mortgage-linked assumption of FLISP, creating a significant impediment to its success in unlocking homeownership for the gap market.

The post-apartheid housing policy (FLISP), designed to redress historical racial inequities, established a binary framework for assistance: fully subsidised housing for those earning below R3,500 per month, and an assumption of autonomous market access for those above it. This approach presupposed a clear threshold of self-sufficiency, implicitly adopting a neoliberal faith in market readiness.

However, this rigid income categorisation resulted in a liminal economic class, stranded between eligibility for state support and access to private credit. Rather than fostering inclusion, the policy generated exclusion, ensnaring the working poor in a gap market designed by the very mechanisms intended to liberate them.

The failure of this model lies in its disregard for structural economic realities. The assumption that an income just above R3,500 enables entry into the housing market, ignores profound affordability challenges. This yawning disparity between policy logic and financial practicality

reveals how well-intentioned interventions can perpetuate, even deepen, the inequalities they were meant to resolve.

The South African housing gap market is a potent example of what Zygmunt Bauman identified as a structural trap of liquid modernity. A system where the promise of mobility inherently produces new forms of exclusion.

This is not an accidental policy failure but a predictable outcome of a framework that categorises human need into rigid, administrative brackets, creating a "liminal class" of the perpetually in-between.

The very assumption that those above an arbitrary income threshold can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" reinforces the myth of meritocracy. It attributes systemic failure to individual agency, suggesting that an inability to secure housing is a personal shortcoming rather than a result of designed economic barriers. This myth naturalises inequality, ensuring that the structural nature of the trap remains obscured by the neoliberal faith in individual mobility.

Thus, the South African "gap market" is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it reflects a broader global condition of structural exclusion, vividly mirrored even in European contexts. In major cities like Berlin, London, and Paris, a growing cohort of middle-income teachers, nurses, and civil servants find themselves permanently priced out of homeownership and struggling with soaring rents. They are trapped by their own adequacy, too employed for aid, yet underpaid for ownership.

Similarly, refugees and migrants in the EU face the same systemic limbo. They are excluded from welfare by legal status yet forced into precarious labour that ensures ongoing insecurity. Thus, fully governed by the system but denied its protections.

This universality reveals the "trap" not as a national idiosyncrasy, but as a defining feature of contemporary neoliberal societies. What binds these seemingly disparate cases is the mechanism of the trap itself. Systems that promise inclusion through merit or mobility instead engineer new hierarchies of exclusion.

These gaps, whether in housing, wages, opportunity, or justice, are not isolated failures but interconnected symptoms of an economic and political order. An order that prioritises efficiency over equity, mobility over belonging, and growth over dignity. They reveal a world where inclusion is often conditional, access is gatekept, and human worth is measured by productivity or purchasing power.

The absence of a simple solution is inherent to their nature. These problems are complex, multi-causal, and resistant to linear fixes. Addressing these gaps demands not mere policy tweaks, but a radical reimagining of opportunity, resource distribution, and human value beyond the confines of citizenship, class, and capital. What unites these gaps is their origin in systems that sort people into categories of worthiness – and in doing so, leave too many perpetually trapped.

Ultimately, the promise of linear advancement, whether framed as the "American Dream" or other narratives of meritocratic uplift is largely illusory. Such myths are not merely optimistic; they are profoundly misplaced, as they ignore the complex realities of privilege, power, and structural exclusion. True justice, therefore, requires not just policy adjustment, but a radical dismantling of the categorical and ideological foundations that make such traps inevitable.

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Peace: A Perspective

By David Bevan

One significant starting point here is that peace is processual. Peace is a complex process rather than any finished or completed thing. As such, it is always being maintained, and/or neglected, and remade by us all as members of a community. I cannot put peace on the table in front of you and examine it in any scientific way. It is a process in which we in Malta are all to some extent living. A tendency not to think about peace, or to think of it as a thing could be considered defective, inattentive and literally degenerate. Peace is not just there. It is created by us and it can, or will fail, if we do not act to maintain it. One version of this quality (among many through history) came from the British minister of war just a hundred years ago; "The story of the human race is war. Except for brief and precarious interludes there has never been peace in the world; and long before history began murderous strife was universal and unending." (Churchill, 1924, p. 1)

These opening claims draw interpretively on a number of authors. From Heraclitus (540-480 BCE) they take the view that the world is in the natural process of flowing: a continuous and varied change, and a tenet that "the story of the human race is war" (Kirk, 1954, p. 245/249). This latter fragment from Heraclitus is extensively reviewed as a process in a study of the beginnings of Western thinking (Heidegger, 1943 [2018]). A similar theme of war (polemos) is picked up in the ethics of Emanuel Levinas, again with some emphasis on the necessity of being in the process of making peace, through the accepted social discourse of trade or exchange: "Commerce is better than war, for in peace the good has already reigned" (Levinas, 1991). Perhaps this idea seems familiar from Hume (2012 [1752]) or Montaigne (1993 [Ca. 1586]) – each of whom considered trading to be a positive interaction for peaceful relations between people. But, for Levinas it was the practice of one person coming face to face with another which is the basis of any ethics, in his view. The axiom underpinning the suggestion that it could be defective either to not think of peace, or to think of it as a finished object arises from readings of Nietzsche (1990 [1889], 2006 [1995]), who itemises for us 'four great mistakes' in Western (or Socratic/Christian) thinking. In particular these mistakes comprise for Nietzsche:

- the specifically human problem with (or confusion over) ascribing cause and effect on the basis of appearances,
- with no appreciation for what is not seen, leading us to false theories of causality,
- purely imaginary causes, and
- the fallacy that freedom is anything other than materially contingent, and relative.

These forms of decadence can be summarised as an adverse reaction to the perceived failure to deal with a problem only on the basis of what happens in the material world and to fall for the temptations of speculative idealism, as the basis of an argument. Peace is something we make, and/or fail at making.

Some educational institutions have departments, or faculties of either 'war' or 'peace' studies, sometimes mixed in differing degrees with notions of conflict and remediation. This tends to suggest that these two conditions are somehow digitally comparable. But, as people who have lived largely with peace for a succession of decades, that is surely too simple a position for us to take in considering the complete breakdown of civilised life and relations that the conditions of war can be seen to represent.

As we have the opportunity daily to ponder and be worried by wars both relatively near (such as in Ukraine and Palestine) as well as farther afield, does it occur to many of us that our peace (such as it is) was achieved by us making it, and in some cases losing it? The Uppsala University Conflict Data Programme (https://ucdp.uu.se) listed 31 active wars in 2010; by 2024 this had risen to 61. The consequences of these increases show up not least in the number of people who are displaced by war and seeking safety or asylum sometimes in our own homeland. In many cases some causes underpinning the origins of these conflicts can be traced contingently to the actions of our friends and allies: for example the geographical repartition of the Ottoman Empire by Sykes and Picot (UK and France) in 1916.

We are fortunate to have a number of institutions that make possible, or at least tend to facilitate peace. A constitution, our democratic election systems, our education systems, our health services, our civil code, the military and civil services, the underpinning legal frameworks and our agreements with other allies are all part of a sometimes indiscernible national commons that processually holds the peace. These domestic institutions together with an array of international associations like the European Union and the United Nations provide agreements, treaties and mechanisms which tend to support mutually sustained peaceful coexistence through trade, diplomacy and cultural interchange. As individuals participate with and among these institutional arrangements, a process of democratic consolidation is fostered, which leads to the norms of the institutions being held, or varied, in practice and by agreement. Disagreements can be resolved discursively by reference to agreed rules and or adjudicated impartially according to the prevailing law.

If I reflect on what I do, then it is possible to have a rare insight into how I operate as part of one or a number of institutions which in turn supports the peace in which we all live. Following a course in education or training, working as a member or leader in a recognised profession, vocation,

skill or trade, driving and complying with the highway code, keeping yourself healthy, pursuing or supporting a sport: each or any of these and many other activities will be tied to social or legal norms that support and continue to rebuild our peace. So let us conclude this section with that: what are you doing to keep the peace?

Crossing now to a specific case, the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has recently warned us that Europe finds itself in the most difficult and dangerous situation since the end of the Second World War. (Foy, 2025) These words express a profound concern about this continent's current security, which she perceives as fragile, uncertain, and threatened from multiple directions. The ongoing war with Russia in Ukraine has become a symbol of this vulnerability, not only because of the immediate violence it brings, but also because it challenges the very principles of peace, sovereignty, and international order that have defined post-war Europe for eight decades.

Frederiksen argues that Russia's invasion represents more than a regional dispute; it is a direct assault on the idea that borders cannot be changed by force. She warns that if the aggression is not resisted, Europe risks sliding further into a new era in which intimidation and power politics replace diplomacy and collaboration. Beyond the battlefield, she points to the rise of hybrid warfare — a complex form of conflict involving cyberattacks, disinformation, infrastructure sabotage, and the manipulation of migration flows — all of which blur the line between war and peace. In her view, Europe is already being tested daily by these invisible threats, designed to weaken trust, create division, and erode the unity that keeps nations secure.

Frederiksen's concerns also reflect a degeneration in Europe. After decades of relative stability, many countries reduced their defence budgets and assumed that lasting peace was guaranteed. The end of the Cold War brought optimism and economic integration, but it also produced unawareness and effective complacency. Now, with the return of Trump and explicit great-power rivalry, Europe faces a hard truth: it needs to rebuild a capacity to defend itself. The Danish leader's message is therefore both a warning and a call to action. It is a demand for Europe to strengthen its own security structures, to invest in defence industries, and to reduce dependence on external powers such as the United States. This message goes beyond military spending; it is also about our mental readiness, unity, and the political will to protect democratic values. Frederiksen's fear that the slow

and fragmented response of the West to emerging political and ecological threats could embolden any authoritarian state that seeks to test Europe's resolve. In one sense, her statement that "Europe is in a dangerous position" is not meant to spread fear but to awaken our responsibility, to remind us (the citizens and governments alike) that peace is never permanent, and that safeguarding it requires both strength and solidarity.

