

[11-ish] months of words, o2.14.2o14 - o1.17.2o15: this space intentionally left blank

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hi.

if this is the first time you're getting this email, here's the deal: this is a list of all the words i've newly enjoyed since the last time i sent an email like this. plus some other stuff related to words.

you may notice that a huge percentage of these words have other people's names listed next to them. those people sent me words. this started happening a few wordlists in, and now it's to the point where people come up to me at parties and tell me about all the new words they've learned. i continue to think this the best part of this whole endeavor. please, send me words.

i've been doing this for a while. you can see all of the previous word emails here:

<http://aaron.bornstein.org/words/>

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words!

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1 neo-to-me-logisms

words that were new to me, at the time. selected on the basis of: panache, cadence, novelty of the conceptual space they carve out, cleverness of definition, mellifluousness as i like to pronounce them, or potential for rhyming with bodily functions.

definitions usually adapted from wikipedia.

the ordering of the below list is not entirely unintentional.

begriff (german): “concept”, “idea”, but also colloquially used to mean “term”, or “word”. in its common usage, the german verb begreifen designates an understanding of an intellectual order. it is this sense of the “intellectual grasp of a thing or an idea” (in begreifen there are echoes of the verb greifen: “to seize, catch, capture”) that is found in begriff: “ich habe keinen begriff davon” means that one has no access to the thing or idea in question. *[via ida m]*

remination: an unremembered dream. *[via kelly c]*

aperçu: a discerning perception; an insight. *[via amy l]*

mamihlapinatapai ([yaghan](#)): a look between two people that suggests an unspoken, shared desire.

tatemae and honne (japanese): what you pretend to believe and what you actually believe, respectively.

desenrascanço (portuguese): to disentangle yourself out of a bad situation. the opposite of preparedness and planning - this portuguese value expresses the importance of frantic, last-minute improvisations that somehow work. taught in universities and the military, it is believed that this ability to slap together haphazard solutions has been key to their survival over the centuries. *[[source](#)]*

sgiomlaireachd (scottish gaelic): the kind of friend who tends to only drop in around mealtimes.

backpfeifengesicht: a face badly in need of a fist. *[via stephanie j]*

kayfabe: in professional wrestling, kayfabe is the portrayal of staged events within the industry as “real” or “true”. with the advent of the internet, it evolved into an open secret, where violations of kayfabe took their own performance value, and are themselves categorized and dissected. more recently, kayfabe appears to have entered a new phase in which it is now repeatedly violated as a fundamental premise of the ongoing story arc (see: “[The Authority](#)”). this has the effect of simultaneously

reinforcing the consensual unreality by actively engaging spectators in its willful maintenance.

supererogation: "payment beyond what is due or asked", from super "beyond" and erogare "to pay out, expend". in ethics, an act is supererogatory if it is good but not morally required to be done. *[via amy l]*

debility: the state of being weak or feeble; infirmity.

viviparous: the development of the embryo inside the mother; the class of animals and birds which share this trait.

dhootie: a long loincloth worn by men in India.

dhoolie: "a rather humbler kind of litter than a palanquin"

chalcography: engravings on [copper](#) plates used for printmaking and for illustrations in the production of books.

incunable: a book, pamphlet, or broadside that was printed - not handwritten - before the year 1501 in europe. "incunable" is the anglicised singular form of "incunabula", latin for "swaddling clothes" or "cradle", which can refer to "the earliest stages or first traces in the development of anything." a former term for "incunable" is "fifteener", referring to the 15th century. *[via amy l]*

peripeteia: a reversal of circumstances, or turning point. *[via amy l]*

eucatastrophe: a catastrophe (dramatic event leading to plot resolution) that results in the protagonist's well-being. *[via amy l]*

exequies: funeral rites.

idam: tamil/sanskrit word which denotes location or position or place. *[via ida m]*

pantouflage (french): a practice by which high-level civil servants obtain work in private enterprise. in american contexts, this concept is known as a "revolving door". *[via y-lan b]*

contrapuntal: a type of music that has two melodic lines played at the same time. *[via amy l]*

lecanomancy: a form of divination using a dish, usually of water. the ripples observed are interpreted to learn the future. also done by throwing rocks in water. *[via benjamin]*

