HUMAN CONNECTIONS

NewPhilosopher

CONNECTION

"In nature everything is connected, everything is interwoven, everything changes with everything, everything merges from one into another."

– Gotthold Lessing

Connection

In an age defined by digital immediacy and physical distance, the question of how we connect, and what it means to us, seems more relevant than ever. We text more than we talk; scroll more than we see; 'lol' more than we laugh. Despite our fragmented experiences, the human need to belong – to be part of something greater than our own existence – nags at us; urges us to make an effort to form meaningful, enduring connections.

But connection is not merely emotional or social; it is the cornerstone of how we understand ourselves and the world around us. Aristotle touched on this when he wrote in *Politics*, "He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god." For Aristotle, relationships were key, be they friendships of pleasure, utility, or virtue.

It is through relationships that meaning, value, and identity emerges; we become whole through our connections with others. Alone, we are little more than a jumble of atoms, vibrating aimlessly; together, we are *connected*. As the environmentalist Rachel Carson put it so well: "We are reminded that in nature nothing exists alone."

In the end, however, connection runs far deeper than friendship. True connection is not simply about being linked – one person to another, one experience at a time – but rather recognising that we are connected to all that is around us, and to the beginning and the end: to all those in the long line that came before us, and all those yet to come.

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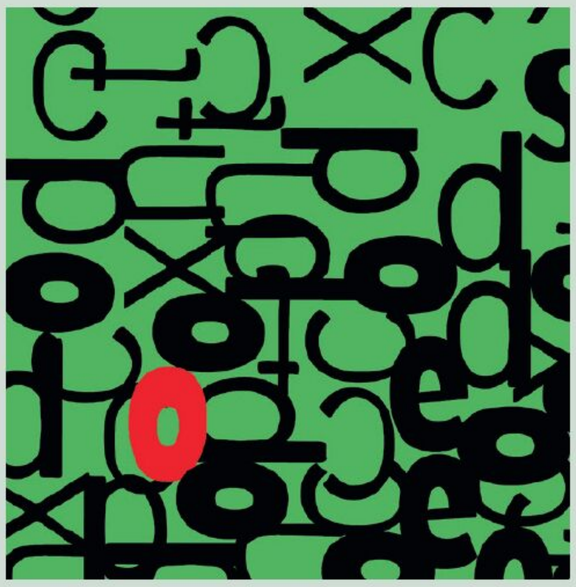

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Nigel Warburton

Nigel Warburton is a freelance philosopher, podcaster, writer, and the Editor-at-large of *New Philosopher*. Described as "one of the most-read popular philosophers of our time", his books include *A Little History of Philosophy*, *Thinking from A to Z*, and *Philosophy: The Classics*. The interviewer for the Philosophy Bites podcast, Warburton was previously Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Open University and Lecturer in Philosophy at Nottingham University.

Antonia Case

Antonia Case is Editor of *New Philosopher* and was Founding Editor of *Womankind*, and is an award-winning writer and journalist. She is the author of *Flourish*, on personal identity and change, published by Bloomsbury. She was the winner of the 2013 Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Professionals' Award and in 2016 was shortlisted for Editor of the Year in the Stack Awards. Case was selected as 'philosopher in residence' for the 2016 Brisbane Writers' Festival.

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Kenneth J. Gergen is a founding member, President of the Taos Institute and Chair of the Board, and the Mustin Professor of Psychology at Swarthmore College. Gergen also serves as an Honorary Professor at the University of Buenos Aires. Gergen has published over 300 articles in journals, magazines and books, and his major books include *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, *The Saturated Self*, *Realities and Relationships*, and *An Invitation to Social Construction*.

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Myisha Cherry is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of California. Cherry is the co-editor of *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, and has written about emotions, race, and state violence in *Hypatia*, *Radical Philosophy Review*, *Critical Philosophy of Race*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Salon*, and the *Huffington Post*. Cherry is the host of the UnMute Podcast and the author of *The Case for Rage*.

André Dao

André Dao is an author and researcher. His debut novel, *Anam*, won the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, the NSW Premier's Literary Award for New Writing, and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award. He is also the co-founder of *Behind the Wire*, an award-winning oral history project documenting the stories of the adults and children who have been detained by the Australian government after seeking asylum in Australia.

Patrick Stokes

Patrick Stokes is Associate Professor in philosophy at Deakin University, Melbourne. He specialises in 19th and 20th century European philosophy, personal identity, narrative selfhood, moral psychology, and death and remembrance. Stokes is the author of *Digital souls: a philosophy of online death*, *The naked self: Kierkegaard and personal identity*, and *Kierkegaard's mirrors: Interest, self, and moral vision*. In 2014 he was awarded the AAP Media Prize.

Mariana Alessandri

Mariana Alessandri is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she focuses on Mexican-American studies and gender and women's studies. Alessandri's essays have been published in *The New York Times* and *Womankind*. Her book, *Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves Through Dark Moods*, is out now with Princeton University Press.

Marina Benjamin

Marina Benjamin is a writer and editor. As a memoirist, she is best known for *The Middlepause*, which offered a poetic and philosophical take on midlife. Benjamin is also the author of *Insomnia* and her new memoir *A Little Give*. She was arts editor of the *New Statesman* and deputy arts editor at the *London Evening Standard*, and is a senior editor at *Aeon*. Her book *Rocket Dreams* was shortlisted for the Eugene Emme Literature Award.

Tom Chatfield

Dr Tom Chatfield is a British author and philosopher of technology, with a special interest in critical thinking, AI and ethics. His most recent book, Wise Animals, explores the co-evolution of humanity and technology, and what the present might learn from our deep past. His other books exploring digital culture and critical thought are published in over thirty languages.

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Russel Herneman is an award-winning cartoonist whose work has appeared in *The Times of London*, *Private Eye*, *Prospect*, *The Spectator*, and many others. He was awarded Pocket Cartoon of the Year 2018 in the Political Cartoon Awards, the 2020 European Newspaper Design award for illustration, and the 2021 Society of News Design Award of excellence for Illustration.

Alvaro Hidalgo

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Corey Mohler

Corey Mohler is the creator of *Existential Comics*, which has covered more than 120 philosophers, examining a wide variety of thought from pre-Socratic philosophy to contemporary philosophy. In 2018 Mohler drew attention from Elon Musk after calling him "the villain from Atlas Shrugged". Musk angrily responded during a SpaceX launch and Mohler later published a comic about the incident.

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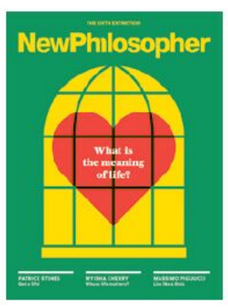

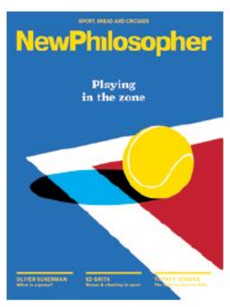

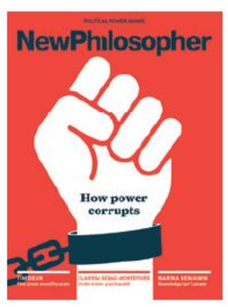

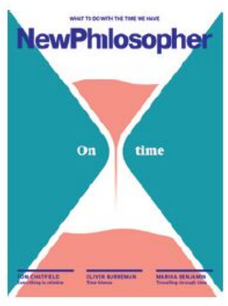

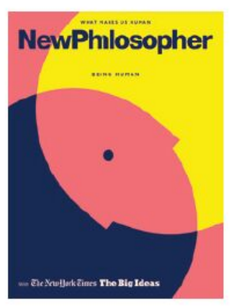

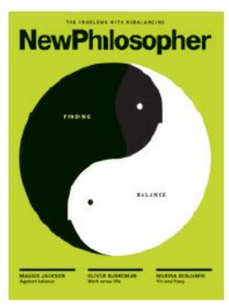

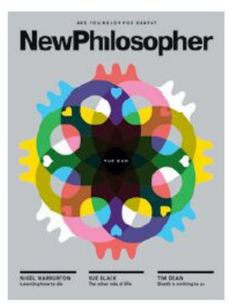

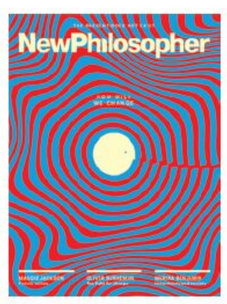

COME
TOGE
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ART ↓ ↑ SCIENCE

For hundreds of years, the sciences and the arts have been separated, with very little overlap. Scientists pursue the truth by means of experiment, observation, and reason, with scant need for the subjective and ornamental qualities of art. Artists, on the other hand, remain cloistered in their studios, or libraries, lest their imaginative sensibilities be dulled by the analytical mindset of science. British physicist and novelist C.P. Snow described it as the two cultures: "Literary intellectuals at one pole – at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension."

Since the scientific revolution, the idea that specialisation is essential to success has gained traction. Universities are segregated into disciplines, with academics remunerated and celebrated by uncovering truths that few outside their speciality can understand. In his 1959 book, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Snow writes: "A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is about the scientific equivalent of: 'Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?'"

The arts and sciences were not always at odds. During the Renaissance, many artists were also scientists, specialists in not just drawing and painting, but anatomy, mathematics, chemistry, metallurgy, and mechanics. Italian workshops were hubs of applied science and artistry, run by master artists who trained apprentices in a wide array of disciplines.

Today, there is a growing movement towards re-connecting the disciplines. NASA, for instance, collaborates with musicians to interpret X-ray data from black holes, translating that data into audible sound. Scientists can hear the rhythm of a black hole's pressures waves – ripples of gas – which has proved to be a more effective means of identifying patterns than reading the data alone. Increasingly, science is turning to using visuals to simulate phenomena that cannot be seen or heard. And it is within the arts that this imaginative, concept-driven mindset most naturally thrives.