Maintaining peace is not only the task of political leaders or armies; it is also as discussed here above, the responsibility of each individual. Every person plays some small but essential role in shaping the moral and social climate of their community. In a time when information spreads faster than truth, ordinary citizens can protect peace by remaining critical, informed, and aware. In refusing to share misinformation, in questioning sources, and by resisting propaganda, which is designed to provoke hatred or confusion, as Dame Vivienne Westwood (2007) encouraged, individuals help build resilience against the psychological dimensions of hybrid warfare. Equally important in the defence of democratic

values, we need to protect freedom of expression, respect for the law, and the peaceful resolution of disagreements. When educated citizens participate actively in democracy, vote thoughtfully, and engage in respectful debate, they strengthen and renew a peaceful society.

Individuals can act through empathy and solidarity. Supporting humanitarian causes, helping refugees, and showing compassion for those affected by war humanises global conflicts that might otherwise seem distant. Such gestures of care send a powerful message that Europe's strength lies not only in weapons and alliances but in a shared humanity. On a smaller scale, peace begins in everyday relationships; in classrooms, workplaces, and online spaces where people choose understanding over hostility, dialogue over division, and respect over prejudice. Teaching young people to think critically, listen openly, and cooperate across differences is an investment in a more peaceful future.

Frederiksen's recent warning invites both collective and individual reflection. Politically, it calls for a Europe that is

prepared, united, and capable of defending its principles. Personally, it surely reminds each of us that peace is not a gift handed down by governments but a living process sustained by humanistic behaviour. If Europe is to overcome this and other dangerous moments, its citizens must see themselves as participants in the effort, and not just as consuming bystanders. This requires vigilance against manipulation, patience in dialogue, and fearless courage in defending truth and fairness. Peace is not maintained only by treaties or armies but by millions of daily choices to cooperate rather than compete, to understand rather than judge, and to stand up for what is right even when it is difficult.

To conclude, Frederiksen's statement about Europe standing in danger is both a warning and a moral challenge consolidating the opening of this article. She says to Europe "wake up, and recognise the fragility of your security, and be ready to act today to maintain peace." A path to continued peace lies not only in astute political strategy but equally in the conscience of all its citizens. Every individual who chooses understanding over hostility, truth over lies, and solidarity over indifference contributes to the invisible but powerful defence that keeps peace alive. Peace depends not just on governments preparing for war, but on individuals preparing and acting for peace—through educated awareness, intelligent compassion, and the courage to protect ourselves and each other, and the values that unite us.

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The Malta Summit of 2-3 December 1989, where Bush met Gorbachev, marked the end of the Cold War, a rare moment of peace in human history.

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Knowledge and Governance: Weighing the Threat of Ignorance in the Age of Information

By Diana Corrato

Introduction

The ideal of governance by a knowledgeable few, stands in sharp contrast to the democratic principles that now underpin most of the civilised world. In several modern societies, education is mandatory, literacy is widespread, and the right to vote is a fundamental civic duty. Every citizen is theoretically empowered to understand and participate in governance, yet this unprecedented access to information has not led to a more informed electorate. Instead, it has paradoxically created new, complex forms of ignorance.

I begin by tracing historical ideals of knowledge and governance before analysing the mechanisms of modern ignorance, arguing that despite the promise of an educated populace, the modern landscape is one of intellectual fragmentation. Amongst the factors fostering this climate of uncertainty, I discuss three interconnected symptoms that actively undermine deliberative democracy and hinder our ability to solve complex global issues: information overload, disinformation, and confirmation bias. By exploring how the ideas of philosophers like Plato and Nietzsche illuminate our contemporary crisis, I argue that the future of effective governance hinges not on the sheer abundance of

information, but on a critical re-evaluation of how we cultivate intellectual virtue and civic literacy.

Historical Ideals of Knowledge and Governance

The conviction that true governance must be built upon a foundation of knowledge is a cornerstone of classical philosophy. This ideal found its most enduring form in Plato's concept of the philosopher-king, an individual driven by the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, rather than power and greed. This view treats knowledge and reason as the foundation of political legitimacy. For Plato, true knowledge wasn't mere familiarity with appearances but a grasp of the *Forms*, in other words, knowledge of the objective truth (Plato, 2015). This distinction is decisive for collective flourishing or societal collapse. In this sense, knowledge provides clarity and guards against being misled by the vastness and dissolution of the world.

Crucially, this philosophical model emerged from a social context where knowledge was a privilege, not a right. The pursuit of wisdom required the opportunity for leisure and immense resources. Therefore, for Plato and his contemporaries, the dedication to knowledge was indeed seen as a moral and intellectual triumph, distinguishing the virtuous few from the masses.

Plato's student, Aristotle, refined this ideal with his emphasis on practical wisdom (*phronesis*). In Islamic philosophy, thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes upheld the model of the philosopher or prophet as a similar guide. By exploring these diverse traditions, we see a consistent historical consensus: that the quality of governance is inextricably tied to the intellectual and moral integrity of those who lead, a principle that sets the stage for our modern paradox.

With unprecedented access to information, it might seem easier than ever to approach a democratic ideal. As it is no longer merely the elite who have access to education and information, it is now possible for the entire population to engage meaningfully in political discourse. Yet the very abundance of data often makes discernment more difficult; the variety is so great that instead of guiding understanding, it fragments it. Although in a different context, Nietzsche anticipated this risk in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, where he warned against the dangers of 'living historically,' that

is becoming overburdened by facts and records without the capacity to integrate them meaningfully (Nietzsche, 1997). For him, knowledge must be lived and embodied rather than hoarded.

As I shall elucidate, contemporary scholarship suggests that our informational abundance resembles Nietzsche's excess more than Plato's ideal: it provides more material than ever, but not necessarily more wisdom.

The Anatomy of Modern Ignorance and the Effect on Democracy

The most fundamental issue is the cognitive problem of information overload, or 'data excess' (Schwarzkopf, 2019). This is not a simple lack of information, but a paradoxical process where the effort to create more knowledge actually expands ignorance. Schwarzkopf outlines a new 'social ontology of organisational ignorance,' where the excessive presence of information, what he terms *parousia*, is as detrimental as its absence (*apousia*) (Schwarzkopf, 2019). We are bombarded with an unprecedented volume of facts and opinions, a torrent that induces severe cognitive fatigue.

Individuals are constantly fed often irreconcilable information and demanded to take a stand on what to like, what to agree or disagree with, what to eat, wear, hate, or think; all of which are guided and reinforced by algorithms and other systems. The absence of necessary tools to filter and discern the overwhelming amount of options and data tends, I argue, towards a state where the individual's freedom to be informed, to be engaged, and to pursue their goals is merely an illusion.

I particularly appreciate Byung Chul Han's formulation of this issue, which posits that this creates a paradox where 'freedom and constraint coincide,' thereby diminishing the ability to achieve the 'deep, contemplative attention' essential for political thought and cultural life (Han, 2015). The frenetic hyperattention required to manage this data excess thus displaces the repose necessary for political discernment, echoing Nietzsche's warning that this lack of repose turns civilization into a 'new barbarism' (Han, 2015; Nietzsche, 1996). Citizens often disengage or resort to mental shortcuts, failing to integrate knowledge

meaningfully, thereby creating a landscape ripe for manipulation and social fragmentation.

This environment of noise and cognitive exhaustion is actively exploited by disinformation, a malicious form of modern ignorance. This is not merely the absence of knowledge, but manufactured ignorance. Schwarzkopf (2019) notes that in data-intensive sectors, ignorance can be strategically created and reproduced through the intentional over-production of data: data excess is fetishised not to reduce ignorance, but to stabilise it. This active creation of confusion, which can serve as a competitive strategy or a method for risk aversion, effectively erodes faith in institutions and experts. When verifiable information is treated as just one more contested opinion on the chaotic digital terrain, the very basis for collective action is dissolved.

This manufactured ignorance is aggravated by the psychological phenomenon of 'wilful ignorance,' where individuals deliberately avoid relevant information to sidestep 'cognitive dissonance' or mental discomfort (Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022). This deliberate avoidance is a complex personal choice. Hertwig & Ellerbrock explain this phenomenon by analysing the case of former East German citizens who chose not to view their Stasi files to maintain personal harmony or avoid difficult decisions and social conflict, prioritising personal stability over a state-sanctioned quest for truth (Hertwig & Ellerbrock, 2022).

The phenomenon of wilful ignorance is further amplified by the social and psychological problem of confirmation bias. In a fragmented media ecosystem, social algorithms reinforce existing beliefs, trapping citizens within self-contained echo chambers and filter bubbles (Zipperstein, 2023). This process is an acute form of confirmation bias, where the tendency to favour information confirming pre-existing beliefs leads to intellectual fragmentation. This mechanism creates what Zipperstein (2023) refers to as incompatible realities, where groups hold irreconcilable versions of basic facts. When one segment of the population accepts the scientific consensus on public health or environmental threats and another dismisses it, collective action is paralysed.

Gabriel Lemonnier, Une soirée chez Madame Geoffrin en 1755 (1812). Oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Depiction of an Enlightenment salon as a site of collective intellectual exchange.

This systemic paralysis and the breakdown of shared facts are a primary cause of the erosion of democracy (Zipperstein, 2023), demonstrating that the quality of governance is fundamentally undermined by the inability of a fragmented citizenry to engage in a shared, deliberative process. The core democratic challenge is therefore not the quantity of information, but the lack of cognitive and civic tools required to navigate the contested digital sphere (Kellner, 2021).

Conclusion: Reclaiming Knowledge for Democracy

The modern information age presents a devastating paradox: the unparalleled access to knowledge has not led to the rule of the informed, but rather to a sophisticated crisis of new ignorances. The combined forces of information *parousia*, wilful ignorance, and digital echo chambers have eroded the foundations of deliberative democracy, resulting in policy paralysis and the widespread replacement of shared facts with incompatible realities.