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philosophunculist / philosophaster: a petty or insignificant philosopher. *[via amy l]*

deliquescence: become a liquid, especially by absorbing moisture from the air. *[via r. watson]*

skeuomorph: a derivative object that retains ornamental design cues from structures that were necessary in the original. example: a software calendar that imitates the appearance of binding on a paper desk calendar. *[via amy l]*

prolegomenon: preliminary discussion, especially a formal essay introducing a work of considerable length or complexity. *[via shervin f]*

sough: the moaning sound of the wind in the trees. *[via r. watson]*

apotropically: allegedly having the power to ward off evil. *[via r. watson]*

contrate: (of a gear) having teeth at right angles to the plane of rotation. *[via r. watson]*

hoplophobia: fear of guns. *[via r. watson]*

etiolated: feeble. *[via r. watson]*

invigilate: supervise during an examination. *[via r. watson]*

climacteric: critical period (general) or when fertility is in decline (medicine). *[via r. watson]*

justiciability: subject to trial in court. *[via r. watson]*

manumit: to release from slavery. *[via r. watson]*

pash: a crush. *[via r. watson]*

ponce: an effeminate man, or man who lives off of a prostitutes earnings. *[via r. watson]*

sapiosexual: one who finds intelligence the most sexually attractive feature. *[via judit p]*

costive: constipated, in reality or in speech. *[via r. watson]*

prestidigitation: sleight of hand. *[via r. watson]*

splenetic: of or relating to the spleen; affected or marked by ill humor or irritability; a person regarded as irritable; "given to melancholy".

hapax legomenon: a word that occurs only once within a context, either in the written record of an entire language, in the works of an author, or in a single text.

suzerainty: a situation in which a region or people is a tributary to a more powerful entity, which controls its foreign affairs while allowing the tributary vassal state internal autonomy. *[via tristan u]*

schwerpunkt: the point of focus; an area of concentrated effort, especially in a military operation. *[via amy l]*

incognizable: incapable of being recognized, known, or distinguished. *[via mariam a]*

mondegreen: [a misheard lyric](#). e.g. "excuse me, while i kiss this guy", "[all the lonely starbucks lovers](#)".

soramimi kashi (japanese): (*soramimi* literally "air ear") interpreting lyrics in one language as similar-sounding lyrics in another language. bilingual soramimi kashi contrasts with monolingual mondegreen.

ellison: the omission of one or more sounds (such as a vowel, a consonant, or a whole syllable) in a word or phrase, producing a result that is easier for the speaker to pronounce. e.g. 'going to' becomes 'gonna'. *[via amy l]*

synoptic: of or forming a general summary or synopsis.

conatus: originally, an innate inclination of a thing to continue to exist and enhance itself. this "thing" may be mind, matter or a combination of both.

the history of the term is that of a series of subtle tweaks in meaning and clarifications of scope developed over the course of two and a half millennia. successive philosophers to adopt the term put their own personal twist on the concept, each developing the term differently such that it now has no accepted definition. *[via amy l]*

2 lackinglogisms

*definitions in search of a word. invent one and
your place will be marked in these pages.*

"fear of invisible things" *[from patrick h]*

"scare-quotes we can use among friends, but only among friends"

proposal by raphael k:

schwalbenfuesschen: literally, "sparrows feet". colloquially, quotation marks are called "gaensefuesschen" which is the diminutive of goose-feet. so what animals are so cliquey they would have lots of inside jokes and language specific to their friends? sparrows apparently have local dialects, so: "schwalbenfuesschen".

two proposals, from stephie f-h:

erfundenernst: consisting of erfunden (invented) and ernst (serious), suggesting that the seriousness of your statement is questionable.

nur-wahrwirkend: only seeming true.