Photo by Etienne Girardet

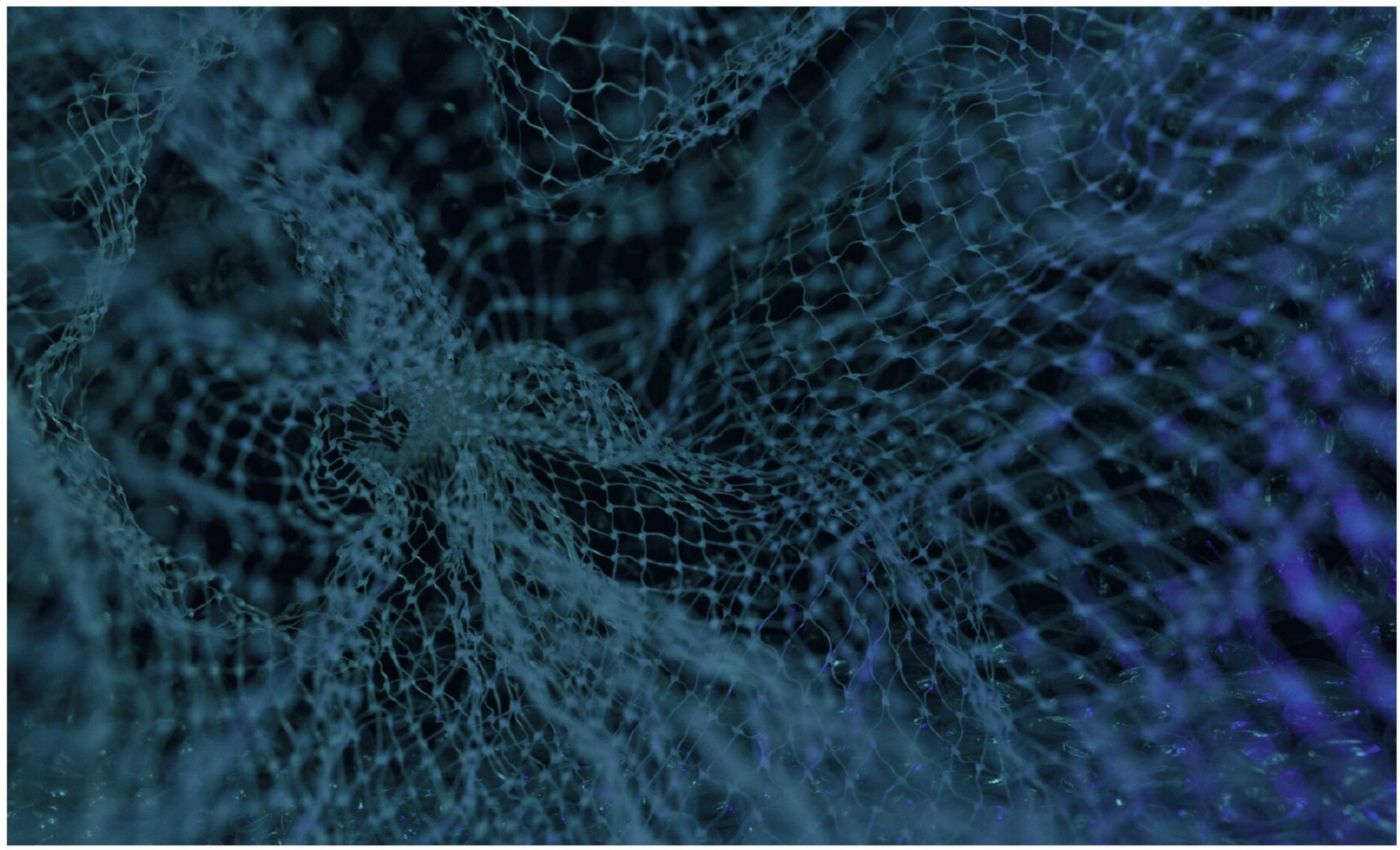
Silent networks

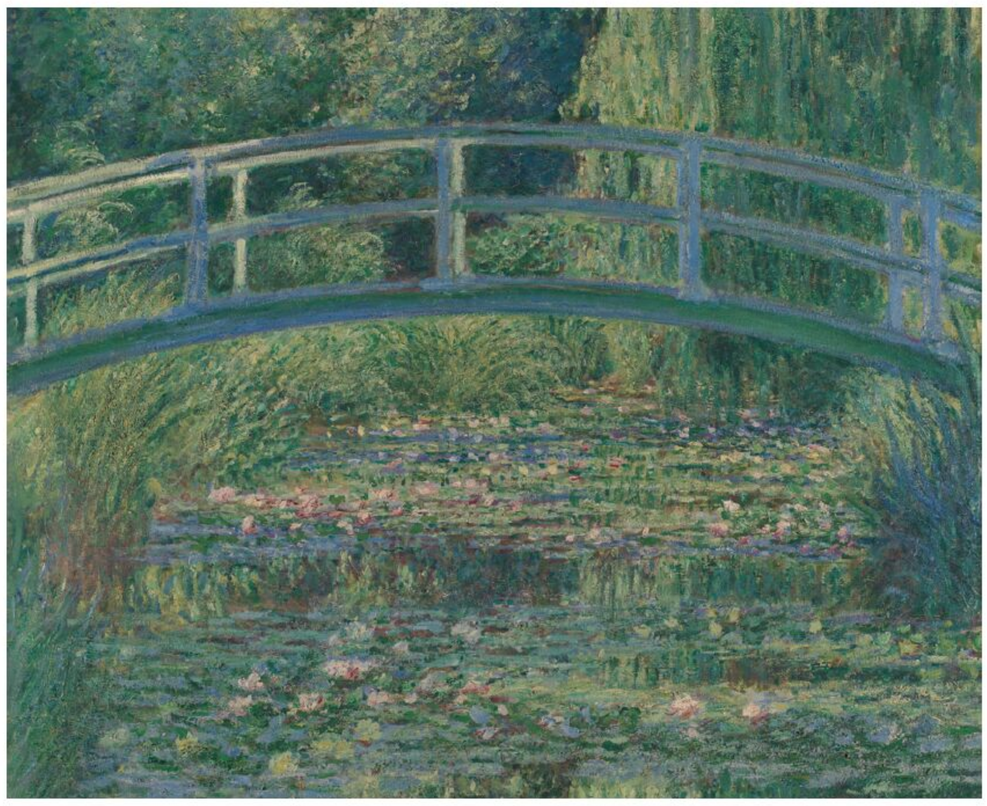
When we head out to buy a new consumer item – be it a vacuum cleaner, computer, or lawn mower – we rarely think of the transaction as akin to meeting a new person. Yet what if this encounter, like any human connection, might shape us in unforeseen ways, with outcomes both positive and negative?

Philosopher Bruno Latour challenges the idea that humans alone possess agency. In his view, objects too can act – they exert influence through the roles they occupy and the outcomes they help bring about. From germs to coffee machines to institutions, humans and non-human entities are entangled in vast, interdependent networks. Latour's actor-network theory posits that every "actant" – human or non-human – plays a role in shaping outcomes, and thus carries agency and value.

"Actants" are defined not by what they are, but by what they do – by their capacity to affect the course of events. A smartphone, for instance, is not neutral; it reshapes our attention, our communication, our habits. Gravity itself, though invisible, is no less active – it governs motion and form. A car transforms not just mobility, but also how we relate to infrastructure, rules, and each other. Latour's theory draws our attention to the significance of things – the overlooked agents that shape our world and experience. Objects are no longer passive; they are participants in a dynamic, shifting cultural and social web.

This has profound implications for how we understand connection. We tend to think of connection in terms of family, friendships, or digital networks – but seldom in terms of household items, weather systems, or gadgets. Yet these, too, act upon us. They are entangled in the same mesh of influence and relation. We live, in Latour's terms, not above or apart from the world of things, but among them. It's a theory that invites us to view the objects around us not as benign bystanders, but as powerful actors capable of enacting change.





The Water Lily Pond, 1899, by Claude Monet

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

Albert Einstein, 1921

"I've given you everything! Toner! Paper! Power! And what do you do for me?! Nothing!"

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

– John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,* 1624

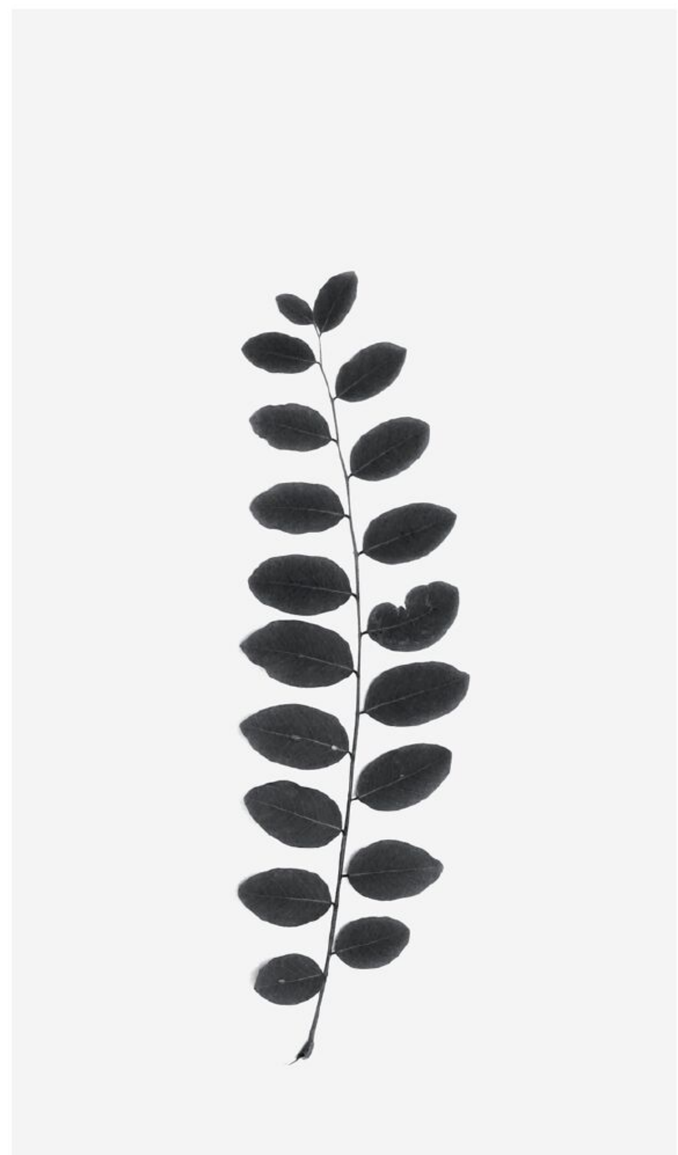
The electronic crowd

In this high-speed internet era, we can connect to almost endless participants in the world, suggesting that we are better connected than ever before. But when roughly half, if not more, of internet traffic comes from bots, this connection comes at a cost: scammers, phishers, trolls, sock puppets, hackers, spammers, click farmers, to name a few.

Bots (short for robots) are software programs that run automated tasks over the internet. Bots are not new – they have existed since the advent of the internet, many undertaking repetitive tasks such as cleaning databases or auto-deleting suspected spam. Chatbots can answer product questions on websites, recommend movies, track your pizza order, but they can also flood comment sections; inflate likes, follows, and views on social media; misleading us into believing that the public is engaged, or enraged, by a topic or event, when in reality it's tumbleweeds blowing in the wind.

Unlike what you read in science-fiction novels, bots are not automated systems with a mind of their own. Rather, they come with the biases, political, and social leanings of their creators, or coders. The creator tells the bot what to talk about, what to prioritise, and how to say it (emojis or none, jokes allowed). Bots can amplify one side of a story, repeat key messages, make fringe ideas seem mainstream, like and retweet posts, and engage in astroturfing (fake grassroots support). Worst still, bots can coordinate in swarms, where thousands of bots act in sync to push a story, or support, attack, or discredit someone.

When Marshall McLuhan coined the term "global village" in the early 1960s, long before the internet, he predicted that new electronic interdependence would recreate the world in the image of a global village. People would be interconnected in real-time across the globe, but this heightened connection would be accompanied by noise and heightened tribal conflict. When McLuhan was writing, it's unlikely, however, he took into consideration the effects of bots, or the artificial 'public' created to persuade or influence the public agenda. Today, it may not be too much connection that's the problem with the internet, but as with almost all human conflicts, it's the outsized influence of the malicious few.



"In an extreme view, the world can be seen as only connections, nothing else. We think of a dictionary as the repository of meaning, but it defines words only in terms of other words. I liked the idea that a piece of information is really defined only by what it's related to, and how it's related. There really is little else to meaning. The structure is everything. There are billions of neurons in our brains, but what are neurons? Just cells. The brain has no knowledge until connections are made between neurons. All that we know, all that we are, comes from the way our neurons are connected."

– Tim Berners-Lee

Smoke Signals

Date introduced: c. 200 BCE
Connection method: Visual, long-distance signalling using puffs of smoke
Reach: Limited to line-of-sight; used along the Great Wall of China
Users: Military personnel, tribespeople

Carrier Pigeons

Date introduced: c. 1150 CE
Connection method: Messages tied to trained homing pigeons
Reach: Up to 1,000 km
Users: Military (e.g., WWI), merchants, nobility

Printing Press

Date introduced: 1440
Connection method: Mass communication through printed books and pamphlets
Reach: Europe-wide within decades
Users: General public, scholars, clergy

Coffee houses

Date introduced: c. 1550 Istanbul, 1650 Oxford
Connection method: Face-to-face dialogue and idea exchange
Reach: Urban centres; then Ottoman Empire, then European cities
Users: Intellectuals, merchants, politicians

Postal Systems

Date introduced: 1653 (France)
Connection method: Written correspondence via national systems
Reach: Nationwide and eventually global; daily mail delivery in many nations by late 1800s
Users: General public

Telegraph

Date introduced: 1837
Connection method: Instantaneous electrical signals across wires
Reach: Transatlantic cable by 1866
Users: Governments, newspapers, businesses

Telephone

Date introduced: 1876
Connection method: Voice communication over wires
Reach: Local and international
Users: Households and businesses

Internet and social media

Date introduced: 1980s–1990s
Connection method: Text-based real-time online discussion
Reach: Global via internet
Users: 5.56 billion

"We are made for togetherness. We are made for community. We are made for a life of connection."

– Desmond Tutu

UNIVERSAL CONNECTION

The human body is made up of four key elements – hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen – as are most living things, including plants, animals, fungi, and even bacteria. These elements are the building blocks of life, found in amino acids, DNA, and energy sources such as fats. But our biological connection goes beyond just the living world here on Earth: we are also connected to the cosmos.

Long before Earth existed, many of the atoms in our bodies – like oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen – were forged in the blazing furnaces of stars and cast into space through stellar winds, planetary nebulae (gas and dust ejected by a dying star), and brilliant supernovae, waiting billions of years to become part of us. But even more ancient is the hydrogen in our bodies, born in the earliest moments – before any star had even shone – some 3.7 billion years ago.

In this sense, we are linked not only to all life on Earth but also to ancient stars, distant galaxies, and the primordial forces that shaped the universe. The idea that we are biologically connected to stardust is not just poetic, it also invites us to reconsider how we perceive our connection to nature, the cosmos, all living beings, and each other. It challenges anthropocentrism – which views humans as separate and superior to the natural world – and hints at a more integrated, relational understanding of our place in the universe.

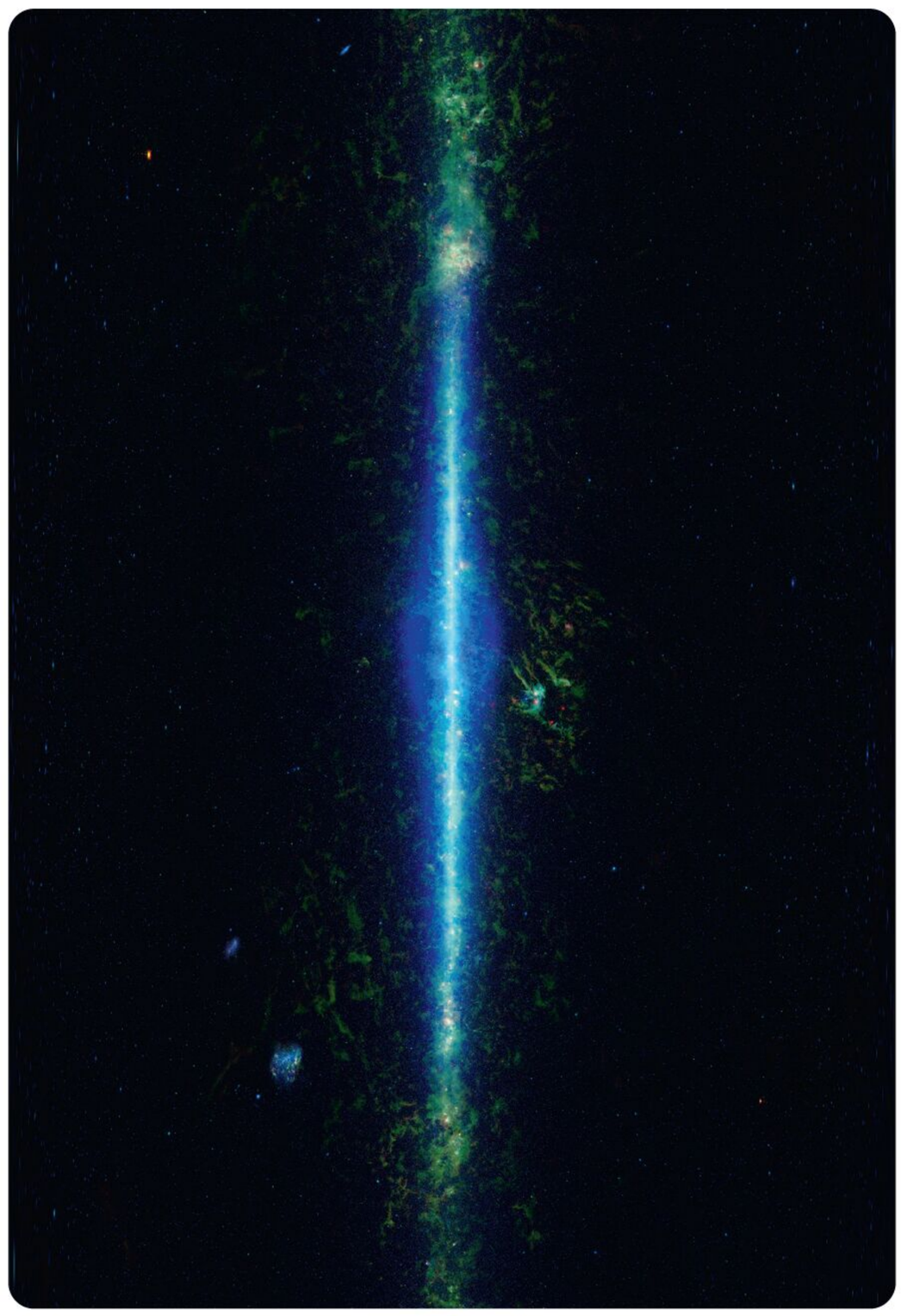


Image: NASA/JPL

"You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."