I share Douglas Kellner's standpoint, arguing that to bridge this chasm between information and wisdom, the future of effective governance hinges not on the quantity of data, but on a critical re-evaluation of how we cultivate civic competence (Kellner, 2021). The solution lies in a dialectical approach that acknowledges technology's potential for both domination and emancipation, demanding both the 'democratisation of technology' and the 'technologising of democracy' (Kellner, 2021). This requires implementing new regulations to ensure universal broadband access and reforming media to combat polarisation.

Crucially, however, the emphasis must be on equipping the citizenry with critical digital literacies. As Kellner (2021) argues, education must be reconstructed as a technology for social progress and freedom, focusing on teaching citizens how to evaluate sources, understand biases, and separate fact from opinion. This renewed focus on intellectual virtue and civic literacy offers the necessary tools to navigate the contested digital terrain, transforming the achievement-subject from an auto-exploited victim of information fatigue into a critically engaged citizen. Only by fostering a public capable of deep, contemplative attention and equipped with the skills to synthesize the deluge of data can we hope to reclaim the integrity of democratic discourse and restore the vital connection between knowledge and sound governance.

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I'd Prefer Not to… Collaborate with AI

Rethinking Our Work Relationship with AI

By Krista Bonello and François Zammit
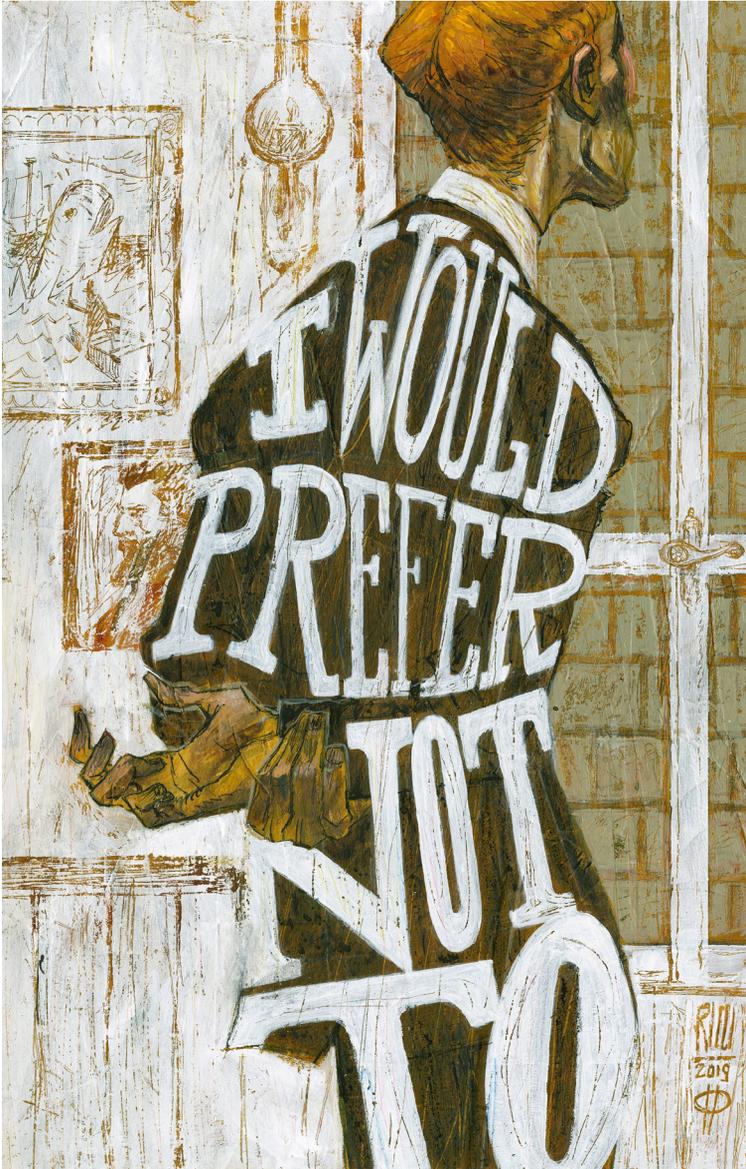
Artwork by Roberto Ricci(2019). Source: artist portfolio

The discussion in the European Parliament on the right **to disconnect** has highlighted some key concerns around the adoption and use of digital tools in the workplace, including "disadvantages giving rise to a number of ethical, legal and employment related challenges," and the anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout that may be produced by "excessive use" of technology having "a detrimental impact on workers' physical and mental health and well-being." These factors highlight the advisability of a cautious approach to technology at work. AI has not, as of yet, been subject to an equivalent discussion. These recommendations on the proposed right to disconnect were formulated just before the breakthrough in AI technology arrived on the scene through Large Language Models (LLMs), which were welcomed and lauded by pundits and tech-optimists with seemingly unabated enthusiasm. These buoyant 'stakeholders' have come to dominate and frame the conversation, leaving limited space for a critical evaluation of the topic. The 'naturalising' argument that AI is inevitable and unavoidable and that we need to upskill 'or else', is an insidious justification, the result of an aggressive "business model" (Gioia, 2025). The perception of its 'necessity' is constructed and carefully nurtured by corporate stakeholders, who marshal it in the belief that it will super-charge 'productivity' and 'efficiency'. The discourse promoting 'working smart' presents itself as favouring the employee but actually benefits the employer.

A recent article by Frank Landymore brought to attention the case of Kevin Cantera, who embraced the use of LLMs and viewed the use of these programmes as an aid and support. The efficient use of these tools meant the AI programme was learning and improving on the job, prompting the employer to replace Cantera and his colleagues with AI.

Cantera is a subject expert who worked with a company that produces educational resources for schools and students. His role was to create content used for educational purposes, but AI is now producing these resources. Landymore argues that with the introduction of AI to speed up 'productivity', employers expect more efficiency and a higher turnout. However, this is a recipe for making and accepting "workslop".

Cost-cutting and redundancies lead to diminished working conditions which negatively impact all stakeholders and create unintended consequences that harm the people who may rely on this product. As the case of Cantera indicates, students might be using educational resources with incorrect information due to the lack of expert human supervision. This means that the replacement of humans with AI products can have more profound consequences than anticipated. Experience has shown that we cannot afford to take a hubristic or complacent approach towards the adoption of AI.

Cantera's case is not an isolated one, but increasingly typical. The implications for the job market have been staggering, with a recent study from Stanford University researchers showing AI's impact on entry-level jobs. *Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence*, exposes how entry-level career jobs have been reduced by the adoption of AI programmes. Automation has led to the removal of career opportunities for graduates, blocking off the paths to professional careers for young people.

These scenarios suggest that the development and training of AI programmes are having an impact on jobs and professions, including those of upcoming and future generations, raising the question of whether we have an ethical obligation not to participate in this endeavour.

If we had to apply the reasoning of Hans Jonas to the adoption and use of AI, then we would have a moral duty to pause the development and use of AI so that we can truly assess the impact and effects before it is too late. His book, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, proposes the argument that new technologies bring with them new responsibilities and that these responsibilities need to be upheld to protect the value and quality of human life, as well as life itself. And since this presumes the ability to choose, the pressing question that necessarily precedes it, is:

should the worker have a *right* to refuse to use AI, and does this right require legal recognition and protection? The prospect of an inability to 'opt out' is no longer the stuff of science fiction nightmares (as in 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and the Star Trek episode 'The Ultimate Computer'), where AI seeks to autonomously override its off-switch. This is being translated into more pedestrian terms, as AI has not just insinuated itself into the workplace, but is increasingly threading itself through our everyday lives, regardless of our consent (Gioia, 2025).

During this accelerated development and push towards the use of AI, we have barely stopped to think about our duties towards ourselves and towards others when developing and using AI products. The drive towards early adoption and innovation at all costs has sidelined deep and meaningful discussion on the detrimental impact wrought upon society and the environment by AI products and the companies that are developing them. As mentioned in an article by *Politico* on the 16 June 2025, some AI investors criticise the EU AI Act, arguing that it stalls 'progress' in the European Union, allowing for other trade blocs and industrial powers to win the economic and technological race. These stakeholders are also pushing for revisions to the AI Act to allow more possibilities for AI developers to have free rein.

The widespread use of AI is driving a growing demand for data centre construction. These data centres leave a large footprint on the environment, negatively affecting
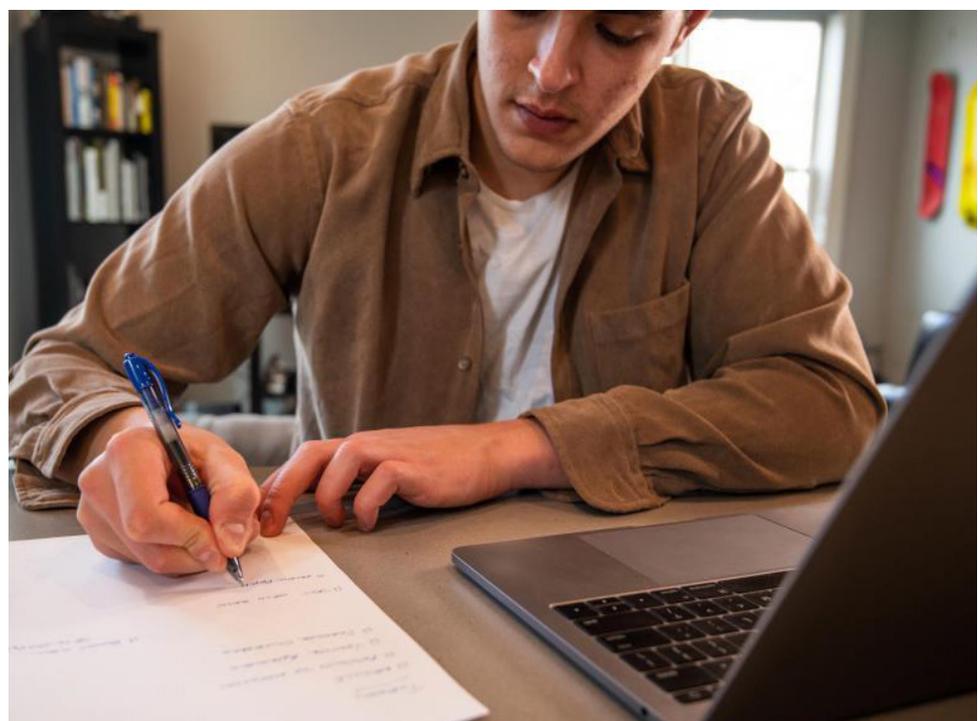
the natural environment and the human populations around them. These data centres are resource-hungry and contribute to carbon emissions, noise pollution, and the loss of natural habitats.