3 novelogisms

words for which i was present at, or soon after informed of, the creation

deja lehrer: from the french for "already taught," the feeling that you have read this before. *[by nathan w & patrick h]*

intronspction: the phenomenon of contemplating one's own genome, as on genetic profile sites like 23andme.

dopplerganger: distortion in self when approaching one's double. *[by patrick h]*

absmacking: the novel occasion on which aaron baffles anya. *[by anya k]*

douchibboleth \ˈdü-shi-bə-ləth also -lɪθ\: portmanteau of "douche" and "shibboleth": a word or phrase revealing its speaker to be a douchebag. *[by matt z]*
examples: "body shots", "monetize", "work/life balance", "reverse racism"; "no labels" *[shervin]*, "job creators" *[shervin]*; "disruptive" *[nathan]*

mensapause: when a mensa member gets alzheimer's. *[by peretz p]*

typeo: a word or letter inserted in a text that can be taken as (A) a typographical error, (B) meaningful wordplay, given the larger context of the insertion, or (AB) both. (ed: read the definition a couple of times, i promise it reveals even more on a second look) *[by daniella f, via patrick h]*

anxipity \æŋˈɪpɪtɪ\: portmanteau of "anxiety" and "serendipity", the faculty of making unhappy and unexpected discoveries by accident. also, the fact or an instance of such a discovery.

(from the inventor: originally proposed in response to a request for a word to describe "accidentally discovering something terrible." "negative serendipity" is commonly used for this purpose, but i thought it might be nice to have a one-word equivalent. i started from the consideration that "serenity" and "anxiety" are roughly opposed, and i felt comfortable retaining "ip" rather than "dip" for two reasons: first, -dipity isn't a proper suffix; second (and perhaps contrary to expectations), "serendipity" is not actually etymologically tied to serenity in any way. in fact, horace walpole coined the term in a 1750 letter under inspiration from a story called "the three princes of serendip," about lucky royals in old sri lanka, that used the persian name of the island. it's literally serendip + -ity!) *[by shervin f]*

The Hume: A unit of empirically-obtained knowledge. A Hume is always fractional; the "Hume content" of any referent can only asymptotically approach one. Because

empirical observations are only 'true' up to their empirical replicability, no observation or even field can actually achieve a whole Hume. Instead, it is used almost elliptically, as in "that's a nice result, it's probably got a pretty high Hume content", never as an exact quantification. The first time something is observed it is almost always of comparatively low Hume content, with some variation depending on the quality of the experiment and analyses. Successive observations may increase Hume value, while counter-observations may lower it - though never completely to zero. The existence of negative Hume values remains speculative but intriguing.

4 wordplay

please, play with your words

come up with a sentence that almost contains a pun but actually doesn't. *[via patrick h]*

i discovered there is a name for a pet peeve that i wrote about in a previous email:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unpaired_word

5 some words about words

not-entirely-shameless navel-gazing

the price of all the names

It should be clear - if only from the fact that I keep sending you these lists - that I really enjoy thinking about new words. But one of the words in this edition - 'remination' - raises, for me, serious questions about whether neologism might sometimes be a fraught enterprise. The particular word is a somewhat technical term and so held to more pedantic standards, but I think the concerns raised also apply in more quotidian contexts. Sometimes the very act of giving names, even to things that seem obviously discrete, tangible, 'real', may incur some cost. It's worth asking: do definitions sometimes stand in the way of meaning?

Remination is defined above as "an unremembered dream". Unremembered dreams probably strike almost everyone as a common phenomenon - most people don't 'remember' many, perhaps most, of their dreams. We wake, on these occasions, with the knowledge that we 'had' a dream - we know that we experienced *something* in our sleep. But the dream's content evaporates when we stir - seemingly *right at that moment* - and leaves behind not the usual record but something else neither memory nor its absence, a *not*-memory. The sensation of a uniquely individual experience lost but almost-there can be a uniquely tantalizing combination of intangibility, possession, and possibility - a diaphanous, barely-intelligible whisper, the light touch of an unconscious enormity denied. We are left demanding, if not recompense, then at least an explanation.

In 1982, Francis Crick and his collaborator Graeme Mitchison proposed that these ghosts of dreams might be a necessary byproduct of a sort of neural housecleaning, a winnowing of chaff that happens during REM sleep. In their paper, "[The function of dream sleep](#)", the scientists began from the assumption that the continual churning of connections among neurons - the daily wiring and rewiring that both transforms our present into our past and simultaneously hones us for an anticipated future - would inevitably result in 'mistakes'; associations that but for some random biothermic fluctuations might not otherwise have been formed. Left unchecked, these erroneous paths could lead to destructive feedback loops of electrochemical signals that they called 'parasitic modes', which would be disastrous to normal cognitive function. They reasoned that, if these failures are inevitable, then the brain must have evolved mechanisms to clean them up. They then speculated that one way it could do this would be by 'reverse learning' the faulty connections¹, and suggested that this 'reverse