– Steve Jobs

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magazine

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"*New Philosopher* has given me hope for the future of this country's media landscape and for the public discussion emanating from it."

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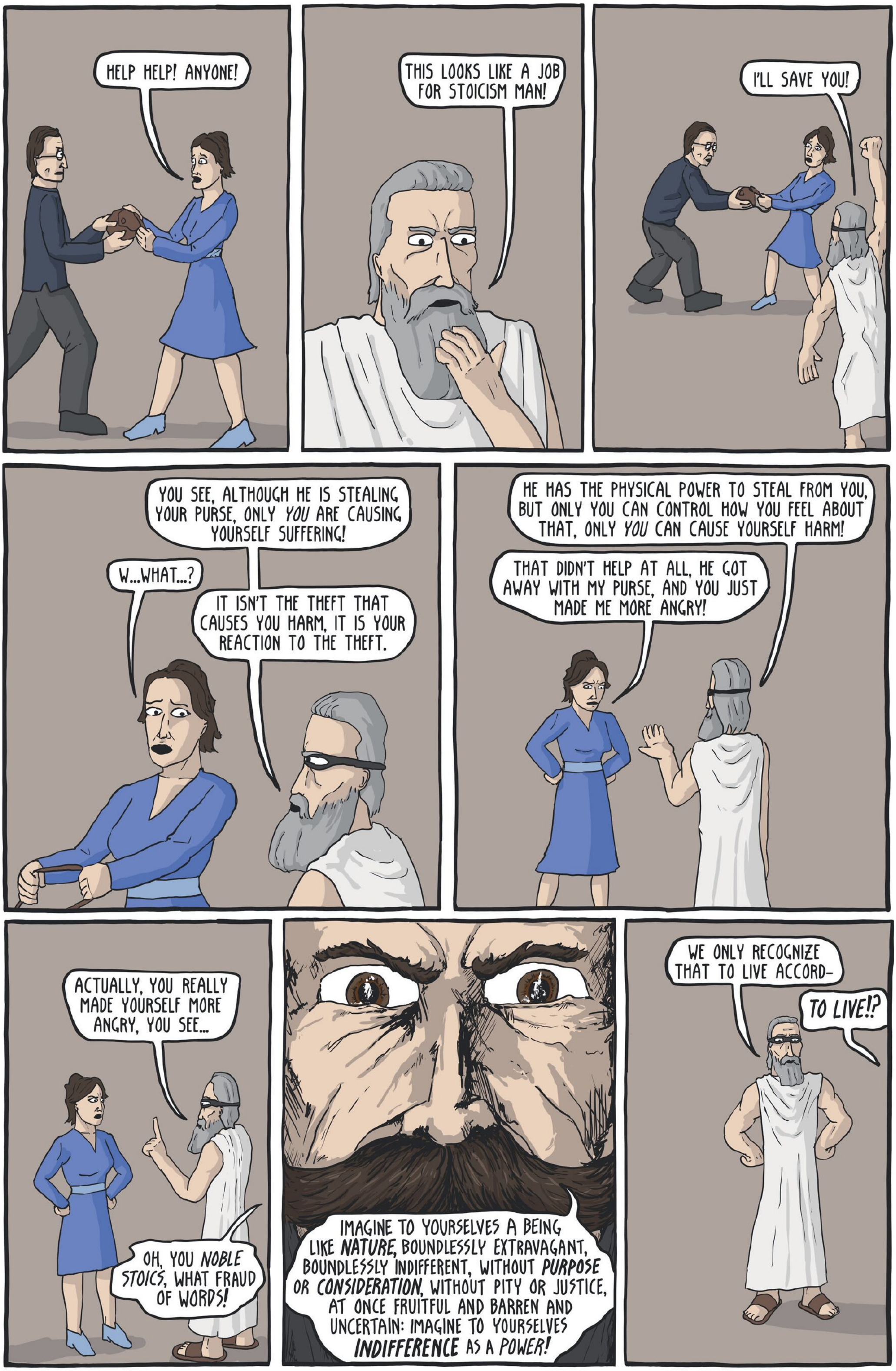
"This magazine is remarkable!"

"Fascinating and challenging material, attractively presented, well bound – what more could one ask?"


HELP HELP! ANYONE!
THIS LOOKS LIKE A JOB FOR STOICISM MAN!
I'LL SAVE YOU!
YOU SEE, ALTHOUGH HE IS STEALING YOUR PURSE, ONLY *YOU* ARE CAUSING YOURSELF SUFFERING!
W...WHAT...?
IT ISN'T THE THEFT THAT CAUSES YOU HARM, IT IS YOUR REACTION TO THE THEFT.
HE HAS THE PHYSICAL POWER TO STEAL FROM YOU, BUT ONLY YOU CAN CONTROL HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT, ONLY *YOU* CAN CAUSE YOURSELF HARM!
THAT DIDN'T HELP AT ALL, HE GOT AWAY WITH MY PURSE, AND YOU JUST MADE ME MORE ANGRY!
ACTUALLY, YOU REALLY MADE YOURSELF MORE ANGRY, YOU SEE...
OH, YOU *NOBLE STOICS*, WHAT FRAUD OF WORDS!
IMAGINE TO YOURSELVES A BEING LIKE ***NATURE***, BOUNDLESSLY EXTRAVAGANT, BOUNDLESSLY INDIFFERENT, WITHOUT ***PURPOSE*** OR ***CONSIDERATION***, WITHOUT PITY OR JUSTICE, AT ONCE FRUITFUL AND BARREN AND UNCERTAIN: IMAGINE TO YOURSELVES ***INDIFFERENCE*** AS A *POWER!*
WE ONLY RECOGNIZE THAT TO LIVE ACCORD-
TO LIVE!?

By Corey Mohler, for more comics visit existentialcomics.com

by Patrick Stokes

Splendid isolation

"No man is an island, entire of itself" declares the seventeenth century English poet John Donne; "every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." If these words have become a cliché, it's perhaps because we've needed to hear them over and over again. The ideal of living in a completely self-sufficient way, whether emotionally or even physically, has attracted people (especially westerners) for centuries. We just can't seem to shake the idea of sloughing off our entanglements with others to go live off the grid – whether by literally running away into the wilderness, or more figuratively, by making ourselves invulnerable to deep connection with others.

Philosophers in particular are often guilty of writing as if we humans are independent atoms of free will and reason, rather than animals who cannot survive without connection to others of our kind. The 'self' of the philosophers, particularly the figure that Charles Taylor called the 'buffered self' of the Enlightenment, is entire of itself, a sovereign knower and a rational actor that can decide for itself how it will engage with others. To borrow a phrase from the 19th century Canadian statesman George Eulas Foster, speaking of Britain's policy of avoiding permanent alliances, the self we find in philosophy from antiquity to modernity is one that, even amidst society, lives in a state of "splendid isolation".

In ancient Greece, philosophers spoke of *autarkeia*, 'self-sufficiency', as a self-evident virtue that needed no explanation or defence. "Self-sufficiency," said Epicurus, "is the greatest of all wealth." It was equated with freedom, both from your own unruly passions and from the demands of others. If you depend upon others, whether materially or psychologically, then your happiness is hostage to the actions and choices of other people. To the Greeks, that was no better than slavery.

Of course, another thing that is no better than slavery is, well, actual slavery. Around a third of the population of ancient Athens were enslaved – a fact which makes the Hellene philosophising classes' claims to self-reliance seem grimly hollow. The life of free intellectual contemplation praised by figures from Socrates onwards depended on the existence of a vast class of unfree peoples to keep it fed and clothed.

The Romans, via Stoic philosophy, were also quite fond of the idea of self-reliance. After all, Rome's foundation myth was a tale of babies

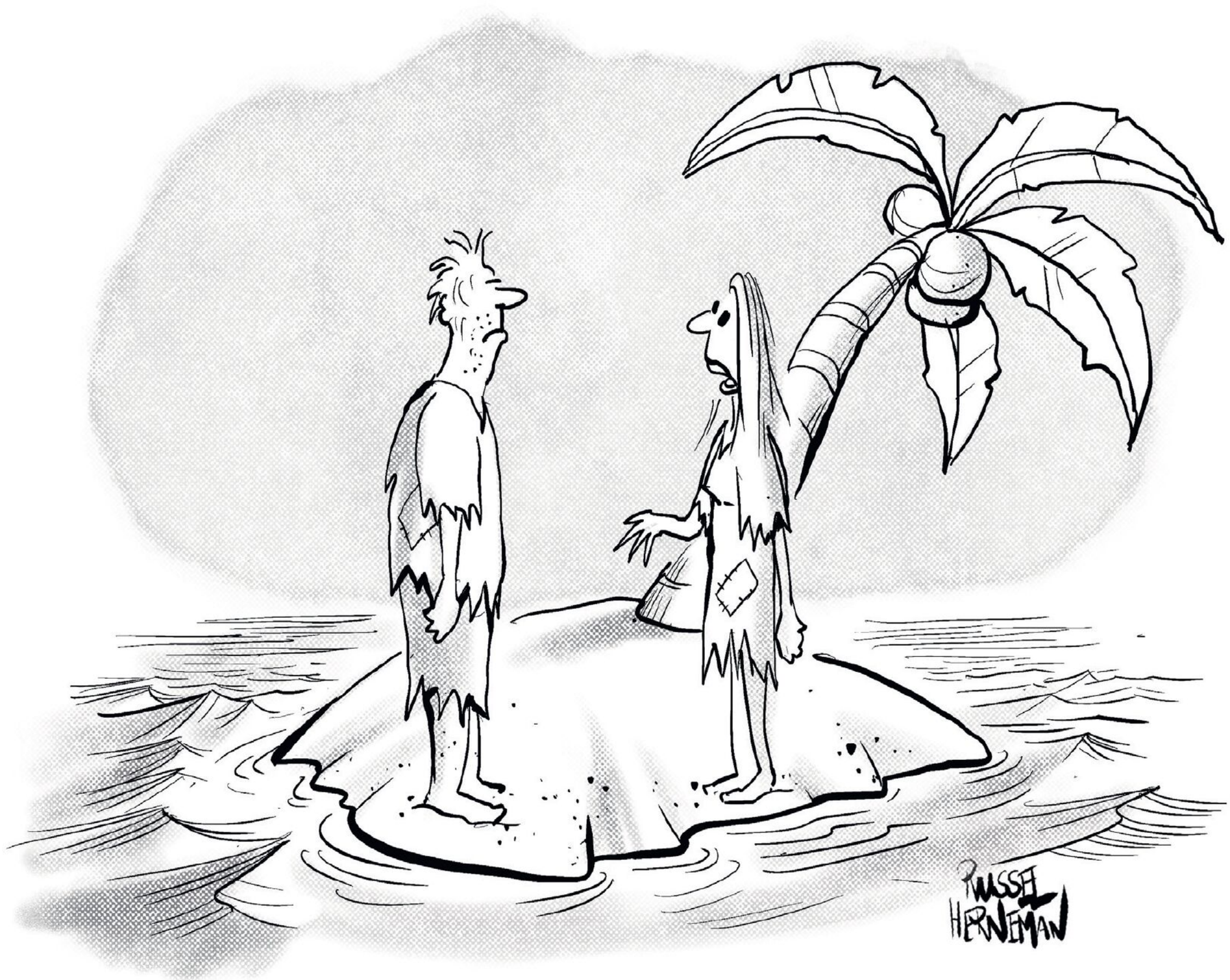
Oxbow, 1836, by Thomas Cole

surviving without any human support. They traced the origin of Rome to the birth of twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, conceived in the forbidden union of a god and a vestal virgin. The infant brothers were condemned to die, but the servant assigned to kill them took pity and instead put them in a basket and floated them down the river Tiber. Alone in the wilderness, the children were then found and suckled by a she-wolf.

Though the story is clearly myth, there are in fact many known accounts of children living with non-human animals for months or even years. These are not romantic tales, but tragic outcomes of neglect or child abuse that often (though not always) lead to children with greatly diminished capacity for language. Twenty-first century cases have generally occurred with neglected children seeking shelter among dogs; less commonly, with monkeys or even sheep.

Perhaps part of the reason we find stories of children raised by animals so fascinating is the flattering idea that we, too, could survive disconnected from the rest of humanity – as if each of us has the internal resources to survive apart from our species, if we're put in the 'right' circumstances. We're all just rugged survivalists waiting for our chance to prove we don't need anyone else.

There's no shortage of examples of radically isolated human beings surviving outside society, from ascetic hermits living alone for spiritual reasons to the notorious cases of lone Japanese soldiers who continued fighting the Second World War for decades after the war had ended. Even in those cases, however, the soldiers were still connected to others in some sense: they understood themselves to be still serving in the Emperor's army,



"We both know this isn't working. I think we should split up."

Some philosophers have managed to see through the illusion that we are, or should strive to be, self-sufficient individuals who don't need others to live.

and continued to kill those they believed to be the enemy. (When Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda was discovered still fighting in Lubang in 1974, he refused to give himself up without orders. His former commanding officer, by then a civilian bookseller, had to be flown to the Philippines to order Onoda to surrender.)

Disconnecting from society is hard enough even in material terms. You can try to flee to the woods, as Henry David Thoreau famously did in the 1840s – where he wrote a book extolling the virtues of self-reliance even as his mother popped by his cabin once a week with clean laundry and his sisters dropped around with cakes. But just retreating to the outback and living by your wits is not enough. By the time you've dropped out of society and cut your ties with the people around you, it's far too late. You are already a product of other people: the name they gave you, the language they taught you, the networks of identity and belonging that, no matter how you try to unplug yourself, still make you who you are.