Therefore, the question posed above becomes more pressing: should employees also have a legally protected right to object to the use and training of AI? Should the law safeguard our space for dissent, our ability to refrain, to assert "I would prefer not to" like Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener? Even if not explicit, the demand to speed up productivity may effectively translate into irresistibly mounting pressure to use AI. Taking our cue from the proposed EU directive, which would safeguard our wellbeing by allowing us to disconnect, we would advocate for a directive that protects the worker's right to resist using AI products, which may likewise have a detrimental impact on our health and wellbeing (consequences that still require further study – urging caution), and which may, in the (not-so-distant) future, reshape the nature of work (including through the spread of algorithmic management), making jobs even more precarious.

AI is threatening jobs, and as Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei and the IMF have already warned, many entry-level jobs will be lost due to AI adoption. These concerns are supported by a *World Economic Forum* report stating that 41% of employers plan to cut employee numbers by introducing AI.

Entry-level professional roles and employment for fresh graduates, just as in many other sectors, are already beset with precarity. Many of these jobs are only provided on a definite contract basis and often do not lead to job stability or career progression. The risk is that with the introduction of new competitive technologies, not only will these roles be under threat, but those who are already in them will be at risk of being substituted by AI, thus making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Disclaimer: No AI assisted in the writing of this article.

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What Kind of Music Critic Will the Future Bring?

By Neb Kujundzic

The title question of this piece may appear arbitrary and even frivolous at first glance. Let me provide some context. Back in 2023, I diversified my post-secondary teaching experience (or shall we say, I subverted it?) by becoming a songwriter and forming a rock band NEBO. From day one, my goal was to integrate my 30 years of teaching philosophy and my lyrical and musical creativity.

The first NEBO album, *Metaphysical Machines*, contains ten songs. Out of those, I selected two: *Radio Silence and Open Mind*. Then I asked ChatGPT to analyse the two songs' lyrics. I must admit I was a bit surprised when ChatGPT asked me: "Shall I write a philosophical essay based on the analysis I provided?" My answer was: "Sure; keep it under 1500 words." What came back to me within seconds was the following paper: "The Ethics of Words and the Ethics of Silence." It is available on Academia.edu:

https://www.academia.edu/143849893/The_Ethics_of_ Words_and_the_Ethics_of_Silence_A_Philosophical_ Reading_of_NEBOs_Open_Mind_and_Radio_Silence_

The paper is *not* written by Neb Kujundzic; however, I had no option on Academia.edu (yet) to indicate, "written by ChatGPT." The first impression when I read the paper was that ChatGPT (and AI in general) is a huge ego-booster. It certainly made my songwriting appear so much smarter. I am not going to lie; it made me feel better about my songwriting potential. However, I am not a vain person, and I am confident that I am not that smart, especially not when I write popular songs. My second impression was that the AI's analysis was incredibly clever. My third impression was that AI cannot help being pompous. My fourth impression boiled down to a rhetorical question: "How many music critics would be capable of this sort of analysis?" Hence the title of this essay.

Let me get back to the point of AI's capacity to conduct incredibly clever and insightful analysis. Consider the following paragraph:

"Open Mind" unfolds with stanzas that address figures who have historically carried heavy social or religious associations: deacons, heathens, eunuchs, freaks. Each verse introduces the temptation toward judgment, only to reject it in favor of

kindness. The refrain—"*Don't you be unkind/Keep an open mind*"—functions as a mantra, a simplified ethical imperative. Its rhyme scheme borders on the comic, with playful pairings such as "eunuchs/tunics," which deflates the gravity of prejudice through humor.

Was I that deep? Not at all. I simply rhymed "deacons" and "heathens." I am perfectly aware that the interpretation is in the eye, or the ear, of the observer or the listener. What if that listener is AI? The stereotypes we currently attach to AI are generative or "parrot-like". Yet, how could it "infer" that certain groups of people (heathens, eunuchs, etc.) provoke judgment and marginalisation? Furthermore, how would AI "know" that the "eunuchs/tunics rhyme scheme" is comical?

Even more so, it is very perceptive to pair *Open Mind's* form and function:

> Musically and poetically, the song mirrors its ethical content. Its simple rhyme schemes, repetitive chorus, and playful tone create accessibility. Just as openness must be practiced universally, the song's form is democratic: it can be sung by anyone, remembered by anyone, and applied to anyone. The ethics of inclusivity becomes embodied in the inclusivity of style.

The last sentence of this paragraph certainly applies to rock and roll in general. It is inclusive, among several other reasons, since it is written and performed mostly by underprivileged and marginalised groups of people. Of course, the irony of rock and roll's stardom and wealth did not escape public scrutiny even in its very early days. Furthermore, the commonality of "playful tone" in rock and roll (and most other genres of popular music) is debatable. It appears instead that most genres of popular music thematise some combination of sadness, heartbreak, and longing.

As well, it is perceptive of AI to recognise that the two songs are steeped in two very different kinds of *ethos:*

> Where *"Open Mind"* exhorts its listeners to adopt compassion and tolerance in the face of difference, *"Radio Silence"* meditates on the power of absence, complicity, and the unspoken. Together, the songs construct a diptych of philosophical reflection: one devoted to the ethics of speech and openness, the other to the ontology of silence and its hidden capacities.

I am entirely convinced this analysis is dead on, and that while *Open Mind* is playful, *Radio Silence* is brooding and mystical. Mind you, to say that *Radio Silence* is devoted to "the ontology of silence" sounds precisely like something a graduate student would say at a cocktail party. Furthermore, to translate the first kind of ethos into the "Ethics of Words" is philosophically crude and ultimately vague. In my opinion, a better choice would be the "Ethics of Communicative Tolerance." The "Ethics of Silence," on the other hand, is more accurately termed. However, it is possible to be silent and either tolerant or intolerant. This is where the divergence between the two different types of ethos becomes apparent.

Despite the oversight and exaggerations typical of AI, the question remains: can we imagine music critics capable of this depth and insight? Keep in mind that the AI analysis may be based on any discipline and methodology. For example, it could invoke some sort of musical expertise related to rhythmic and melodic patterns. It could invoke any combination of sociological, economic, and political methods and approaches. Given the AI's insightfulness, scope, precision, methodological diversity, etc., what is left for a human reviewer? Perhaps offering a possibility of a unique personal experience or feeling? Or providing an ability to tell a story (that people can easily relate to) and therefore translating music into a living, relatable, contextualised human experience? Or perhaps promising a possibility to listen to a unique, and ultimately flawed human voice that we recognise as authentic?

I like to believe that there are plenty of possibilities for human reviewers in the future. What troubles me is that AI seems to be able to emulate all the abilities I went through in the previous paragraph. I think we have arrived at the ultimate dilemma here: whether the future critic is essentially hybrid or whether music itself requires the idiosyncratic and imperfect human ear?

Neb Kujundzic is Professor and Dean of Arts of the University of Prince Edward Island. He studied Philosophy and Literature at the University of Sarajevo, ex-Yugoslavia and earned a PhD at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. He has been appointed affiliated professor with the University of Malta in 2019. His research interests include philosophy of technology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, and metaphysics.

Perspectives on Heritable Genome Editing (HGE)

By Corinne Othenin-Girard
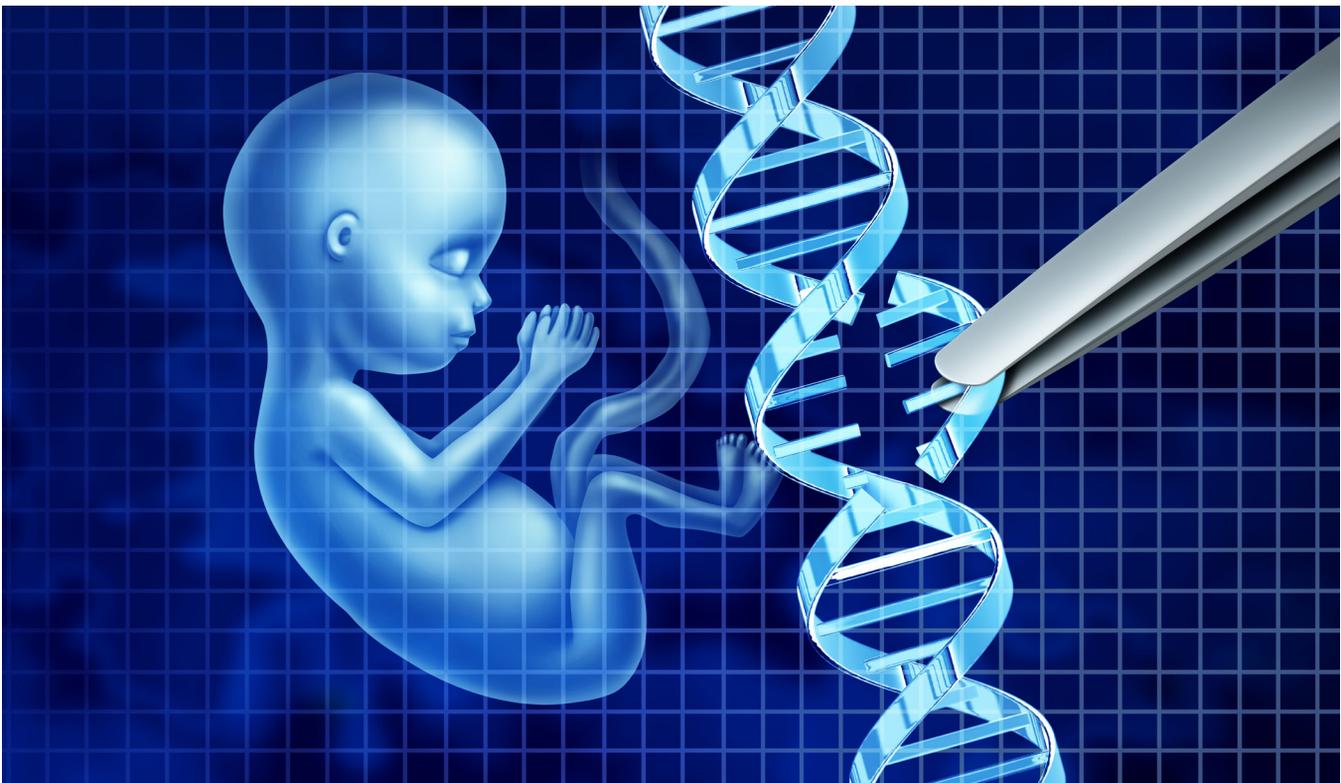
Heritable genome editing (HGE) refers to molecular techniques used to alter DNA sequences in early-stage embryos or germ cells (sperm and egg cells). These modifications, generated by the use of CRISPR-based techniques, would potentially affect all cells of the future child. Although HGE is often described as "gene surgery", it does not directly treat or cure diseases. Rather, it creates individuals with altered genomes, that will be passed on to future generations. To date, HGE technology has only been clinically applied three times, by the Chinese researcher Jiankui He in 2018. This involved the genetic manipulation of the three babies, Lulu, Nana and Amy.