¹ Note that 'unlearning' a connection is not the same as 'deleting' a memory. Associations between neurons always, inevitably, decay, but any of various reconfigurations contingent on that original coupling will almost certainly remain in place. One could perhaps delete the ability to explicitly, consciously, recall an experience, but doing so doesn't delete the experience or the inferences that followed from it. Thoroughly erasing any kind of memory - a thought, a concept, a habit, a name, an impression - and all its effects is not only biologically infeasible; it may be mathematically impossible. The webs our brains weave are, by necessity, quite tangled. With hundreds of thousands of neurons involved in a particular thought, the networks of subsequent

learning' could be the - or at least a - purpose of dream sleep. It would stand to reason that the dreams that had been 'reverse learned' could not be later remembered.

Importantly, neither these 'parasitic modes' nor any type of 'reverse learning'² had, to that point, actually been observed. (Perhaps, in the authors eyes, the fact that the modes had never been seen only lent credence to the hypothesis that they were naturally done away with.) But at a deeper level the entire enterprise of positing a function for unremembered dreams may rest on a shaky foundation. We don't remember all kinds of experiences, in waking life as well as in sleep. Are dreams 'unremembered' any more than other types of memories? The mere inability to explicitly bring to mind a past experience does not at all imply that the record of that experience is gone forever. Involuntary memories spring to mind all the time despite having gone years without recall - this is true, even, of those dreams we lose at the waking moment³. Further, whether we recall them or not, experiences still shape us. For example, patients with severe amnesia are still able to learn new skills, like playing songs on a piano. They don't recall that the learning happened, but the experiences can hardly be said to have been 'unremembered' - the song sounds the same, whether or not it is accompanied by memories.

When asking these sorts of questions, one might start to wonder what exactly is the thing that the authors were trying to explain. It seems that the very notion of an unremembered dream is itself elusive, ill-defined; might it not verge on question-begging to speculate a functional role for them?

["because you had to give names to everything you found"]

So 'remination' was an idea of questionable empirical validity, sprung from no clear preceding line of thought. When scientific proposals are not attached to extant ideas or replicable observations, they can drift by unremarked-upon, failing to stir further research. Perhaps out of a desire not to let their nascent proposal dissolve unremembered, the authors gave it a

(and preceding) thoughts are inevitably overlapping, with each element shaped in some - sometimes infinitesimal - way by those reconfigurations that preceded it, it is in a very real sense impossible to 'undo' a memory once it is formed.

It could be argued that to delete connections doesn't eliminate a memory in isolation - in fact, in forcing new routes to be taken, in jarring loose previously coherent patterns, forcing new islands to seek contiguity, the very process of deletion could create new, perhaps 'false' memories altogether. And those new connections would inevitably contain echoes of the former, excised, memory in their very structure. This is a problem that has been the bane of spurned lovers and mornings-after since time immemorial: memories *can't* be erased, only reconfigured. What negative space remains is still communicative of what-has-been, even if only as the remaining, circumscribed, impression.

² In a weird bit of serendipity that unfortunately only clouded the issue, the brilliant computational neuroscientist John Hopfield simultaneously proposed an unrelated 'unlearning' mechanism - which was published in the *very same issue* of *Nature*.

³ If we don't immediately call our dreams forward for explicit verbalization, we give them the opportunity to burrow a bit deeper, gestate a bit longer. How many times have your dreams changed in the process of retelling them to others (or even to yourself)? If we don't name their objects, identify their themes, enforce a narrative on them, we may leave open the possibility of a dream becoming 'ours' in a way that it might never have had we (explicitly) recalled it in the first place.

name. They coined the term 'remination'⁴ to describe both the process of undoing destructive connections as well as the impression of lost experience that it was supposed to leave behind.

I don't doubt the intentions were positive. Crick was at this point embarking on his second career, investigating the "neurobiological underpinnings of consciousness", having accomplished in his first field about as much as one could ever dream. So we can reasonably infer that his goal in manufacturing this neologism was simply to introduce vocabulary that might propel the conversation forward.