Even in myth, unfettered by the laws of biology, it turns out you can't get very far without human connection: Romulus and Remus might survive for a while thanks to nonhuman agency, but it is only when they are found and adopted by a shepherd and his wife that they are able to become the people they are. What they lack in the forest is not simply human language, but a name and a conceptual relationship to others that forms the architecture of their identities. A Romulus who stays with the she-wolf after being weaned would be impressive, but could never be Romulus. (To be fair, the actual myth isn't all that happy either: the brothers quarrel over where to build their new city, and Romulus ultimately kills Remus.)

Some philosophers have managed to see through the illusion that we are, or should strive to be, self-sufficient individuals who don't need others to live. In his book *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alisdair MacIntyre (one of the most influential moral philosophers of the past half-century) points out that humans are in fact radically interdependent in ways that philosophy has been far too reluctant to admit. We can preach the virtues of *autarkeia* in the marketplace of ideas, but you only need to collapse while standing in a queue to realise just how false this picture is. In that moment, when life and death depends on the kindness of strangers, it becomes clear how much we ultimately live at the mercy of each other.

Still, the idea of running away from society, even at great physical risk, retains some appeal. There are various medieval accounts of children being raised by wolves in German forests. One boy in Hesse, it is said, ran with a wolf pack from the age of three until he was found by Benedictine monks five years later. In time, the boy was able to speak and was integrated back into society. And yet, according to the fourteenth century *Chronicle of St Peter of Erfurt*, "this boy often said that he much preferred to live among wolves than among men." ◘

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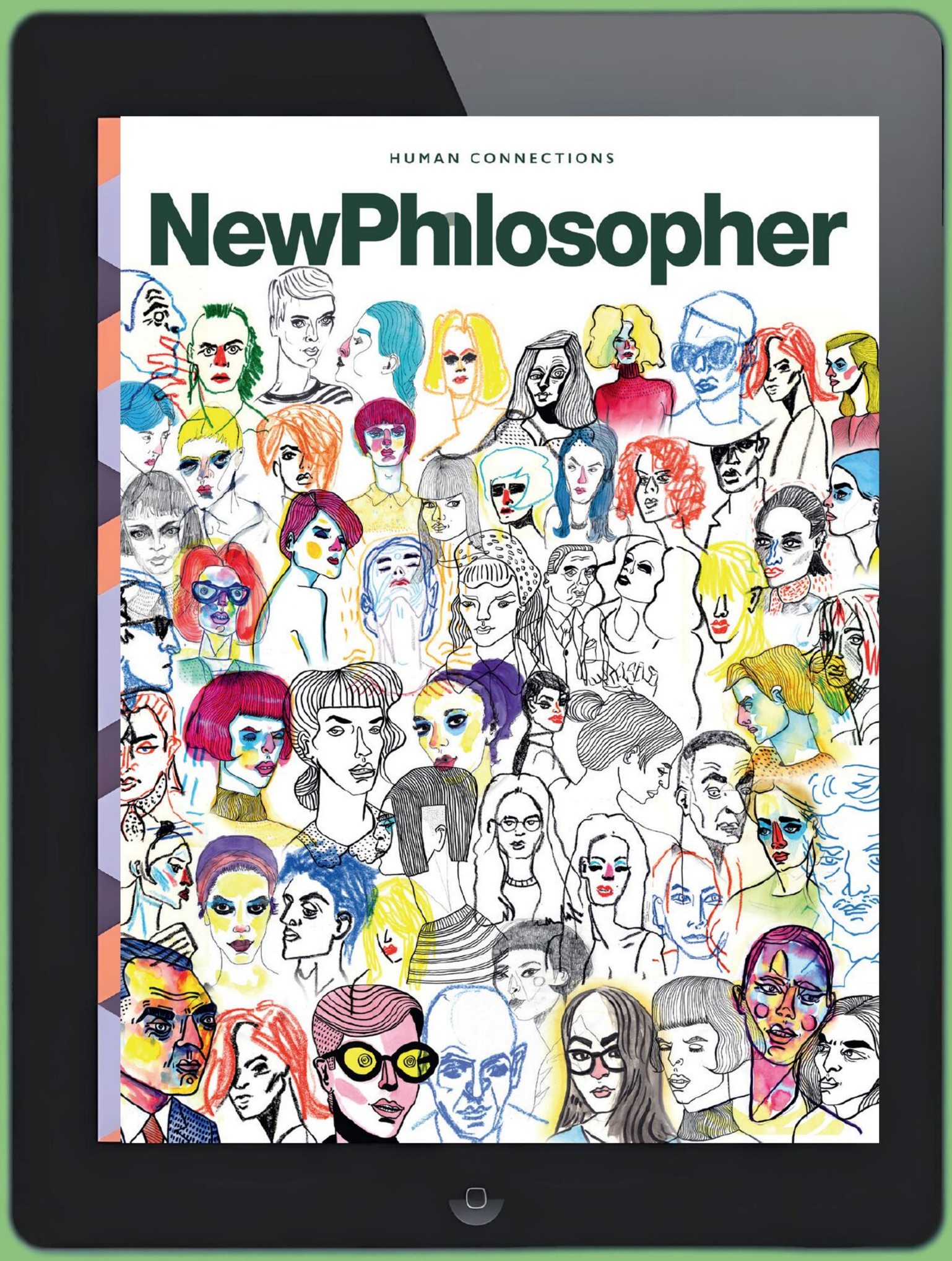
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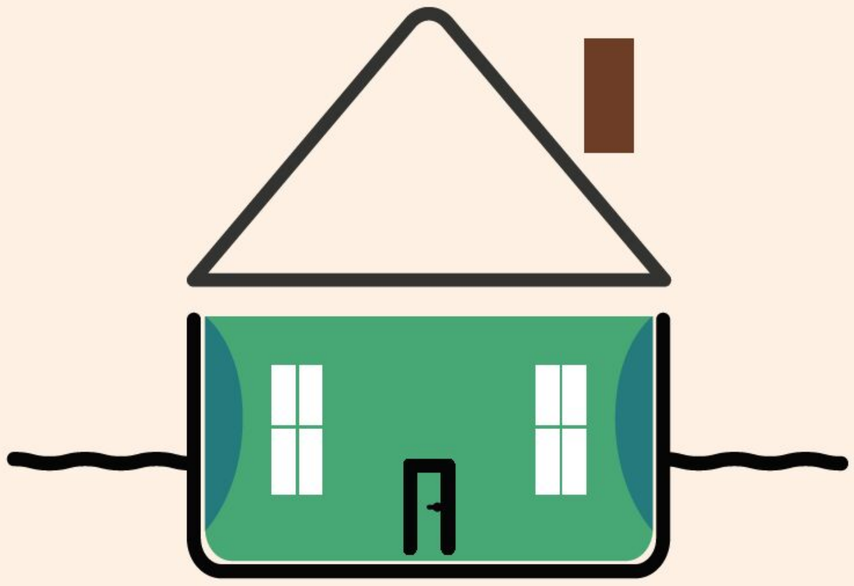
Nighthawks, 1942, by Edward Hopper



LONELY IN THE USA

About one-in-six Americans (16%) say they feel lonely or isolated from those around them all or most of the time – including roughly equal shares of men and women. About four-in-ten adults (38%) say they sometimes feel lonely, and 47% say they hardly ever or never do.

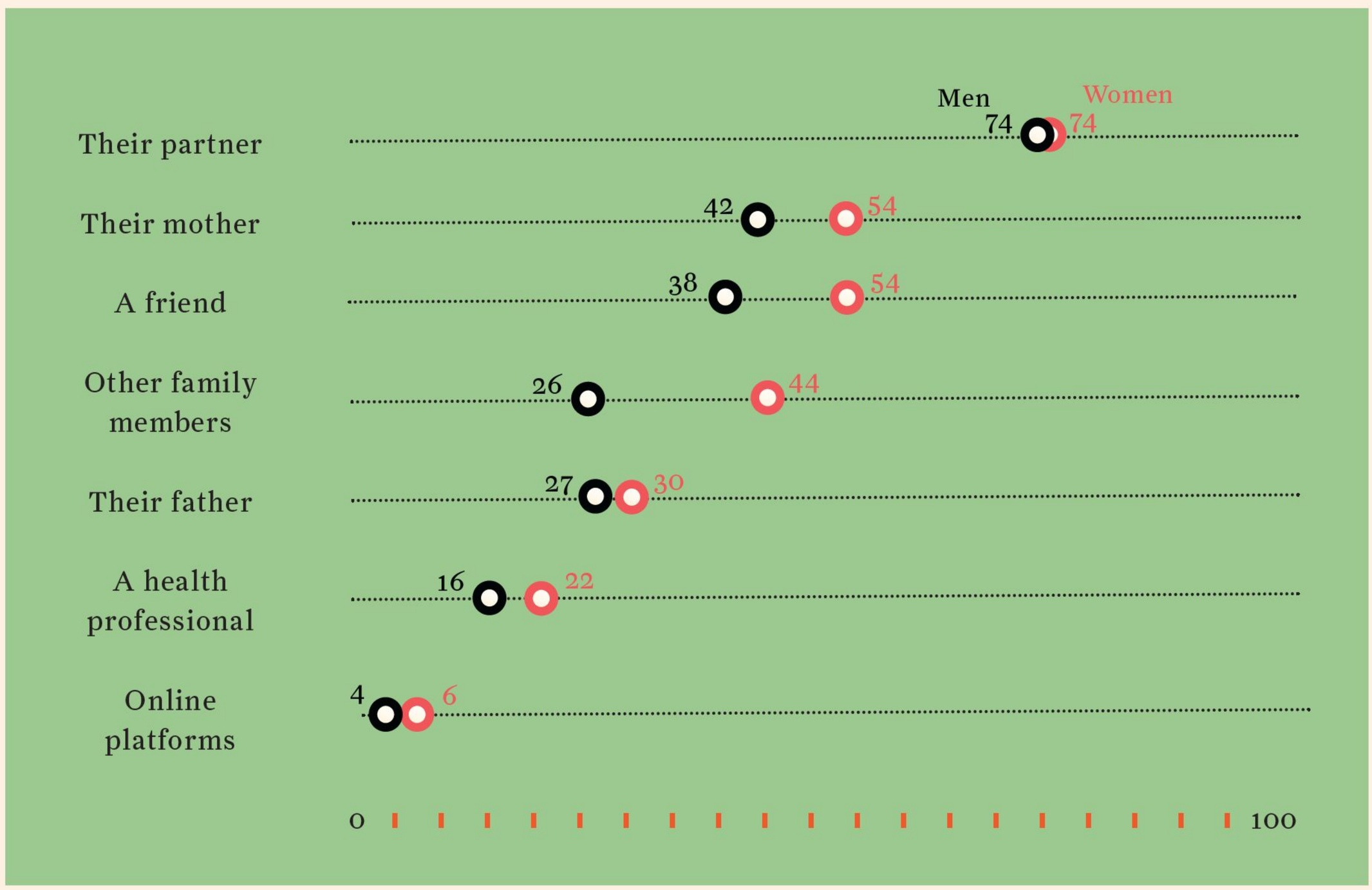
While experiences with loneliness don't differ much by gender, they do differ significantly by age.

Adults younger than 50 are much more likely than those ages 50 and older to say they often feel lonely (22% vs 9%). Across age groups, adults 65 and older are the most likely to say they hardly ever or never feel this way (66%).