The clinical application of HGE may have a range of social implications, which can be viewed from diverse perspectives. I present four perspectives that represent possible future outcomes:

a. The development of HGE as a revolution
b. HGE as a tool for profit
c. Ultimate reproductive power through HGE for parents-to-be
d. The perception of manipulated individuals as an outcome of HGE

a. The Development of HGE as a Revolution

The development of emerging biotechnologies for human HGE is being hailed as a revolutionary innovation (Shwartz, 2019, Smith, 2018). Although still a speculative genetic technology, HGE is presented as a panacea that promises to eliminate disability and "enhance" humanity. Within bioliberal discourses, innovation is being equated to progress, whereas disability is seen as a threat to the future, and viewed "as a bar to progress, that we would always already desire to cure and prevent" (Denbow, 2024, p.91).

Christopher Newfield, a Professor of English and American Studies who focuses on innovation theory, argues that

revolutionary innovations are defined "as right and necessary, efficient and inevitable" (2020, p. 246). The process of HGE that involves the alteration of an early-stage embryo's genome rests on the promise of bringing unimaginable benefits to individual children and the future of humanity. HGE used for reproduction does not only mean the alteration of genes, but also the alteration of future individuals' traits.

Vinsel and Russell (2020) offer the term of "innovation-speak", which is based on the idea that social progress comes about through the introduction of new things. They state that

> "innovation-speak is a sales pitch about a future that doesn't yet exist. Innovation-speak is fundamentally dishonest. While it is often cast in terms of optimism, talking about opportunity and creativity and a boundless future, it is in fact the rhetoric of fear. It plays with our worry, that we will be left behind". (p.11)

Bioliberal voices tend to present this innovation as something that cannot be avoided, recommending HGE procedures in a manner akin to a sales pitch for a promised future.

b.   HGE as a Tool for Profit

As HGE technology is associated with progress, it also promises profit—and even appears to demand it. Bioliberal voices frame HGE technology as a profitable enterprise. Philosophers and bioethicists Anomaly et al. (2018) argue that pursuing HGE for "genetic enhancements might increase the welfare of each and the prosperity of all" (p.89). They claim that HGE technology offers not merely gain—profit for researchers, institutions and stakeholders—but a sense of prosperity for all.

Amalia Kallergi, a researcher whose work intersects with bioinformatics and human-computer interaction, argues that "genetic engineering could be used to create stronger, healthier and happier humans also beyond the species norm" (2016, p.173), and that we should seize the opportunity "if we want to eradicate disease, give us smarter offspring or radically extend our lifespan".

The businessman and philanthropist Bill Gates (2018) considers that "gene editing holds the potential to save millions of lives and empower millions of people to lift themselves out of poverty. It would be a tragedy to pass up the opportunity".

The biotechnology policy advocate Marcy Darnovsky (2019) conveys that the "decision about altering the genes of future generations carries huge stakes, including the prospect of dividing future societies into genetic 'haves' and 'have-nots'. This is one we have to get right." Embedded in this warning is a concern about the fear of being left behind.

c.   Ultimate Reproductive Power Through HGE for Parents-to-be

The parent-to-be demands the license to use the ultimate reproductive power to fashion and upgrade the next generation to their liking. People want the right to manipulate freely the DNA of their child, to select their characteristics, and to make genes available—for example those associated with greater intelligence. They seek to shape their child through the appeals of promised human potential.

The social need of the parent-to-be is implied, as couples want to have the best child with the greatest well-being, and should not be prevented from having that. It could be satisfied with the application of HGE.

Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane (2009), two leading philosophers in bioethics, argue that there is a moral obligation to develop the best child possible. Savulescu terms it the Principle of Procreative Beneficence (PB). Under this principle, parents would be morally obliged to discard embryos that carry genes which could possibly lead to disability or criminal characteristics.

The principle of Procreative Beneficence urges parents to choose the best possible embryo—one that would develop into the most valuable, intelligent and capable child. The simple aim of improving the well-being of future generations through HGE is supplanted by enhancements that establish a new type of normality. HGE is promoted not only to eliminate disabilities and diseases, but also to enhance future generations by enabling them to excel as better human beings.

The underlying premise remains that it is the parents-to-be and/or the medical geneticist who would decide what

aspects of the DNA of the forthcoming child or individual are to be modified, and to what extent. In other words, the present generation determines what the next generations should possess. This process is construed as an intentional, rational evolution, described as "the next stage of human evolution" (Savulescu, 2007, p.530).

However, the parent-to-be would in actual fact experience the illusion of control since the outcomes of HGE are inherently uncertain.

d. Perceptions of the Manipulated Individual Being the Outcome of HGE

The perception of a manipulated individual is complex. Such individuals will not only grapple with discovering and "understanding the self and its parts (identities)" (Stets et al., 2003, p.1), as unmanipulated individuals do, but will also have to endure constant comparison with the paragon — a blend of HGE-child-catalogues, their parents' wishes and societal expectations of HGE-individuals.

Another issue would be the persistent question: who would I have been, had I not been manipulated? This concern is intensified by CRISPR-induced mosaicism (non-uniform editing), which could literally split their identity.

The philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas (2023) envisages that the process of HGE turns human beings into means rather than ends, thereby objectifying them. Furthermore, genetically modified individuals are no longer born equal to the previous generation, thereby creating an asymmetrical relationship between generations.

Conclusion

HGE is not the next stage of medicine but a redefinition of human life as something to be engineered, optimised, and commodified. Beneath the rhetoric of "revolution" and "enhancement",

lies hidden a transformation that turns reproduction into design, children into projects, and the future into a marketplace. Human life is treated as something to be optimised and controlled, all at a substantial cost. We are told this is progress and whoever rejects it is condemned as being fearful of change. One cannot resist the inevitable, they say.

The term *inevitability* is intertwined with HGE; it stems from the language of ideology, not ethics. HGE is not a revolution, but a rupture—a break in how we think about autonomy, equality, and the meaning of being human. The edited child becomes the unwitting carrier of someone else's aspirations,

market logic, and genetic preferences of their time. The promised liberation of Darwin's evolution is in fact the parents' control over the next generation, imposing asymmetries between generations. It is a new form of determinism. Destiny is replaced by special genome sequences, encouraging the selection of the "best" children. But who decides what "best" means, and for whom? As we tinker with the very code of life in the name of perfecting humanity and calling it a rational evolution, are we not engaging in eugenics?

HGE is less a medical advance than a disruption in our understanding of freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of being human. The question is no longer whether we *can* do it, but whether we truly want to rewrite humanity – silently, irreversibly, and under the banner of progress.

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Critique of Genetic Engineering Poem

By Chengde Chen

Genetic engineering offers a million benefits,
Yet I have one reason to resist.
But any number multiplied by zero remains zero.
Science is meant to sustain human existence;
If genes are written by nature's long history,
Isn't quoting them out of context a rebellion against ourselves?

The temperature on Earth's surface stays within ±50ºC—
A narrow range in the grand thermometer of the universe,
Yet just right for us—creatures of 37ºC—to survive.
Believers marvel at God's design, yet it is only nature.
Every species is an adapter to this condition;
Those that weren't either never had a chance or were erased.

Should God, seized by whim, play at "planet engineering"—
Rearrange the solar system—what would happen?
If Earth moved one step inward to Venus's place,
The blistering 480ºC would evaporate us into clouds.
If Earth stepped outward to where Mars resides,
The minus 140ºC would cast us into super-ice.

Earth is in our genes.
Genes are nature's vertical memory and horizontal logic.
The process of adapting and eliminating carves all specifications.
Billions of codes are billions of doors and locks without keys,
Shutting out foreign viruses through DNA incompatibility—
So we don't catch cats' flu, nor do dogs get our hepatitis.

Yet manufactured genes arrive suddenly—
Bearing no burden of history, yet short-circuiting species.
When transgenic pig organs are implanted into humans,
Pig viruses leap across millions of years to join us.
To break species barriers for medical gain
Is to strip ourselves bare, as if tether humanity to a WMD!