According to the metrics, he was very successful: in 32 years since publication, the paper has been cited 865 times - [38 times in 2014 alone](#)⁵. But although it is constantly referred to, a review of the citing literature reveals that remination has generated surprisingly few new consequent ideas⁶. Those hundreds of citing publications have largely been unable to successfully build on the proposal, often referring to it only as part of a more vague bundle, sometimes with very little relationship to the original idea (e.g. that dream sleep is important for maintaining some kind of homeostasis). That the paper is cited at all in these situations seems peculiar, as though the authors feel they must come to terms with the proposal, yet balk at any substantial attempt to do so.

What went wrong? The problem isn't as simple as giving a name to a process that hadn't yet been empirically observed. This is why we have theory, to propose the as-yet unseen and give some suggestion for how to see it. The mathematicians Philip Davis and Reuben Hersh distinguish science from mathematics by defining the former is the study of reproducible *external* objects, while the latter is the study of reproducible *mental* objects. The border between the two is fertile ground. As long as the theoretical construct can be formalized, interrogated, and used to make new falsifiable predictions, it can be said to be mathematical, and could someday give rise to new scientific objects, phenomena repeatedly observable in the external world. The problem is that 'remination' does not appear to satisfy either definition. It doesn't reliably call forth the same phenomena in either matter or mind. As a result, different observers have used it to mean a range of different things, sometimes incommensurable with each other. Perhaps it was premature to give it a name?

⁴ A clever (but still crude) portmanteau that bears an I-hope-intentional homophony with "rumination", for which it is sometimes hilariously malappropriated: <http://remination.blogspot.com/>.

⁵ Exact figures are hard to come by, but the average neuroscience paper is probably cited dozens of times in its life <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/415643.article>

⁶ There is a still-vibrant line of thought, most vocally argued by Giulio Tononi of the University of Wisconsin, that sleep generally serves to dampen connections formed during the day. While the precise relationship of this idea to the Crick/Mitchison 'reverse learning' proposal is debatable - it appears to have sprung on its own from distinct empirical observations - it is fair to say that there is still quite active discussion of these sorts of mechanisms, though perhaps not in the form that Crick and Mitchison originally envisioned.

And yet it persists. For sure, this is in large part because of Crick's eminent standing and the longstanding practice of reflexively citing prominent publications⁷. But I think there's some credit due to, and some value in exploring, the stickiness of the name. It's likely impossible to say, with any real certainty, the weight that the word carried in this case. But I think it's worth considering what might be the impact of a tangible name. Perhaps, in the act of naming, Crick and Mitchison unwittingly stultified progress, treating as final a definition that was anything but.

["this rhapsody of incoherent terms was precisely the opposite of a system of numbers"]

Did coining the term 'remination' actually end up harming the project to which Crick had devoted his twilight years? Even if so, it's not as though Crick and Mitchison's crime would be unique. Crick's chosen second field, cognitive neuroscience, is replete with these premature but catchy concretizations of ill-formed concepts: 'emotion', 'attention', 'consciousness', 'mirror neurons', even 'memory' itself. Another pioneer of cognitive (and computer) science, Marvin Minsky, coined the term "suitcase words", to describe words that contain many others⁸. These sorts of abbreviations are found in the more aspiringly reductionist areas of neurobiology as well: the focus on 'spikes' as the word describing a particular set of electrical impulses that travel along the length of a neuron has obscured the incredible variety of interesting ways that cells communicate with one another, and hindered research that may someday uncover the lion's share of meaningful neural activity. The problem is far from limited to just one field - despite Crick's work in his first career, the field of genetics is also still burdened by uncertain, shifting terminology; even the seemingly-fundamental definition of a 'gene' has [fluctuated wildly over the decades](#).

Yet science progresses, despite. It is clearly of some use to devise terms for still-poorly understood phenomena, to describe them as best we can in order to communicate in-progress thoughts. But the costs of all these names are rarely considered. It would be valuable for more to understand that every neologism is a tradeoff, a balance between the value of advancing a 'conversation' and the dangers of imposing form where it may not yet be helpful. Naming things puts a stake in the ground, forcing those who come after to operate in the space thus defined - to shape their own language in the grammar implied by the existing vocabulary. The effects could be far more harmful to the overall project than simply having let the concept persist, beneath the terminological surface, as a space of possibility for shared understanding made less explicit, more general and more specific all at once, motivating a wider variety of experiences and experiments than it might have when packed into a single, reduced name.