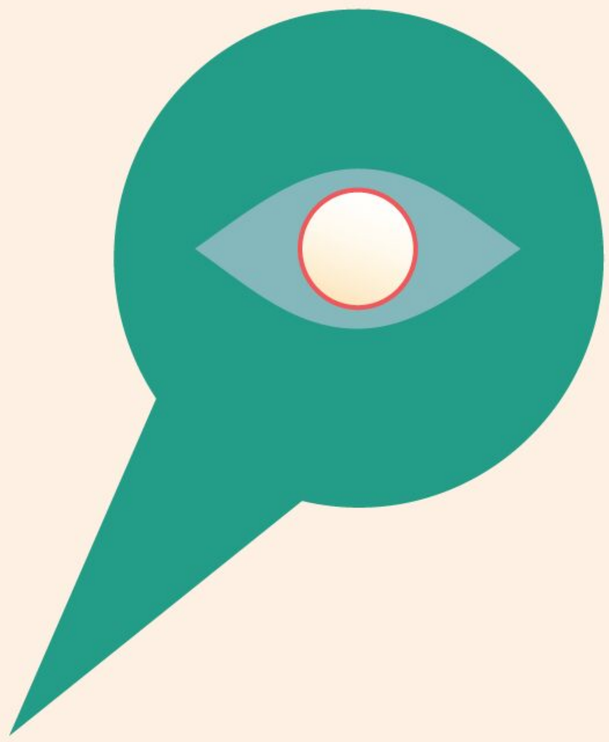
MEN ARE LESS LIKELY TO ASK FOR HELP

Source: Pew Family Research Center

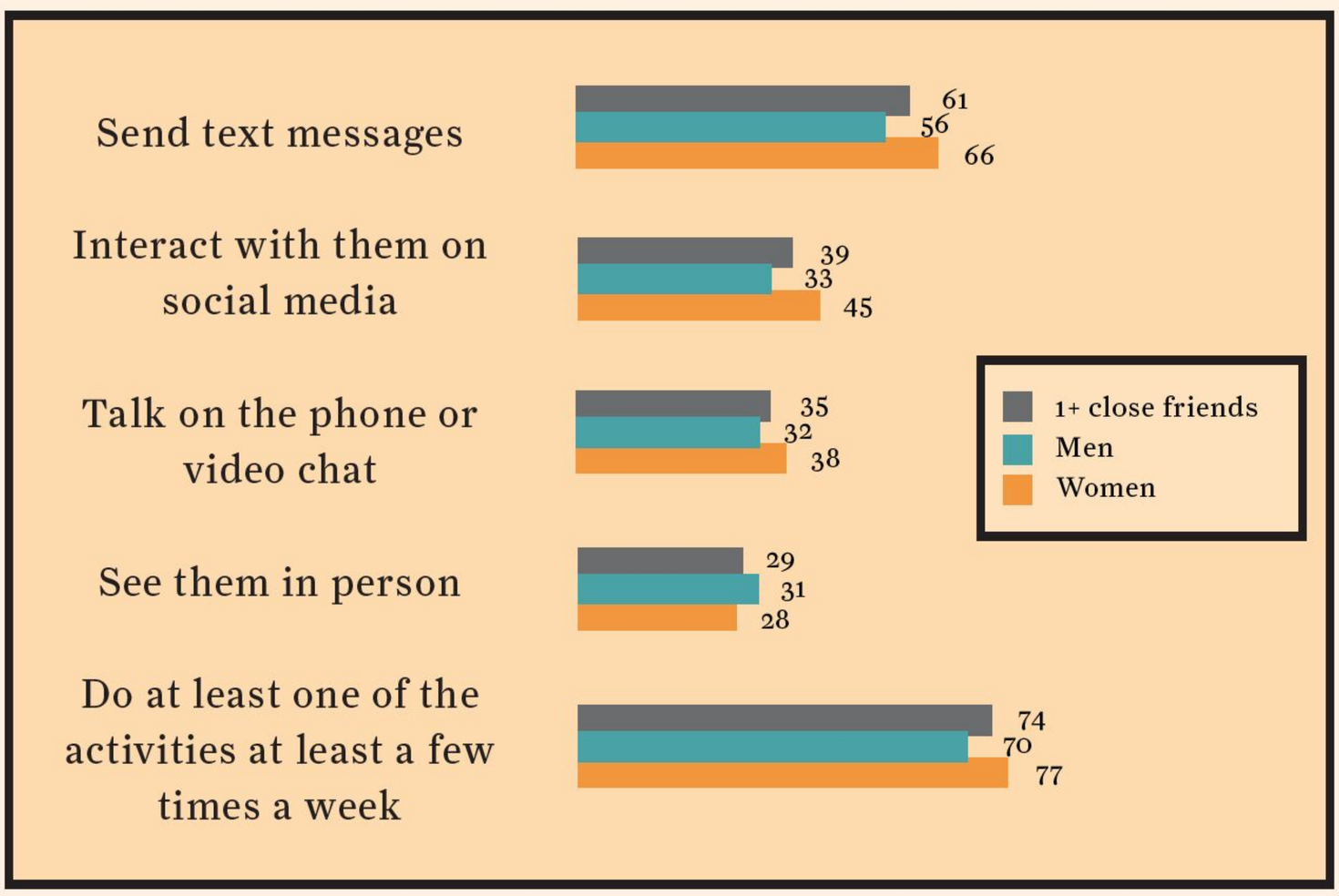
Percentage saying that they would be extremely or very likely to turn to each of these individuals or groups if they needed emotional support:



WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO KEEP IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS



Among those with at least one close friend, percentage saying that they do each of the following with a close friend once a day to a few times a week:



Source: Pew Family Research Center, survey of US adults conducted September 3-15, 2024: Men, Women, and Social Connections

Women are somewhat more likely than men to talk on the phone or video chat with a close friend at least a few times a week (38% vs 32%). But men (31%) are somewhat more likely than women (28%) to say they frequently see friends in person.

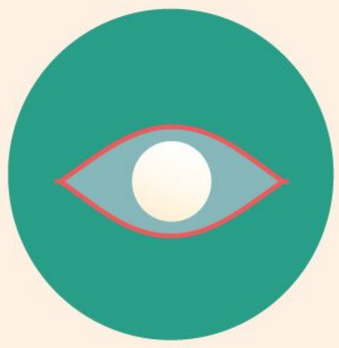
About eight-in-ten adults (81 per cent) say they have at least one close friend – not counting their family members – and most (64 per cent) have more than one close friend. About one-in-five (18%) say they don't have any close friends.

Among adults who have close friends, 74 per cent say they connect with one at least a few times a week, whether by texting, interacting on social media, talking on the phone or video chatting, or seeing them in person.

Texting is the most common form of communication between friends. Most adults with close friends (61 per cent) say they text one either a few times a week or daily.

Sizable shares also interact with friends on social media (39 per cent) or talk to them via phone or video chat (35 per cent). About three-in-ten (29 per cent) say they see a close friend in person at least a few times a week.

There are large differences in how often men and women text or interact on social media with close friends. Women are more likely than men to say they communicate frequently in these ways by margins of 10 points or more.



by Tom Chatfield

Life is connection

The 20th-century English poet Philip Larkin wrote about mortality with terrible eloquence. His last great poem, 1977's *Aubade*, dismisses with contempt the "specious stuff" that claims:

No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel.

Larkin knew that nothingness is precisely what we fear:

No sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with...

To live is to be linked to a living world, as one tiny part of its totality. To die is to be disconnected – cut off forever from love and life.

Life is connection. We are linked to every creature that has ever lived, just as our continued existence is wholly dependent upon other living things. But we are also connected to one another with a complexity no other creature can match. Ants and bees may have hive minds in a sense we can hardly imagine. Yet they have nothing on humanity when it comes to the world-spanning networks of technology, culture and communication that define our species. Our collective life is the richest, strangest and most potent thing this planet has ever seen.

For thinkers like the American social psychologist Kenneth Gergen, the very idea that "you" or "I" exist independently of our connections to others makes little sense. As he puts it in his 1996 essay "Social Psychology as Social Construction," when we say "I am angry" or "I love you" we "are not trying to describe a far-off land of the mind, or a state of the neurons. Rather, we are performing in a relationship, and the phrases themselves are only a constituent of more fully embodied actions, including movements of the limbs, vocal intonations, patterns of gaze…"

My love for you is not an artefact I carry within me, unchanging. It is something that plays out in the relationships between us, upon a stage set by our society. The very words we use – "I" and "love" and "you" – were given to us by our culture and our times, along with the norms and possibilities they embody. In different eras and in different places, not only our relationships but also our inner lives would have been profoundly different: experienced and expressed through different words, deeds, artefacts and systems of belief.

For Gergen, then, "emotional performances are no more possessions of the single individual than are the words we speak." It is literally impossible for me to speak to you outside of pre-existing words and assumptions, or to make myself understood independently of the place and opportunities surrounding us. I cannot convey or display my feelings without inhabiting a social role – while being changed by the process of doing so. My love, anger, creativity, anguish, hope, rebellion and desire are not the facets of an unaltered gemstone that is my inner self. They are threads of connection, stretched between the inner and the outer. "I am linked, therefore I am," Gergen punningly puts it in his 2009 book *Relational Being*. If the 21st-century has taught us anything, it's that Descartes' solitary dictum all too easily yields to the social network.

None of this means there is no inner landscape to my life – only that

The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434, by Jan van Eyck

such selfhood can neither be accessed nor understood only by looking within. Consider the words I am typing right now. Consider the machine I am typing them upon, then the nestled technologies that will see them transmitted and reshaped, printed and bound, before being shipped across the world to your glancing eyes. This complexity is a compendium of collective achievements. Everything I know, hope for and do is dependent upon countless others, living and dead. Genetically, I am little different to those human beings who walked the Earth ten thousand years ago. Yet mentally, I am "modern" in ways far beyond their conception – just as those who follow me through the millennia will grow inaccessibly strange.

Philip Larkin feared death's annihilation of the self:

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon…

I love his poetry because it gives voice to something at once universal and irreducibly particular: the horror that is my own death, creeping through time towards me. This universal particularity is a paradox of the socially constructed self. Our knowledge of time and death both unites and divides us. Life's ultimate common ground is also its most fundamental form of disconnection.

And yet. Love and language hold a lesson that, at least sometimes, can trump this. Towards the end of his 1984 book *Reasons and Persons*, the English philosopher Derek Parfit describes how his attitude towards death has changed in parallel with his beliefs about identity – and the degree to which he has come to see the "self" as socially patterned rather than an inner essence. When he believed that only personal identity mattered, he writes, "I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness." But after he changed this view, "the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less."

Parfit's deepest philosophical interest became, over the course of his remarkable career, the question of what we owe to one another: rich to poor, neighbour to neighbour, past to future. At the end of his final book, the third volume of *On What Matters*, he weighs up the unknowable prospect of what lies ahead – and the burden of hope it places upon the present. "Life can be wonderful as well as terrible, and we shall increasingly have the power to make life good. Since human history may be only just beginning, we can expect that future humans… may achieve some great goods that we cannot now even imagine."

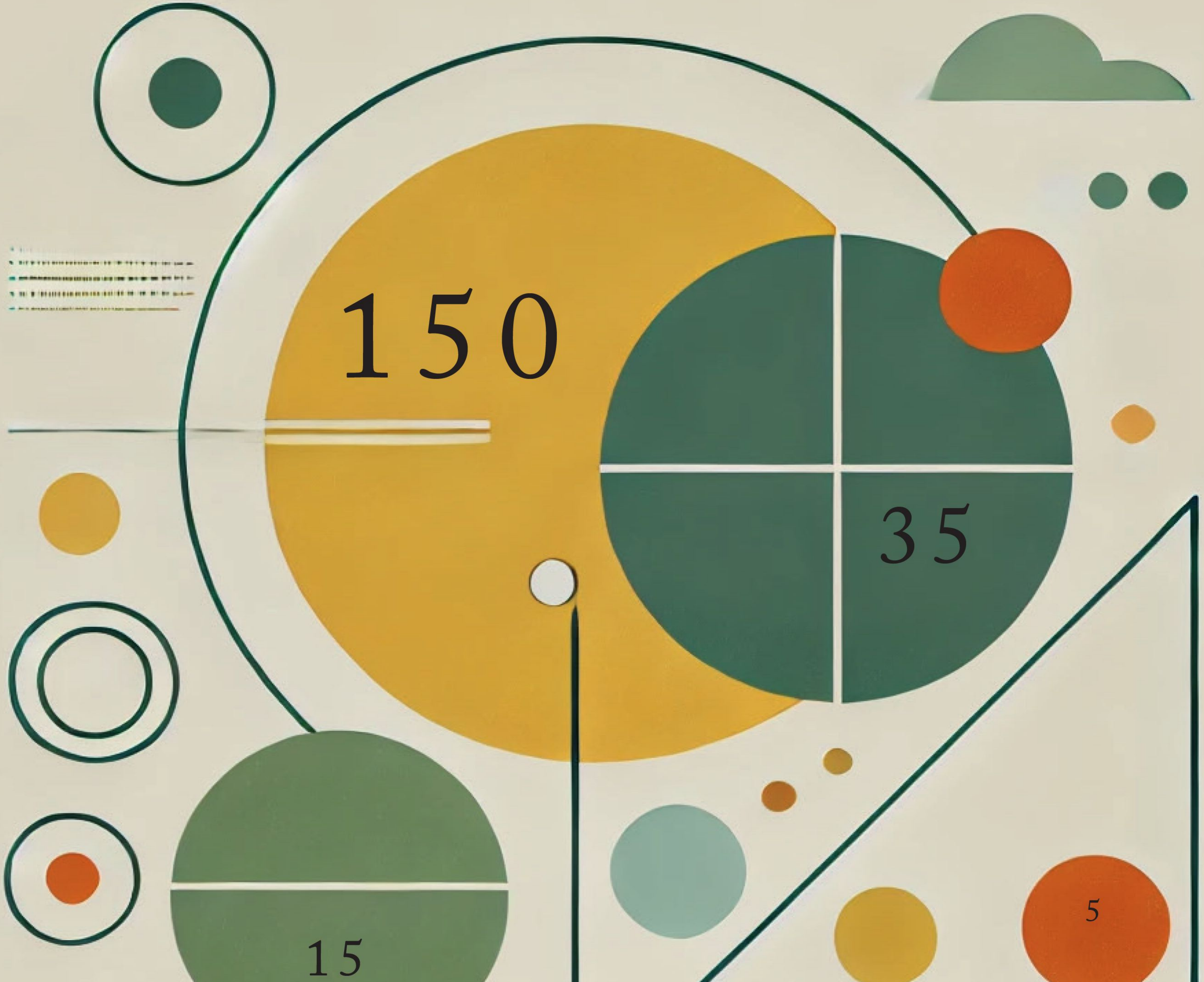
We must make meanings out of life with the tools we are given: language, social roles, technological and social opportunities. But we also have the capacity, collectively and incrementally, to remake ourselves and these tools. To write about love and death is to remind others that we are mortal, yet never truly alone. To research the nature and roots of anger, violence and hatred is – perhaps – to grow a little wiser. To think richly and well about the world is to embrace a plurality of insights, possibilities and voices – and seek, as best we can, purposes and deeds that those yet to come may thank us for. ◘

The English philosopher Derek Parfit describes how his attitude towards death has changed in parallel with his beliefs about identity.

Artwork: The Human Condition, 1935, René Magritte

"All the arts which belong to polished life have some common tie, and are connected as it were by some relationship."