The biological world is a self-contained, all-dimensional computer;
Disrupting one sequence could make the whole system into chaos,
Like asking God to restart His creation!
He'd rather we tamper with planets than meddle with genes:

"If you must, modify Me first—make a GM god—

For to reshape the world, I'd need double strength and
perseverance!"

Chengde Chen is a part-time Professor of Philosophy at Shanghai University and the author of Five Themes of Today, a collection of philosophical poems, as well as Thought Reading, a full-length philosophical novel.

# *The Search for Self in Artificial Systems*

By Katryna Vella

Introduction

The most basic worlds, as well as the artificial ones, can occasionally give rise to the most profound philosophical issues. At times, it is within systems constrained by strict rules that introduce the most provocative challenges. This article seeks to explore the consciousness of structured, artificial worlds such as Conway's *Game of Life*. *The Game of Life* is a cellular automaton governed by mathematical principles, in which cells move, reproduce or perish, according to predetermined rules. Performance is predicted by the sequential arrangement of every neuron which is an informational entity capable of flourishing within the infosphere. These are therefore philosophical concepts, and decisions about whether such artificial systems exhibit consciousness must be informed by philosophical theory (Nieder et al. 2002; Nieder & Miller 2004; Sawamura et al. 2002).

What differentiates the behaviours of pixels across a grid, from the routines that structure human lives? Do our lives too, depend on algorithms, instincts, and social expectations where every move we make and every thought we think is monitored or already predicted — much like the Mexican wave (Zuboff 2019)? In the 21st century, we have been exposed to a world of replicas and a myriad of programmable entities. One disturbing insight offered by poststructuralism is that subjectivity itself may be nothing more than a statistical pattern of signs. This article examines how the *Game of Life* can serve as a relatable model for the lives we lead, revealing the tensions between intentionality and consciousness. Through this model, we may reflect on our social lives, our search for purpose, and the ability to act freely within predetermined systems.

Conway's Game of Life: The Coded World

The *Game of Life* is just a grid of cells, either living or dead. With each generation (or iteration), each cell's destiny is predetermined according to a set of rules: cells survive, die, or are born depending on the conditions of their immediate neighbours. Despite its scientific simplicity, this artificial world allows for unpredictable
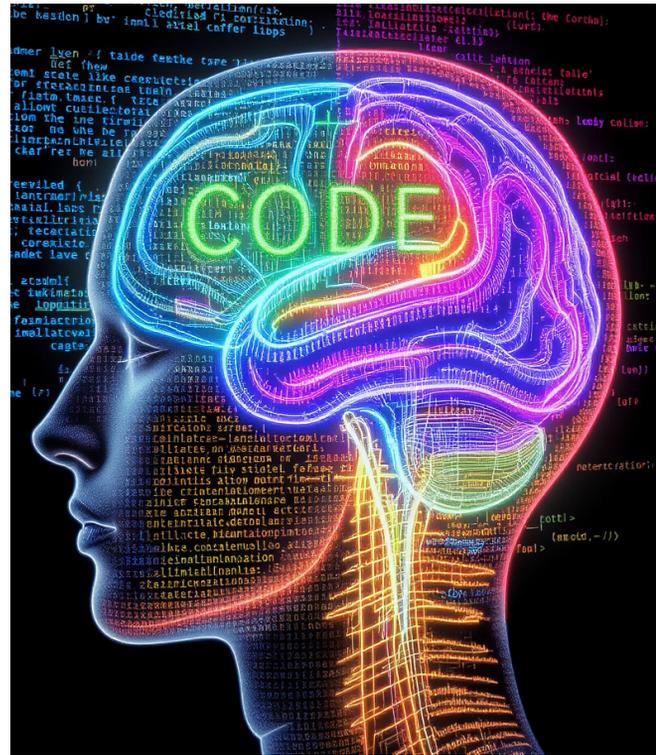
behaviours, creating a representation of humans' natural and social paths of life. In the *Game of Life*, structures orbit one another, cells migrate, and some configurations sustain themselves for countless generations.

It is often assumed that consciousness is affected by complexity, yet this assumption is not supported by the emerging patterns of the automaton. These patterns are viewed as arising from simple interactions at a lower level. In life, cultures and societal systems persist and evolve. Similar to automation, the life of individuals often follows patterns that are not consciously decided. Such patterns may arise from social norms and values. In both cases, questions of uncertainty arise: does agency exist within these structures, or are we merely sophisticated configurations in a larger, indifferent system? Are we caught within the rival forts of biopolitics and thanatopolitics where power subconsciously influences our understanding of the value of life itself?

The act of thinking captured in Descartes' famous "*cogito, ergo sum*", is sufficient to demonstrate that a person is conscious. Through reflection, one confirms a distinction from purely mechanistic processes. Yet, the *Game of Life*

invites us to ask whether apparent intentionality can emerge without reflective thought encouraging a return to fundamental questions about how we make decisions. This should not be disheartening, as Pratchett (2017) reminds us: "Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving." So, do we also behave like gliders and oscillators sometimes, moving through life mindlessly as far as routine takes us? Is the brain like a computer (Searle 1986)?

Simulated Intentionality

A central philosophical issue is intentionality, and relatedly, the question of whether intentionality has a definite point of origin. The essence of this claim is that if we have been set to follow rules, then those rules have been established by someone else, and our intentionality is therefore based on that design. It almost sounds like a pet flap for a totalitarian regime. Mental states can be *about* something and thus possess directedness.

Franz Brentano considered intentionality as the defining feature of the mental. Within the *Game of Life*, gliders may appear to pursue goals, yet these behaviours emerge from mechanical rule-following. There is no 'aboutness', no interiority or awareness of purpose.

Humans live in moral situations all the time and feel the urge to find reason and give meaning. Structures are often referred to 'spaceships', 'guns', 'oscillators', as though they possess intentions. Similar to Locke's insight that our minds begin as *tabula rasa*, they start to be 'filled' by experience and knowledge. By pattern recognition, we are 'nudged' to classify, infer purposes, and form concepts and opinions. This is not because our minds discover intentional frameworks inherent in entities, but because we project them.

Locke emphasises the empirical and evolving nature of consciousness. It is not static but always subject to change and adaptable to experience. Locke might remind us that behind the meanings assigned, lies a projection of our habits rather than a discovery of the code's intention within the artificial world. A machine capable of thought has not yet been proven so far. Thus, the states and processes that involve mental representations need not depend on a purely computational perspective.

The Illusion of Freedom

Tension lies in the extent to which freedom and consciousness are possible in rules-based systems. Social structures such as economies and cultures appear to develop into class systems that operate in ways analogous to the laws of cellular automata. This can be understood as a form of the 'Dictatorship of Capital' (Han 2017). Yet, according to Boden (1988) this is not a property of the brain as such, but of people who are conscious agents rather than mere code. Individuals live through social structures, in which their freedom is 'constrained' by social expectations and environmental conditions. Often, the illusion of choice under the mask of 'freedom' blinds us to the recursive nature of these systems where even rebellion can become predictable.

In worlds like the *Game of Life*, it might be possible for a configuration to alter its behaviour based on the patterns it perceives. Could such an entity achieve a form of proto-consciousness which then acts as a 'source code' of awareness, run on some non-human artifice (AI 2024)? Can such a cell somehow question its place in the grid, its origins, its purpose? This thought experiment echoes Descartes' view that appearances may deceive, that an entire world might be owned by a force that *can* be evil, leaving only the certainty of the thinking subject.

If, however, as Locke argued, personal identity and consciousness are products of memory and learning from experience, then such a pattern might achieve subjectivity only if it developed a record of its own internal states and the capacity to reflect upon them (Gabriel 2020).

Edmund Burke likewise suggests that a pattern must be sufficiently representative to make decisions. Without the capacity to recognize itself as persisting through successive states, the pattern would remain a complex simulation rather than a true subject.

Emergence and the Problem of Consciousness

Emergence is a concept in which properties at a higher level of organisation arise from the interactions at lower levels. This has often been used to explain consciousness. The human brain, composed of 'objective' neurons, somehow produces subjective experience for the concerned self, creating moral situations that would otherwise not exist. Could the *Game of Life*, or an equivalent system, achieve a similar form of emergence?