⁷ A primary predictor of a publication's citations is the number of times it is cited within the first year of publication.

⁸ This designation may itself miss a critical nuance: it is not at all clear that these 'suitcase' names contain, whole, other component phenomena. They may yet be shown to reflect only aspects of some phenomena, while entirely missing key functions not contained within the set. Treating them as discrete containers may sever atomic kinds, setting as distinct functions that suit each other more than those with which they are, currently, adjoined.

["this fact ... had much of the quality of a dream made up of previous elements"]

Given current understanding it seems deeply unlikely that such a process as 'remination' exists in anything like the form that Crick and Mitchison described. Looking back on 30 years of useful experiments and theory - conducted in parallel, in spite of, not in response to, this hypothesis - we can say it's pretty likely that remination is *not* the "function of dream sleep." Instead, current thinking about dream sleep is that it might constitute - or at least permit - something more constructive than simply deleting connections between neurons. Namely, a process known as 'consolidation' involves selectively strengthening some connections created by experience⁹. The proposal is that during dreams we are constantly 'replaying', reimagining, and recombining past experiences until the connections that define them grow strong, while implicitly leaving unused associations to wither and be eventually recycled¹⁰.

One result of consolidation is that it creates 'semantic' knowledge - generalizations from experience to concepts that can be applied to new situations, without reference to a particular episode of experience. For instance, if you show me two dinner plates containing foods I've never seen before, I will probably be able to tell you whether they are Indian or Chinese cuisine; I will do this without having to bring to mind any given instance of sitting down to an Indian or Chinese meal. I have a sense of how these cuisines should look, smell, taste. But if you show me two similarly novel-to-me dishes, and ask me to tell you whether or not they are, say, Tibetan, I might have a more difficult time. I've had a handful of experiences with a couple of Tibetan restaurants, but not enough to build up a grammar for them that is flexible enough to generalize to new situations. I don't have the ability to say what's 'that' - or, importantly, what's '*not-that*'. In other words, after consolidation we develop a sort of *schema* for working with these concepts.

["the communication thus precludes genuine development of meaning"]

Anatomically, this process corresponds to a lessening role for the hippocampus, the brain structure associated with creating and maintaining *episodic* memories, accompanied by an increased reliance on areas of prefrontal cortex. Recently, we've learned that this same sort of prefrontal involvement can *also* result from instructions or descriptions, externally-provided verbal explanations about the structure of the world: if I tell you the rules of Tibetan cuisine, you don't have to have a dozen Tibetan meals to make distinctions about what is and is not a Tibetan dish. The mere verbal communication suffices, concretizes something for you without any prior tangible experience, without any need for the process of consolidation. In other words, the words of others can skip right over experience and lead straight to understanding - an understanding that diminishes, perhaps contradicts, perhaps even *excludes*, experience.

⁹ Consolidation has also been observed during waking moments of rest - periods of 'mindwandering' - but sleep seems to a particularly active time.

¹⁰ Unknown at the time of Crick and Mitchison's publication was that there is a constant process of churning the receptors that link neurons. This process happens on the order of hours, during both wake and sleep.

And this is the danger of names: they create something that can act like a schema, without any actual referent upon which to act. The concise headline - 'remination is an unremembered dream' - behaved, in the brains of the readers, like an equivalence, a bidirectional assertion, a category earned from experience, obscuring any investigation into the assumptions giving rise to either side, to term or to definition. That the definition was not rooted in *any* experience frustrated its application, but did not stem its spread. Being named made remination something to be addressed, but the underlying premise of its existence was now shielded behind the name, essentially unassailable.

In his *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse explored the destructiveness of increasingly concretized names for geopolitical actors that dissociate from their origins. He writes: "If the linguistic behavior blocks conceptual development, if it militates against abstraction and mediation, if it surrenders to the immediate facts, it repels recognition of the factors behind the facts, and thus repels recognition of the facts, and of their historical content." Names can sustain belief in a 'thing' that is a "surrender" to the immediate 'facts', foreclosing the possibility of further interrogation of those facts. In the case of remination, such interrogation would have been vital to forward progress.