Cicero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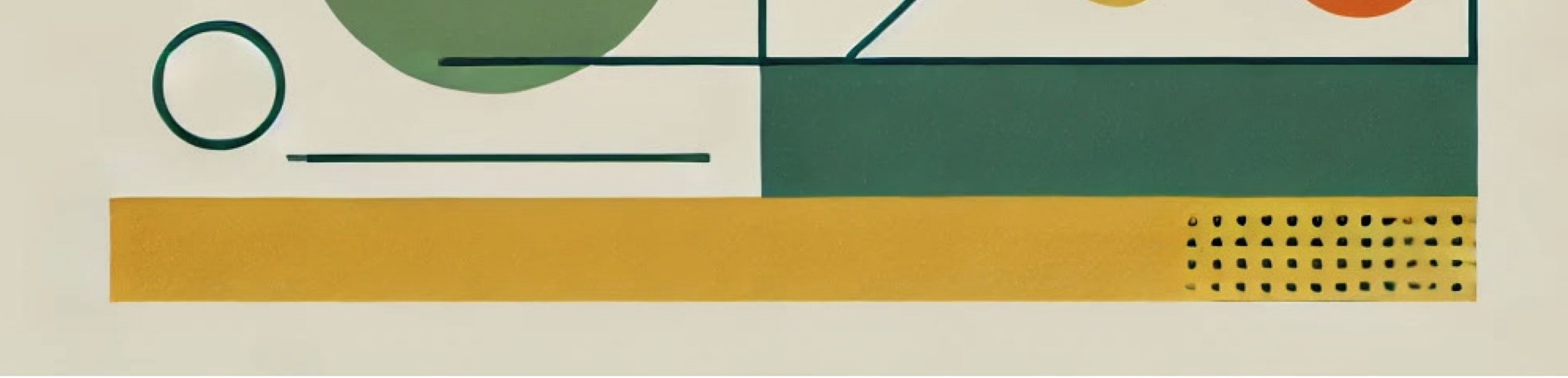


CONNECTION

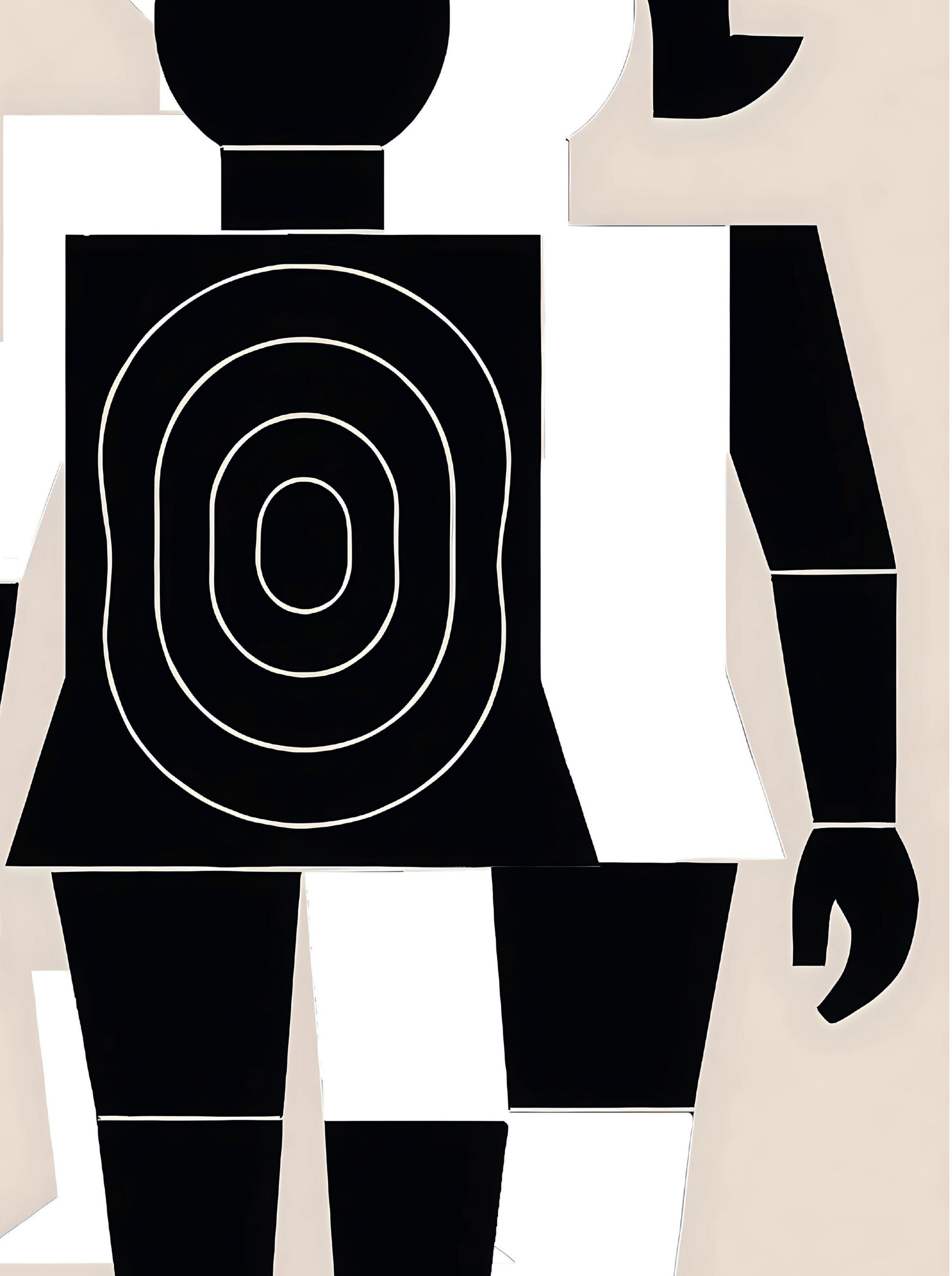
By Patrik Lindenfors, Andreas Wartel and Johan Lind, *Biology Letters*

'Dunbar's number' is the notion that there exists a cognitive limit on human groups of about 150 individuals. This because '[t]o maintain group cohesion, individuals must be able to meet their own requirements, as well as coordinate their behaviour with other individuals in the group. They must also be able to defuse the direct and indirect conflicts that are generated by foraging in the same space'. According to the hypothesis, since the neocortex is commonly believed to play a crucial role in handling social relationships, its size should set an upper limit on the number of stable social relationships that primate brains can keep track of and maintain.

The number 150 was established by extrapolating a regression line describing the relationship between group size and relative neocortex size in primates, to humans. That there exists a correlation between group size and relative neocortex size has been replicated in several studies, though in some cases only for female primates, but often not finding a significant relationship (making an estimate of Dunbar's number unachievable). However, the replication studies are of somewhat limited value as most studies have used the same brain data. Additional studies have been made using similar reasoning, but analysing relative brain size instead of relative neocortex size.

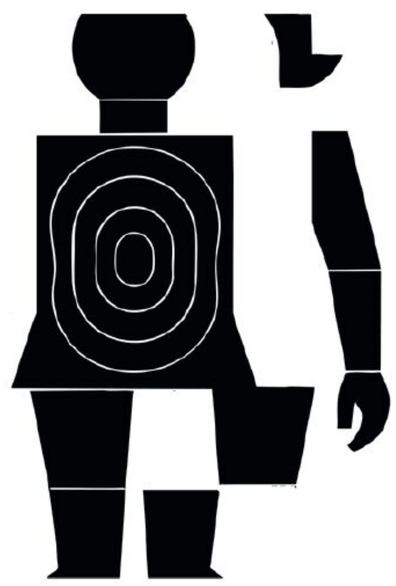
The expected human group size of 150 has been substantiated by observations of human communities with group sizes ranging between 100 and 200, including hunter–gatherer communities, military units, businesses, 18th-century and Neolithic villages, information from the Domesday Book and Christmas card networks.

'Dunbar's number' is often cited, has had great impact in popular culture (e.g. it featured prominently in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Tipping Point*), and has had consequences such as the Swedish Tax Authority restructuring their offices to stay within the 150-person limit, with the implicit but hopefully unintended assumption that their employees have neither family nor friends outside work.



Heartspace

by Marina Benjamin



I've recently become aware that my friendship group is shrinking. And not by design. It's that classic middle-aged, caught-between-two-poles dilemma that is to blame. Between caring for an elderly parent and a young adult (living at home, in keeping with the latest late-to-launch trend) and simultaneously working full time, I simply haven't the headspace – or perhaps more accurately, the heartspace – to nurture the friendship group I once maintained with ease. Instead, I find that I make time for a small number of close friends in whose lives I feel both bound up and invested, putting quality before quantity. Yet nurturing even this reduced friendship circle takes more conscious effort than before. I have to remember to check in. To find space in my diary. To commit.

Amid the necessary fragmentation of our lives, I wonder if it's become harder to hold to the centre.

Of course, there are larger webs of connection we all maintain beyond the tight circle of our close friends, generally numbering around 150 individuals – if we are to believe the findings of anthropologist Robin Dunbar. What has become known as 'Dunbar's number' was originally based on studies of 38 primate genera. Dunbar found that group size among these primates was largely consistent, which got him wondering if this optimal group size might extend to humans. Wanting to test his hypothesis, he looked at hunter gatherer societies, neolithic farming villages, even anabaptist Hutterite communities, and to his surprise he found that the number of 150 stable relationships more or less held.

Dunbar's work has been used by architects in building design, as well as by business developers and algorithm writers, and in spite of numerous scholarly attempts to debunk it, 'Dunbar's number' persistently pops up: 150 is

more or less the number that delimits telephone calling networks, Facebook groups, Christmas card lists, military fighting units, online gaming groups and church congregations.

The idea that underpins the thinking is neurological. Dunbar argued that 'the social brain' cannot cognitively cope with a greater number of meaningful connections. But what counts as meaningful? It's a genuine and interesting tease.

When I think of my wider community of neighbours, professional colleagues, extended family and friends, 150 individuals feels about right. But these connections are not equally meaningful. Ranked by order of their depth charge, those friendships that go back decades have the profoundest impact: these are people I met at school or university or in my first adult forays into the working world. We have, as they say, history together.

Next come friendships forged in my local community. These are people I bump into almost daily, when I step out of my door, walk the dog, shop locally. Often, we're in and out of each other's houses; we keep sets of each other's keys; my child babysits their children. We meet for drinks in summer and tidy the local square together on a Sunday. There's a quotidian element to these connections, a threading of one life with the next.

Most people would probably place family inside an inner ring of intimacy, but mine sits further from the centre. We're not just geographically far flung, which makes meaningful connection challenging, but there are chasms of difference between us in terms of faith, political leanings, and principled ideology; social distances which I'm not convinced genetic links can bridge. It is said that blood is thicker than water, but what gets lost here is the fact that water flows more easily and fluidly than blood. It finds a way.

Indeed, I sometimes feel that my connection to my work colleagues is more meaningful than my dealings with uncles, aunts, and cousins: it's more intimate, collaborative, and confiding, as opposed to being habitual and ritualised. There is room for both in a life, to be sure, but I'm finding that growing older makes me crave intimacy and mutuality more. Especially the mutuality generated by a horizonal group of peers with whom you move through life in parallel, sharing experiences that feel generational, experiences that animate a cohort of people like a Mexican wave.

So, it bothers me how little I see of some of my oldest friends. And that friendships once easy to nurture have grown more complex, with mounting duties and entanglements on both sides. It's become a truism to note that we work longer hours than previous generations did, and have less time for friendships as a result. But we are the poorer for it, I believe, and risk becoming cut off not just from our friends but from ourselves, too.

* * *

The stoic philosopher Hierocles talked about "circles of concern". His interest was in cosmopolitanism and the idea that extending our *oikeiosis* – variously translated as 'orientation', 'familiarisation', 'affinity', and 'affiliation' – towards other human beings, in widening circles of connection, might form the basis of human ethical action.

Hierocles believed that the innermost circle of concern was the self (something we can easily lose sight of, leading to feelings of disembodiment and dissociation). He argued that connecting to the body makes

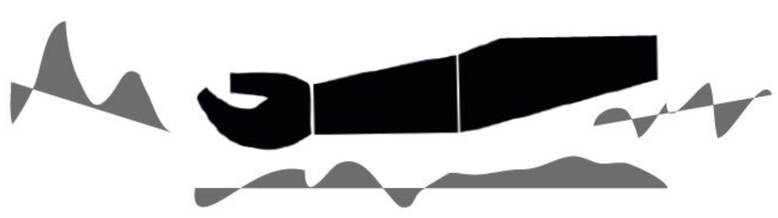
I sometimes feel that my connection to my work colleagues is more meaningful than my dealings with uncles, aunts and cousins: it's more intimate, collaborative and confiding.

Just as I worry that my social circle is shrinking, I worry that as a society we no longer have the heartspace to entertain Hierocles's outer circles of concern.

you feel grounded. Successive circles in his schema move through family, fellow citizens, and countrymen, with the outmost circle embracing humanity as a whole. The cosmopolitan citizen is one who seeks to draw the further circles closer towards herself, so she might feel greater concern for more and more people. What Hierocles seems to have had in mind was a kind of utilitarianism for the soul.

It is utopian, of course, to think that we might feel solidarity and intimacy with distant others. But we might feel sympathy and empathy for them – a feeling for and with those populating the outer circles of concern. It is not so different from what Freud described as "oceanic feeling", except for Hierocles, evincing the proper level of concern for each 'community', near or far, was a way to practise the virtue of justice. Hierocles still feels relevant to me when I think of the plight of migrants, and the differences between those who want to welcome them and support their right to live better lives, and those wanting to pull up the drawbridge.

Just as I worry that my social circle is shrinking, I worry that as a society we no longer have the heartspace to entertain Hierocles's outer circles of concern. We suffer from compassion fatigue when it comes to the plight of distant others. The constant bombardment of images of suffering blunts our ability to respond. And we suffer from overwhelm, from there being so many claims on our empathy and charity that we end up feeling numb. We struggle to have meaningful connections with these distant others, because our 'social brains' cannot make that cognitive leap. But perhaps this is where we need Hiercoles all the more. We need to remember that sometimes justice should take precedence over the more intimate concerns of friendship. ◘



“I think one of the most important lessons from space exploration is that we need to work together as a species. When you look at Earth from space, it’s clear that our differences seem small compared to the bigger picture. The view of Earth from orbit teaches you that the boundaries we’ve created – be they political, cultural, or social – are just human constructs. ...

... From up there, you see a planet without division. That's the perspective I want people to carry back with them – seeing each other not as 'other,' but as part of the same interconnected whole. We're all sharing the same Earth, and the challenges we face are global. The future of humanity depends on our ability to collaborate and understand that we are not isolated. We are all in this together."

– Mae Jemison

By Ubaid E. Alyafizi

by Antonia Case

Conscious connection

My mother's pot plants know they are loved. It's why they grow to such extraordinary size, and flower way beyond their anthesis. Or that's my theory anyway. Sunlight and regular watering cannot entirely explain the rich lush foliage and scarlet red petals of her poinsettia (Christmas plant) flooding out of its tiny clay pot.

I like to think that my mother's admiring gaze is not lost on her pot plants. They suck it in, so to speak, just like the water she gives them. They know they are loved and cared for, and this knowledge moves them to greatness. Walking past my mother's pot plants, you can't shake the sense that they are showing off.

Of course, modern scientists would ridicule my observations as a delusion, or just plain absurd. Plants, like rocks, and trees, and even fish, do not sense love, or care, and they certainly don't show off. I may touch the leaves, smell the flowers, or remove dead leaves from a plant's stems, but my connection to a plant ends there, because brainless plants cannot return my gaze.