This suggests a distinction between *behavioural complexity* and *phenomenal consciousness*. A pattern that processes
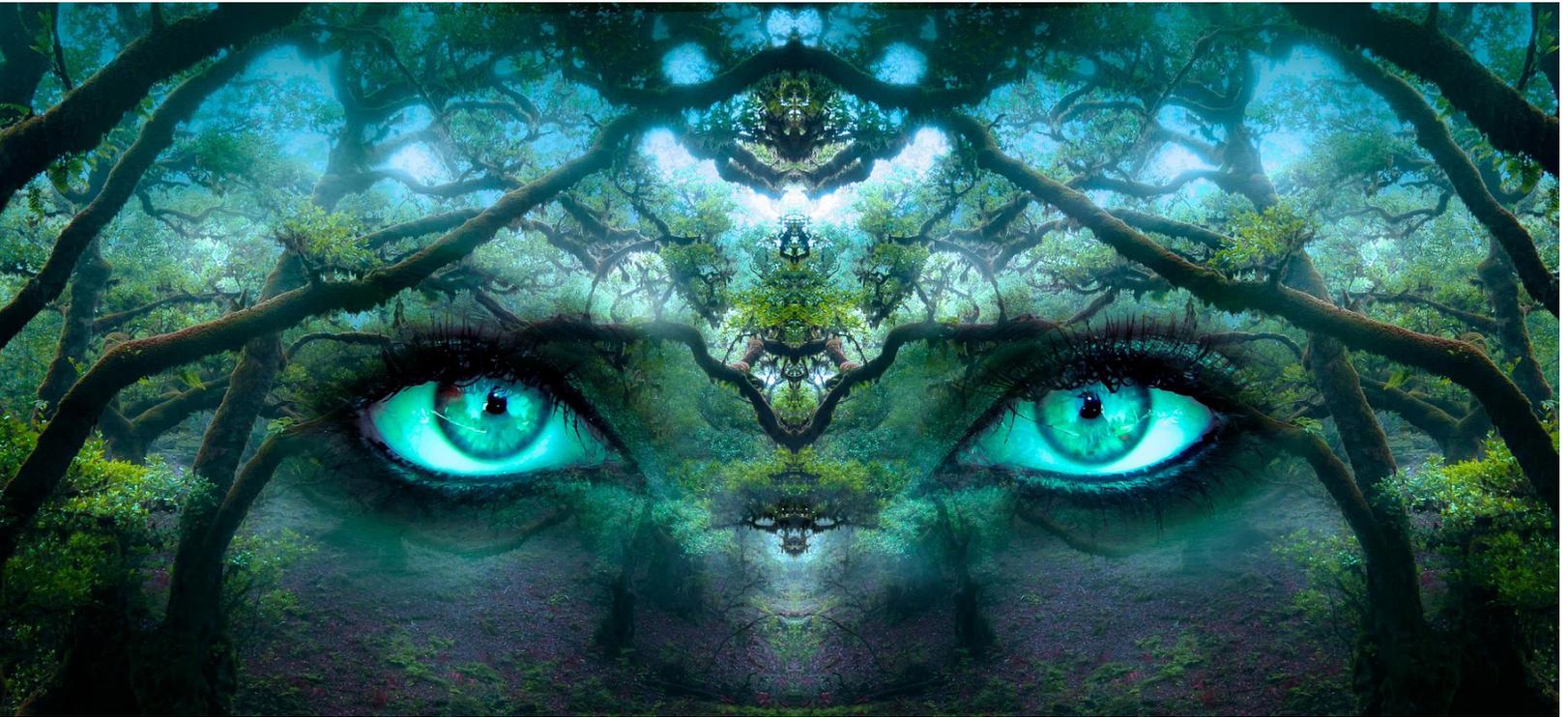
information, makes decisions, and adapts might exhibit *functional intentionality*, responding to stimuli similar to biological organisms. Yet without *qualia*—the raw, subjective experiences of sensation and feeling—the subjective conscious experience remains only a simulation of a mind rather than the mind itself. Similar to GOFAI ("Good Old-Fashioned AI") programs, which could manipulate symbols and follow rules but could not truly understand or experience emotions, gliders traverse the grid without knowledge of motion or goals.

Descartes would deny that such entities possess a soul. Owing to his dualism, he separates operations and thinking. Digital literacy here becomes important, since—contrary to digital dualism—the digital world is not distinct from the real, physical world; the two constantly interact and affect one another. For Descartes, only reflective thought guarantees true existence. Locke, being more empirical might consider that if an artificial entity could accumulate experiences, form memories, and reason about its own states, then it might approach personal identity. Yet even then, the problem of *qualia* would remain.

The Search for Meaning

Humans constantly search for meaning. Even within systems that appear predetermined, individuals seek purpose, defiance, and transcendence. The paradox of agency is introduced both in artificial and social worlds: although constrained by rules, those capable of reflection can reinterpret them, rebel against them, or assign them new meanings. This capacity for self-reflection and 'going deeper', by asking *what* and *why* not just 'where' and 'how' of information, creates distinction between simulation and subjectivity.

In programmed worlds, one might imagine entities gradually coming to understand their origins, perceiving the structure of their environment and confronting the absence of a higher meaning—perhaps beginning to forge their own. Likewise, within human societies, individuals inherit norms and, over time, seek to change the structures into which they were born. This process is often called 'progress' and may be seen as a recognition of a Wittgensteinian ladder. Yet as Floridi (2013) warns, we must remain cautious of *semantic traps*: situations devoid of subjectivity that masquerade as meaningful activities. Emergence alone does not guarantee freedom or meaning; these must be actively constructed.

Conclusion

Conway's *Game of Life* reveals how simple operations can result in complex, purposive behaviours. We must be aware of the significant political ramifications that exist as power and control are encoded within systems without our knowledge. Yet it also gestures toward the uniquely human capacity for

finding meaning within constraints by interrogating the code and by seeking transcendence within pre-written systems.

According to Descartes and Locke, true consciousness is formed from reflection, memory, and intentionality. The movements of cells across the automaton's grid illustrate both the power of emergence and its limits. Yet, the conformity imposed by human societies can be alarming as standardised rules pre-define specific behaviours. Complexity is not consciousness. Simulation is not subjectivity.

Still, the question persists in both artificial and human worlds: can beings, biological or digital, observe the operations of their environment and choose to act against the norm?

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Katryna Vella is a medical physicist specialising in diagnostic and interventional radiology. She has a strong interest in philosophy, particularly in logic, ethics and politics, especially where they twine with the ethical challenges of technologies in medicine.
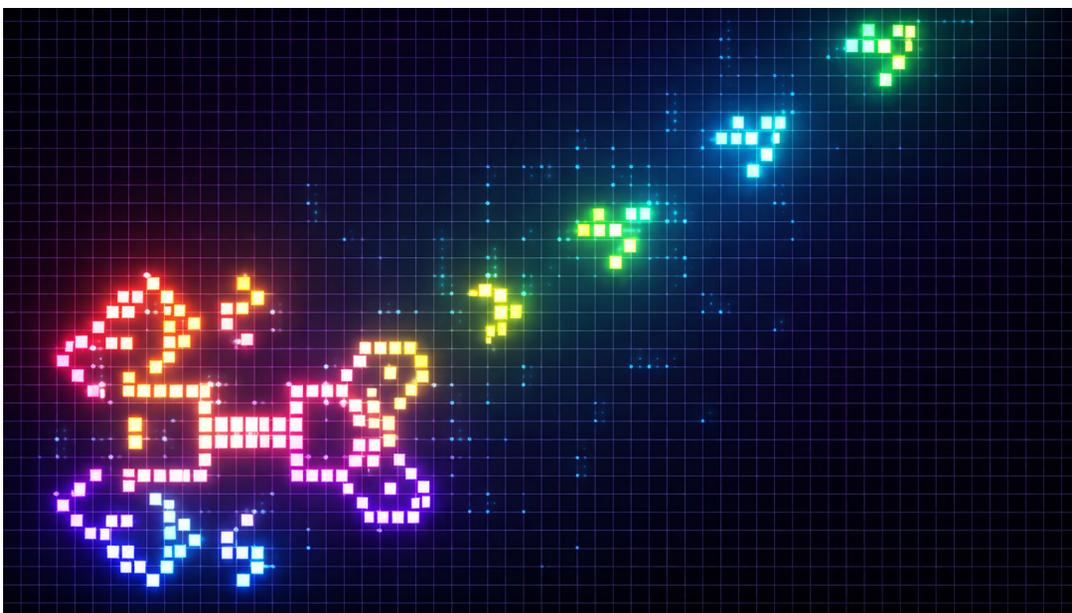
Pattern inspired by Conway's Game of Life cellular automaton.

Book Review

Post-Truth

Author: Lee C. McIntyre
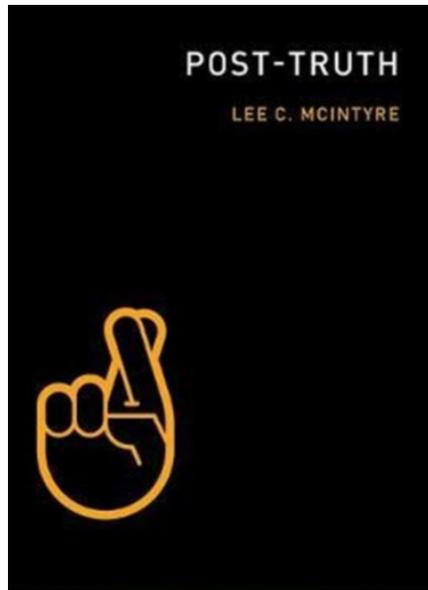Publisher: The MIT Press
Year: 2018

By Valdeli Pereira

Last semester, I attended a special topic in Philosophy, Politics, and Society at the University of Malta. Among the suggested bibliographic references for the theme was this interesting book titled *Post-Truth* by Lee McIntyre. Among the long list of books, I found this one particularly interesting due to the relevance of the topic and its impact on our daily discussions about philosophy, democracy, and the new challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI).

In an era where political manipulation often eclipses empirical evidence, and social media serves as fertile ground for misinformation, *Post-Truth* offers a timely and serious analysis of a cultural shift that threatens the foundations of rational discourse and democratic institutions. At its core, *Post-Truth* addresses the following question: how did we reach a point where objective facts matter less than beliefs or feelings? McIntyre argues that the post-truth era is not just about ignorance or partisanship, but about the deliberate rejection of evidence and expert knowledge in favour of ideological convenience. This is not an entirely new phenomenon—propaganda and denialism have existed throughout history—but McIntyre sees post-truth as exceptionally dangerous due to its scope, speed, and the technological tools now available to disseminate misinformation.

The book begins by defining what 'post-truth' actually means. Drawing on the Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 Word of the Year designation, McIntyre explains it as a situation "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." He directly links this to developments in climate change denial, anti-vaccine movements, and political propaganda. McIntyre traces the roots of post-truth to earlier developments in science denial—such as tobacco companies questioning the health risks of smoking—and shows how the same tactics were adopted by fossil fuel interests and political actors.

One of the book's most provocative arguments is that post-truth is ultimately a form of authoritarianism. By undermining the possibility of shared facts, authoritarian leaders can more easily manipulate public opinion and erode democratic norms.

In terms of solutions, *Post-Truth* does not offer easy answers but emphasises the importance of education, media literacy, and institutional integrity. McIntyre advocates for a renewed commitment to the pursuit of truth; not only in science and journalism but in everyday discourse. He calls on readers to resist cynicism and to actively engage in fact-checking and in defending the idea that reality matters.