Marcuse was writing of the disciplinary power of the abbreviated names of political organizations, but that the same destructive tendency arises in both science and politics suggests a broader lesson. I'll further suggest that the costs of names aren't limited to new categorizations, nonce coinages or technical terminology. The premature or haphazard application of old categories and terms can be just as harmful. Words like 'incentivize', 'rationalize', 'privacy', 'schizophrenia' all have embedded in them poor understandings of the natural and political world, but their common use closes those understandings off from deeper inspection. They communicate ideas, but in doing so hinder the types of thinking that might generate certain kinds of useful ideas sometimes antithetical to the premises on which those words were founded. What other words do you use that hinder thought in this way? Stereotypes - gender, race, identity, professional - are one easy example, but yet it's often underappreciated just how pervasive they really are, beyond the explicit. How often do you fill in the blanks of other people's intentions or actions, based on schema they never deserved?

["... the unarticulated, the immoderate, the eternal, nothingness."]

But clearly we *must* name things - it would be rather odd for me to close a list of new-to-me words with a paean to eliminativism. Simply deleting words is fascistic, and never successful: the Third Reich tried and failed, Putin's Russia may be [deleting a letter](#), China is now [even trying to ban the practice of wordplay](#). On the other end of the spectrum, the OED famously never deletes words (at least, [not by organizational policy](#)). While the dangers of explicit censorship are easily identifiable (if not heeded nearly often enough), might there be something similarly constraining arising from such a culture of agglomeration?

It isn't necessary to let this tendency go unchecked. Marcuse's conditional could serve as a sort of rule of thumb for how much damage a term, newly coined or even just newly applied, might cause. Words can be evaluated by how much they obscure their precedents, how much they "surrender" to what might currently be understood as "facts". Surely some words are necessary to communicate, but others may outweigh that benefit by destroying essential nuance - or closing off that nuance from developing. Borges wrote that every noun is an abbreviation - we can go further and argue that some nouns abbreviate more disastrously than others.

Can we mitigate our tendency to abbreviate? One approach to resist the mission creep of vocabulary is to first think and speak of new concepts by what they are *not*. There is value in a positivity of negation, a circumscribing of that-which-is by that which-is-not. The difference between X and not-X or Y and non-Y, as opposed to a named opposite, can seem subtle, but allows space for a much richer suite of possibilities, or conditions of possibility¹¹.

[under the neologism - the beach!]

For example, think of the words used to describe personal identity. Aaron Swartz, in his essay [*Why I'm not gay*](#), considers the difference between 'gay' (or 'bisexual') and simply 'not straight'. Between them is a world of nuance that has very real impacts. The former pin down a restrictive, never-quite-right definition of a person or relationship. The latter leave open the fluidity and individuality appropriate to always-changing subjects and interactions. Abandoning these sorts of concrete terms can be frightening in part because it makes more difficult identification with a tribe - in fact it explicitly sets one *apart*. But that very identification can itself be destructive, allowing further atomization and enabling power's divide-and-conquer domination of threatening identity. Homosexuality was pathologized only after it was named; I would not be the first to suggest that the relationship between these two facts might be more than correlative. The next step after pathology - selective, incremental 'normalization' - is only made possible once further identities are set apart: it is possible to co-opt 'gay' identity into 'straight' culture; it would be much more difficult to co-opt all that is 'not-straight'.

Militating against the tendency to name, we can resist the imposition of schema. It can be tempting to adopt the full nihilism - to write off all terminology as arbitrary and embrace the resulting lack as a fundamental, liberating limit. But to seriously abandon a Platonic notion of names, of a 'true' word to express some asserted 'real' concept, entails accepting that naming is *not* arbitrary - that words carry all the meaning there is. This implies that the tradeoff between naming and not-naming is deeply consequential. I have no prescription for where on this line to find yourself in any given situation: certainly the value of naming for pure whimsy is to be considered, and naming for communication still important (though probably

¹¹ Even more daring, and more difficult, is to resist the urge to name at all, to circumlocute productively and leave the excess space un-negated by refusing to put it in dialectic with anything. This ever-changing, ever-moving target by necessity continually expands the spaces available for thought.

overemphasized in the deliberation; it may even be an inherent impulse, something that can only be actively overcome). All I can ask is that you consider the consequences of a word before its time. The more we resist the urge to give names, then the more we may let our very real dreams persist - formless, unremarked, but not at all unremembered.