True human connection, in this sense, is limited to an infinitesimally small proportion of matter on Earth – humans mostly, and animals with similar brains to us. The rest of the world is, for modern scientists, just matter. We can connect to our dog, and of course many people love their dog as much, if not more so, than other humans, but we can't really connect to something that doesn't share our capacity for joy, excitement, attachment, say, like a pot plant. We don't connect to trees, clouds, flowers, or the apple hanging on a tree. It's because, if something is not conscious, it's a one-way relationship – we are conscious, but the plant, tree, or flower is not.

Consciousness is notoriously difficult to pin down. Where do thoughts, desires, aspirations and acts of will reside? The human mind, unlike the body, is immaterial, in the sense that a surgeon cannot find a thought, hope,

or idea residing somewhere in the human brain. The body, in comparison, made up of atoms, cells, flesh and bone, is material. It has shape, size, weight, density; and occupies space.

But we know that the human mind interacts with the human body at every moment of our lives. We run a fever overnight, and our mind conjures up images of monsters in our dreams; we drink too much wine, and our mind sees two pot plants instead of one; we get angry at a co-worker, and our face turns beetroot red. Mind and body are in constant communication, the immaterial mind can order the body to exercise, or eat, or even abstain from eating if the mind decides it's on a diet. The body, by comparison, can remind the body to eat by giving it hunger pains, or it can freeze from a frightening sound or sight, alerting the mind to potential danger.

It's not a stretch to understand how one material thing can affect another. When a tennis racquet hits a tennis ball, both racquet and ball have size, shape, and weight, and both occupy space, so it makes logical sense that a flinging racquet will cause a ball to sail over the net. But if we were to say that a tennis racquet has hit a thought, we enter more difficult terrain. A thought has no size, weight, or shape. A thought cannot be seen, heard or touched. A thought does not occupy space. It therefore seems ludicrous to suggest that a tennis racquet could affect a thought.

But when we confidently say that mind and body are connected, we are making a similar assumption to the tennis racquet and the thought. Bodies are the stuff of matter, whereas minds are immaterial. How could they be at all connected?

This is exactly what philosophers have been grappling with for centuries. Scientist Thomas Huxley wrote in 1868, "how it is that anything so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as the result of irritating nervous tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the genie when Aladdin rubbed his lamp." Coining it the "hard problem of consciousness", philosopher David Chalmers was equally perplexed. "How does the water of the brain turn into the wine of consciousness?... How is it that all of this matter adds up to something as complex, as interesting and unique as consciousness."

One theory that purports to solve the 'hard problem' of consciousness is panpsychism, or the belief that all forms of matter are conscious to some degree or another. Panpsychism, from the Greek *pan* ('all') and *psyche* ('soul' or 'mind'), is the idea that consciousness – perhaps the most enigmatic force we know – is not confined to complex organisms. Instead, it suffuses the universe itself, woven into the very fabric of reality. Panpsychists' beliefs reach back thousands of years. In the *Timaeus*, one of Plato's dialogues, he writes: "This world is indeed a living being endowed with a soul and intelligence... a single visible living entity, containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related." Aristotle too, while not directly supporting panpsychism, does, in his own way, connect living entities with a soul, or consciousness. Later, these ideas were further elaborated by Renaissance thinker Giordano Bruno, who believed that a general spirit pervaded all things: "The single spirit doth simultaneously temper the whole together; this is the single soul of all things." Baruch Spinoza, too, thought that everything has a mind-side and a body-side: "The order and

One theory that purports to solves the 'hard problem' of consciousness is panpsychism, or the belief that all forms of matter are conscious to some degree or another.

Perhaps my mother's pot plants look forward to the morning hour when she greets them with a cup of tea in hand.

connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things."

Consciousness, in this sense, is not limited to humans and animals like us but is a fundamental aspect of the universe. One may argue that trees, cells, even electrons may exhibit degrees of consciousness, as may pot plants.

Panpsychism as a 'theory of reality', has many lovely consequences. First, it reorientates our understanding of the world toward one rich with novel possibilities for connection. In this view, matter appears not as inert, but as something alive – breathing, sensing, and possibly 'feeling' (in its own way). Panpsychism re-enchants the world and restores a sense of intimacy with nature. Second, it challenges the mechanistic worldview, in which nature is seen as inert, passive, and devoid of intrinsic value. This mode of understanding – in which matter is merely a resource to be controlled, conquered, and exploited – has had devastating consequences for the environment. Panpsychism reframes nature not as something 'other', but as something we are within – and is within us.

The elusive nature of consciousness means that it's not improbable to consider what it's like to be a plant. Perhaps my mother's pot plants look forward to the morning hour when she greets them with a cup of tea in hand, or when she showers them with a cool mist at the end of a hot summer's day. They may have a sense of what it's like to be a pot plant, to stretch wide – leaves open, flowers to the sunlight – the steamy air gliding across the waxy surface of their skin.

Regardless of whether pot plants have consciousness or not, I know my mother flourishes alongside her plants. When the different species of plant stand side-by-side, fireworks of flowers erupt, and the show is truly mesmerising. Wandering past, nonetheless, I still can't shake the sense that they are showing off. ◘

Connection

"I think we all need connection. Don't we?"
– Jean-Luc Picard

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."
Martin Luther King Jr.

"Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time. Connection between individuals and their beliefs can spark societal transformation."
Ruth Bader Ginsburg

"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind."
John Donne

"My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together."
Desmond Tutu

"A hidden connection is stronger than an obvious one."
Heraclitus

"I am not free as long as one person is chained, the connection between us is unbroken."
Audre Lorde

"Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection,
The lovers, the dreamers and me."
Kermit the frog

Connection

"Connection is the root of all healing. It is what allows us to grow and thrive. In our disconnectedness, we are lost."
Clarissa Pinkola Estés

"Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies."
Aristotle

"I get by with a little help from my friends."
John Lennon

"Connection is why we're here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives."
Brené Brown

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."
Helen Keller

by Mariana Alessandri

Misery loves company

It's wedding season in the US, which means that a lot of money will be spent on venues, decorations, flowers, appetisers, alcohol, photographers, and gifts. Toasts will be made, champagne-induced laughter will drown out small talk, and middle-aged bodies will take over the dance floor, shaking off anxieties induced by this chaotic world. Third cousins will reconnect over vats of pasta and nasturtium-filled salads. Instagram reels will be created, gossip will be spread, and, after midnight, all of Cinderella's horses will turn back into mice and sink into large beds, their ears still ringing with party music.

This year, I've got three weddings in my family, and I am skipping them all. To be fair, my niece is having an "intimate" wedding, which I am grateful not to be invited to. My nephew is skipping the big party in lieu of a down payment for a house. As for my brother, I went to his first wedding, where I learned that the minutes I will get to spend with him won't justify the exorbitant airline ticket price, especially if I bring my family along. There won't be time for a meaningful connection in that celebratory space.

But there's also a philosophical reason for skipping out on weddings. The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno believed that joyful occasions just don't encourage deep connection. Joy is the emotion to choose if you want levity, fun, silliness – a good time. Even Unamuno had to admit that "bodies are united by pleasure". But if you're after early morning heart-to-hearts, soul conspiracy, and blood brotherhood, joy isn't the strongest player on the bench. Upbeat feelings will insulate you from anyone who might spoil your fun. The last thing you want when you've got your mojo is a wet blanket trying to make eye contact. When we're up, we turn our heads away from the misery that lies beneath.

But when we're down, Unamuno found, the gig is up. "Souls are united by pain," he wrote in *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Misery is muscular. It's willing to admit that suffering is ubiquitous. And when we are sad, it can be comforting to be in the presence of a person who's lowered their mask. Shared sorrow is why support groups exist, and why a person might feel that they can be emotionally honest there. In

By the Death Bed, 1896, by Edvard Munch

If sympathy says, "I feel for you," and empathy says, "I feel with you," compassion says, "Go ahead and cry. I'm not going anywhere."

Unamuno's eyes, sorrow draws us into a cocoon – a mortar of suffering, he called it – away from the blinding sunshine of toxic positivity. He believed we have a greater capacity to connect with one another when we're aching than when we're contented.

Calling up sadness in the clutch is a risky move because, in many societies, it's seen as a burden we shouldn't lay on our loved ones. Many of us were taught to hide our emotional and physical pain as an act of love for others. So, whether it's hiding a diagnosis from a parent, or not disclosing a worry, sadness, or fear to a best friend, we have become experts at 'protecting' one another. Our self-sacrifice is motivated by care: since we think that sharing pain causes pain, we keep secrets in the name of love.

But what if Unamuno is right? What if communion comes from compassion, and compassion from suffering? In that case, if we continue to interpret sadness as a burden, then we'll smile through the pain and abandon the shared road of compassion. Instead, we'll hit the lonely rut and soon give up on one another. But compassion is critical right now, given our social and political climate, and we need it even more than we need sympathy or empathy.

If sympathy says, "I feel for you," and empathy says, "I feel with you," compassion says, "Go ahead and cry. I'm not going anywhere." Acknowledging one another's emotional pain puts us on the road to compassion, and, for Unamuno, the road to love. Once we let ourselves see our fellow sufferer, our "companion in misery", as Arthur Schopenhauer put it, the chain expands. Love, Unamuno says, "personalises" everything it has compassion for, including trees, animals, and insects. In each other's pain we can see our own reflection.

Unamuno wrote: "We only have compassion for – we only love – that which is like ourselves and insofar as it is like ourselves… thus our compassion for things, and with it our love, grows in proportion as we discover in them the likenesses which they have with ourselves." Suffering reveals similarity, and when we respond to one another, what he called our "spiritual love" for them grows. Spiritual love can also lead us back to our estranged selves. So, if our cries are a bid for connection, stifling them is like saying, "I don't trust you." And ignoring a loved one's cries is like saying, "You are not like me."

People who aren't attuned to their own suffering will be fooled by another's cute pair of jeans or new haircut, missing the agony beneath. But the rock-bottom quality of suffering can open our eyes to what the happy people overlook. Sadness recognises sadness: It can spot a sufferer even in a mask. So, while the rest of the world misses, denies, or ignores that person's agony, a person also feeling down can see things more clearly. This is one good reason to pick up our heads in moments like this: we've got temporary access to the real. Unamuno's endorsement of the bonding quality of emotional pain also suggests that we should start thinking of suffering less as poison and more as a cup of sorrow that we pass around. It hurts, but don't drink alone.

His philosophy also gives us a reason to stop trying to 'fix' our loved ones. They aren't broken, and besides, it's not our job to make each other feel better. Combatting someone's 'down' with our 'up' in the name of balance, doesn't work. Platitudes seldom delight a hurting soul, but they can make them feel misunderstood, ostracised, ashamed. So, while the rest of the world tries to turn frowns upside down with flowers, cake, or concert tickets, we can be the one person who isn't measuring success by whether we get a smile. Underneath it all, people don't want to be cheered up; we just want to feel seen. We want to be accepted all the time, not just when we're easy, and we deserve to be loved without having to perform. So, if the goal is deep connection, we can start looking for it in the neglected corners of our lives. We'll find each other in the cobwebs, in the dark, and at funerals. ◘

Eclipse shadow of the moon, by NASA

"It is a comfort to the unfortunate to have had companions in misery."

Publilius Syrus, 1st century BCE, *Sententiae*

Photo by Bastian Pudill

Interviewer: Zan Boag
Interviewee: Nicholas A. Christakis

Social connection

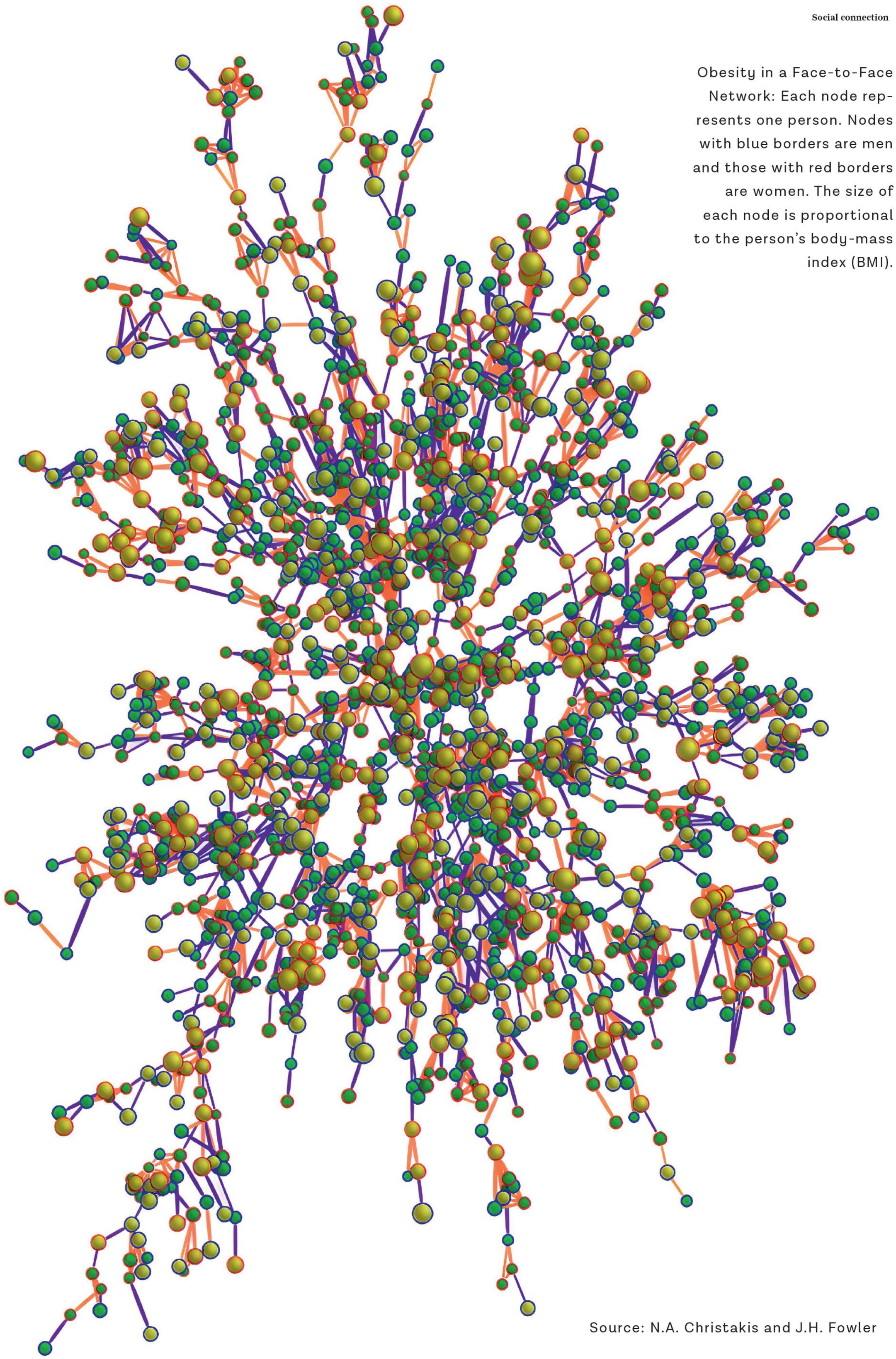
Nicholas A. Christakis, MD, PhD, MPH, is a sociologist and physician who conducts research in the areas of social networks and biosocial science. He directs the Human Nature Lab. His current research is mainly focused on the social, mathematical, and biological rules governing how social networks form ("connection"), and the social and biological implications of how they operate to influence thoughts, feelings, and behaviours ("contagion"). The author of four books and over 200 articles, Christakis was elected to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences in 2006 and was made a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2010 and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2017.