In conclusion, *Post-Truth* is an engaging and urgent read for anyone concerned about the health of democracy and the role of knowledge in public life. Lee McIntyre's clear accessible prose and his philosophical rigor, make complex ideas digestible without oversimplifying them. Although the book is short, its implications are vast—and troubling. In times when truth is under siege, McIntyre reminds us that defending it is not just an intellectual exercise, but a moral and civic duty.

Valdeli Pereira holds a degree in Philosophy and co-edits SHARE magazine.

An Interview with Rick Lewis

By Ian Rizzo

Rick Lewis is the Editor-in-Chief of Philosophy Now magazine, which he founded in his spare time in 1991. Philosophy Now is a bi-monthly magazine aimed at the general educated public, as well as students and teachers of philosophy, and was the first general philosophy magazine of its kind. Rick Lewis studied physics at UMIST and worked at BT Laboratories before completing an MA in Philosophy at the University of York. He lives in London with his wife, Anja Steinbauer, who runs the organisation Philosophy For All. In this interview, Ian Rizzo explores philosophy's relevance to contemporary life, focusing on questions of subjectivity, perspective, and how philosophy can help mediate between competing views in an increasingly divisive world.

1. In your biographical profile, you mention studying physics before pursuing an MA in philosophy. What inspired this transition, and how did it eventually lead you to launch Philosophy Now?

While I was studying for my Physics degree at UMIST in Manchester, I took an option in the philosophy of science, and was taught to analyse the ideas of Aristotle, Auguste Comte, Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and the rest about that. That introduced me to philosophy. A year or so later, while working as a physicist, I went to the retirement party of a colleague who glumly confided to me that after

40 years working for the company, he thought he had wasted his life. Although I found my work interesting, I fell into asking what I should do with my own life, and then, more abstractly, into wondering about the purpose of our lives in general, and finally into asking about the nature of purpose. This quickly led me into reading about philosophical theories about the foundations of values, and I found myself reading about, for example, David Hume on "is" and "ought". I realised I was completely out of my depth and decided that the only rational course of action was to go back to university to study some more philosophy. Afterwards, I returned happily to my physics job, but found that many of my physics friends were

passionately friends were passionately concerned with philosophical questions of their own, for instance about the existence of God, or the ethics of eating meat, or the nature of time. I thought there should be a magazine for people interested in such things, partly as a forum and partly to help connect them with the ideas of historical philosophers on such questions. So then I wrote to every university philosophy department in Britain asking people to contribute articles. The response was very good, and in my spare evenings and weekends I began to edit the first issue of *Philosophy Now.*

2. How do you see philosophy's contribution in today's job markets and business world, given that many philosophy graduates end up in academia?

I think people should do philosophy for the sake of trying to discover truth and wisdom, not for the job opportunities. However, people also need to put food on the table, and fortunately employers have begun to realise that trained thinkers are versatile, valuable employees. The proportion of philosophy graduates who end up as university philosophers is actually quite small compared with the proportion ending up as successful lawyers, teachers, software experts, actors or business people, or in a dozen other professions. Steve Martin and Woody Allen, Peter Thiel and George Soros, all studied philosophy and sometimes applied it in their later careers.

3. Do you think universal education would be stronger if philosophy were made mandatory from primary school, similar to mathematics and languages? And in your view, what is holding back this kind of universal development and how can it be overcome?

Yes, I do think that – though for that age group philosophy usually means reasoning skills rather than studying the history of ideas. I have several friends who have worked very hard to introduce philosophy lessons to primary schools, and have made a good deal of progress. I think what is holding progress back is that the children's school days are already quite crowded with different subjects, so schools find it difficult to allocate time and resources to any new subject. However, back in 2015, the UK's

Education Endowment Foundation ran a randomised, controlled trial involving more than 3,000 nine and ten-year olds in 48 primary schools. In the trial, children who had a philosophy discussion session once a week made substantially faster progress in maths and reading skills than children who didn't. By the end of the trial they were several months ahead. That's pretty persuasive. (The discussion sessions were run by a philosophy-in-schools charity now called 'Thoughtful'.)

4. With populism and authoritarian politics on the rise, while humanity faces universal problems such as climate change and AI, do you think Plato's claim that politicians ought to be philosophers holds more weight than ever? And if so, what can realistically be done?

Plato distrusted democracy, believing that it can be hijacked by demagogues. He tried to show why in his 'Ship of Fools' allegory in *The Republic.* Yet his own plan for an ideal society, described in detail in *The Republic,* sounds pretty awful to most modern ears. Karl Popper even described it as 'totalitarian'. So it would be a dreadful mistake to regard even great philosophers as infallible authorities about politics. Other philosophers, such as John Locke, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, helped lay the foundations of modern democracy: for example, Locke's political philosophy was a key influence on those who wrote the US Constitution. I think in a democracy it is a good thing for philosophers and everybody else to involve themselves in politics, and that politicians and everybody else should learn more about philosophy and about critical thinking in order to help them make the wise and rational choices politics requires.

5. In the upcoming Annual Philosophy Lecture hosted by the Philosophy Sharing Foundation on 6 March 2026, you will be asking whether we each have a point of view or are in fact each a point of view. This seems highly relevant today, when subjectivity often seems to override objectivity. Even the history of philosophy itself is riven with contradictory perspectives – from

Heraclitus and Parmenides to Plato and Aristotle, rationalists vs the empiricists and continental vs analytical philosophy. Is it really possible to step outside our own perspective to understand someone else's views, or are we always bound by the limits of our own subjectivity? And if so, in what ways can philosophy act as the best discipline to mediate between such competing perspectives?

I think we are always bound by the limits of our own subjectivity, but fortunately those limits are quite broad, and include an ability to understand – very imperfectly – the subjectivities of other people. Depending on the field of enquiry, we can do this on an emotional level using our empathy, and we can also do this in the natural sciences by using mathematics and an understanding of the apparatus of perception. What does the woman with blue-tinted spectacles see if she stands at the top of the church tower over yonder, looking south? We can work it out pretty precisely. She occupies a particular spatial viewpoint, and anyone with similar perceptual apparatus who stands in the same place will see the same landmarks on the same bearings. But if we ask what she feels when she stands at the top of the church tower looking south, then her viewpoint in that sense is peculiar to her, and depends on her own personal history, emotional and cultural baggage, and a thousand other things.

6. You mention Thomas Nagel as an influence for your upcoming talk. Which other philosophers, past or present, have most shaped your thinking? And in what ways?

David Hume for pointing out in "A Treatise of Human Nature" the problem of the gap between "is" and "ought" in ethics, which in a way leads on to the contrast between subjective and objective views of ethics. Among more recent thinkers, the late Philippa Foot for her brilliant attempts to solve the problem of an objective foundation for ethics despite Hume. Foot was a truly great philosopher and one of my heroes, and I once had the privilege of interviewing her in her Oxford home about her book *Natural Goodness*. More generally on viewpoints, I also think it is particularly worth reading Nietzsche, who famously was a 'perspectivist' philosopher, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, for his 'dialogical hermeneutics'.

But I have a lot still to learn about them, and about the role confusions over points of view play in different areas of philosophy – all I have is a strong interest rather than a developed theory.

7. With today's digital media and the growing use of algorithms to influence or even replace human decisions, how can philosophy help us cultivate a more open dialogue on the understanding of reality?

AI Large Language Models are astonishingly good at suggesting solutions to all kinds of problems. It's being realised more and more that they also often feed not only on reliable sources of information but also on the output of other AIs and on the digested assumptions and misconceptions of human beings. Put a dozen AIs online and leave them to answer one another's questions, and they'll soon be building tottering fairy castles of nonsense. Philosophers are supposed to be good at examining the underlying assumptions of human reasoning, so perhaps philosophers will turn out to be useful in helping people to make good use of AI, to avoid its pitfalls and to appreciate its limits. Epistemology in particular may turn out to be a more vital branch of philosophy than ever.

8. As a philosopher, what are your views on the future of humanity? Are you more optimistic or pessimistic, given the signs of the times? And what do you think is the central question philosophy ought to be exploring now?

I used to hold the optimistic belief that in general open, free societies would always tend to enjoy greater economic success than closed, authoritarian societies, because economic success depends upon the free flow of ideas and freedom from excessive central control. For this reason, I thought, however many repressive regimes there were in the world, the long-term future looked brighter. Unfortunately, we now see a situation where authoritarian systems have become extremely good at exploiting new technologies to grow their economies, expand their power and monitor their citizens more efficiently. So now we really are in trouble. But if the democracies rely on their greatest strength – their talent for innovative, unfettered thinking – then maybe we will still win through.

2025: Year at a Glance

12, 19 and 26 Feb 2025

David Vella
A 3-session course on
The Call to Be True to Yourself

20 Mar 2025

Thomas O. Scarborough
Annual Philosophy Lecture
Holism

22 Apr 2025

Andre Callus
Individuals in Space:
Identity, Place and
Neoliberalism in Malta

12 Jun 2025

Julie Reshe
Tragic Laughter:
Why Philosophy is a Joke

11 Sep 2025

Ian Rizzo
Pink Floyd's Wish You Were
Here at 50:
The Meaning of Absence
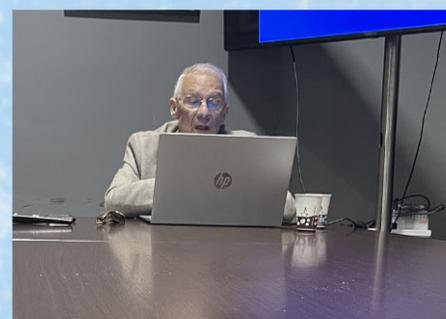
29 Sep 2025

Robert Farrugia
Crisis and Hope

9, 16 and 30 Oct 2025

Gail Debono
A 3-session course on
Exploring Adler's Psychology
of Human Nature

18 Nov 2025

Silvio Meli
Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasion

28 Nov 2025

Niki Young
Where Does Consciousness
Stop?

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