Zan Boag: *To begin with, I suppose the best place to start is with your definition of connection. And at the same time, I'm curious, how has your definition of connection changed over the course of the years?*

Nicholas Christakis: The kind of connection that I'm interested in is social connection, specifically human social interactions. Of course, I'm interested in analogous phenomena elsewhere in the natural world, such as connections among animals – elephant, dolphin, or chimpanzee networks. And I'm more broadly interested in the emergent properties of social groups, how interconnected groups can come to have properties not present within the individuals themselves, how it is, in fact, that the whole comes to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Emergence is itself actually a very interesting phenomenon in the natural world and it occurs in magnificent ways. So, consciousness is an emergent property of neuronal tissue. You take individual neurons and you connect in some specific way and you get consciousness. Or life is an emergent property of matter. You take a set of atoms, of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, and so on, and you mix them in a particular way, and you get life. And you can take groups of people and connect them in very particular ways, and then you get distinctive properties of those groups that are not necessarily properties of the individuals themselves – for instance, a group of uncooperative people, if connected in a particular topology, can be made to be cooperative.

And the analogy I often use here is carbon. You take a group of carbon atoms and you connect them one way and you get graphite, which is soft and dark, or you take the same carbon atoms and connect them another way, and you get diamond, which is hard and clear. There are two key intellectual ideas there. First of all, these properties of softness and darkness and hardness and clearness are not properties of the carbon atoms. They are properties of the collection of carbon atoms. And second, the



Obesity in a Face-to-Face Network: Each node represents one person. Nodes with blue borders are men and those with red borders are women. The size of each node is proportional to the person's body-mass index (BMI).

Source: N.A. Christakis and J.H. Fowler

properties you get depends on how you connect the carbon atoms to each other. Connect them one way, you get one set of properties, or take the same carbon atoms and connect them another way, and you get a completely different set of properties.

And it's the same with human groups. You can take a group of people and connect them one way, and they are happy and healthy and innovative and wealthy. Or you take the same people and connect them in a different way, and they are unhappy and unhealthy and stagnant and poor.

So, when you ask me, what do I mean by connection, I mean just that. I mean the intangible ties that bind individuals together. And these ties can be of diverse sorts. They're social ties primarily, and they can be friendship ties, or sibling ties, or spousal connections, or co-worker connections, and so on. So that's what I mean by connection. And then I mean as well the resulting properties from that.

You're talking about social connections, which brings me to your book Connected, *in which you alluded to this idea when you wrote: "We are connected and so we are affected." So, in what ways are we affected by the connections we have?*

I would argue that virtually every aspect of our experience is affected by these social connections. We tend to think of ourselves as being free agents and having free will and being able to think our own thoughts and do our own deeds and make our own choices – but actually, most of the time, when we're free to do anything we want, we copy other people. And this is in part by design. Diverse behaviours ranging from how much we eat, or who we vote for are all affected by the people around us. We evolved to be this type of social animal that is imitative. The very fact that we are so successful as a species relates very directly to our capacity to spread knowledge across time and space, by learning from each other. We cope with our environment by learning from others.

And what's interesting is that we're affected not only by the people to whom we're directly connected, that is, our friends and our colleagues that we know about, but we're also connected indirectly to our friends of friends and to our friends of friends of friends and so on. And those individuals – who might be nameless to us – also can affect us. I think people – since we all recently transited through a pandemic – probably have a very intuitive understanding of this. Because right now you're not infected with a virus and neither are your friends, but this person who's unknown to you, your friend's friend's friend is infected with this virus. And this virus will inexorably follow the geodesic path through the network and affect you. Your risk of death depends on some tiny event beyond your social horizon, over which you have no control and that you can't necessarily even see.

That was an interesting finding in your work, the "three degrees of influence" concept, that our behaviours ripple out to people we've never even met, as do their behaviours to us.

Correct. I mean, that's an empirical regularity that we observed initially with observational data back in 2007, but then also with large-scale experimental data. For example, we did these experiments where we brought strangers into a laboratory and gave them a little bit of money and put them into groups of four strangers and had them play something called a public goods game, where each individual could make a sacrifice and contribute to the common good of their group of four. That is, a person can give a dollar to the group, then that dollar is doubled and divided amongst everybody. The group of four gets $2 for a person's

The very fact that we are so successful as a species relates very directly to our capacity to spread knowledge across time and space.

$1 contribution, but that person only gets back 50 cents.

So from a selfish point of view, I should give nothing and hope that everyone else contributes. Of course, if everyone does that, the group collapses. You have a tragedy of the commons situation and nobody succeeds. The best thing is for everyone to contribute maximally. But of course, people are tempted not to do that. They're tempted to defect.

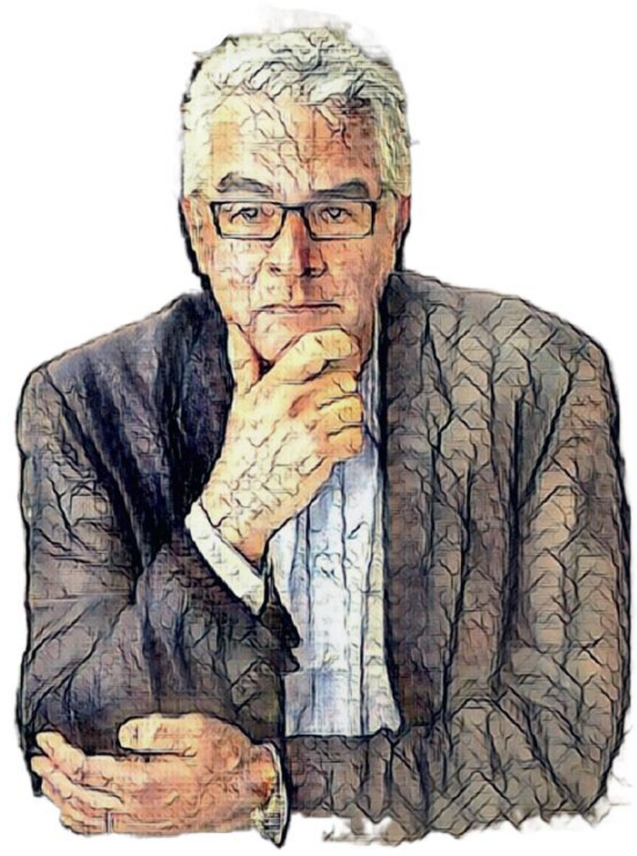
In that experiment, we played a repeated version of that game where you would be randomly assigned to a group of four people and play this game. And most people were kind and acted altruistically at the beginning. Then a bell would ring, and people would be randomly assigned to new people, and then a bell would ring, and people would be randomly assigned to new people, for six rounds.

And what we found was that how Tom treated Dick in the first round affected how Dick treated Harry in the second round, which affected how Harry treated Susan in the third round, which affected how Susan treated Jane in the fourth round. So how Susan treated Jane depended on how Tom treated Dick, even though neither Susan nor Jane ever saw or interacted with Tom or Dick. In my view, this is a very weird and profound observation, namely, that how two people over there are treating each other in our society depends on how you and I are treating each other over here, even though those two people will never see us or don't even know us. Because of this ripple effect. Because of social contagion. And we showed this experimentally in this paper from 2010, to three degrees of separation.

And we have many other experiments. We just completed a project that was published six months ago, in 2024, with 24,000 people in 176 villages in Honduras. And in this experiment, we randomly assigned certain individuals within these villages to be given a maternal and child health intervention. And then we came back two years later to study, not the response to 'treatment' among the treated, but the response to treatment among the untreated. We focused not so much on how did the people to whom we gave the intervention respond – did they change their breast-feeding practices, for example? No, we studied how everyone else in the village responded. So, if we picked 10 per cent of the people in this village and gave them this intervention, what happened to the breast-feeding behaviour of everyone else? And we found that we could affect the behaviour of everyone in the village by shrewdly picking a subgroup of 10 per cent in a very specific way, creating cascades of social contagion – and, more to the point, we found that the knowledge and behaviours spread to two degrees of separation.

The key point is that it's possible to show that we are affected by and can affect others more than one degree away. That is the key point. The extent of the influence is sometimes two, sometimes three, sometimes four degrees away, but typically around about three degrees of separation away.

You've conducted studies in which you created artificial societies in the lab – you have strangers who are brought together to cooperate or compete – so it must be fascinating for you to get some data from the lab and then from studies in the real world as well. But I'd like to come back to these artificial societies that you created in the lab. Clearly, these experiments revealed quite a lot about human tendencies when it comes to connection and cooperation, but did they reflect patterns that you've seen in natural social networks, like in families, communities, or workplaces? You were talking earlier about Honduras, but do you have other examples where it hass reflected patterns you've seen in natural social networks?



Nicholas A. Christakis

Yes. We do experiments in the laboratory, and tens of thousands of people have participated in our experiments over the years. But we also do experiments in naturalistic settings. For example, we've been working for eight years in these 176 villages in Honduras. Also, we've worked in India, we've done experiments with thousands of people there. We've done experiments online where real people are interacting in their ordinary way. In all of these cases, what we're trying to do is to show how it is that the pattern of connection between people, or the operation of contagious processes within networks, can affect the collective properties of groups.

I had an idea that I wanted to put on the table earlier, which I'll interject

here, when you asked me about connection, and it's still relevant. I'll start by evoking a metaphor from Japan. If you talk to a typical European or American, and you ask them about the organisation of their cities, they'll say that the cities have roads and the roads have names, and the houses on the roads are numbered from the beginning of the road to the end of the road. And then if you ask them, "Well, what is the space between the roads?" they would say to you, "What do you mean, the blocks?" And you could ask, "Well, do those have names?" And they would say, "What are you talking about? The blocks don't have names, the roads have names. The blocks are just the space between the roads."

Now, I am told that in Japan, in antiquity, it was the reverse. The blocks had names and the houses were numbered in the order in which they were built on the blocks, and the roads did not have names. If you asked someone there, "Well, what is the space between the blocks?" They say, "What are you talking about? Those don't have names. It's the blocks that are named."

So it's a question of perspective. What is the actual entity that we're interested in? And because we have corporal bodies, we tend to think of our bodies as the 'real' thing. And you ask, "What about these invisible, ethereal connections between people?" And we would say, "Well, those don't have names. Our bodies have names, we have names, and the things between us, we can't see those things. Those aren't as real as our bodies."

But I would say, I'm not sure that's true because I think these social networks have an enduring reality. They are a magnificent feature of the natural world. If you think about it, we come and go, we live and we die, we move from group to group, but the networks persist. The networks stay where they are and they have a kind of enduring reality. And you could ask why we don't have a social science of connection, why we have a social science of bodies of people.

I think once you see that, once you see that these connections are everywhere, it's a little bit like the movie *The Matrix*. You step through the door and now suddenly that's the thing of interest. It's those connections that are the thing of interest. And in a way, the bodies are of less relevance. So, in my lab, we've been studying that. We've been studying, for example, at the village level, how these networks can have different topological architecture and maybe different functions from village to village independent of the constituent individuals. And that's where experiments can help, too, because you can take a group of people, you can design a network, with different structures, and throw people into those structures experimentally, and then test how does a group of people put into this structure perform compared to the same people put into a different structure, for example. And you can conclude that it's the structure that matters, not the people.

To be clear, I am not totally effacing our individuality! We are individuals after all. We do have corporal bodies, but I think that there's another reality as well that is ordinarily hidden, but that, I think, is very deep and interesting.

"How did you break it off with your last girlfriend?"

I think it's really important to distinguish real social connections from these online connections.

With some of your research, you've shown that things like obesity, smoking, negative influences, even positive ones like happiness can spread through social networks almost like a virus. Now, a lot of this stuff that you were writing about was late 2000s – 2008, 2009, so you must've done the research before that. With the rise of social media and the influence of social media on our lives, do you think these effects have been amplified, or are they being diminished by the sheer volume of connection that we have, or perhaps are they distorted in some way?

Well, first of all, I think it's really important to distinguish real social connections from these online connections. Just because Facebook calls those people your 'friends', they are not your friends, actually. They're something else. They're acquaintances, they're online connections, but they do not have the same impact as real friends.

You also have to distinguish the medium and the phenomenon. In other words, your friends can affect you through a variety of media. Face-to-face; they can call you on the phone; they can use Facebook. But the reason they're affecting you is not because they're calling you on the phone or because they're using Facebook. The reason they're affecting you is because they're your friends, whatever medium they use to communicate.

We need to distinguish that from the mere medium, from the mere existence of these online networks. Now, there are certain deep and fundamental ways that these online networks are the same as face-to-face networks. First of all, mathematically, that is, topologically, they often have the same properties – for instance, transitivity, the probability that your friend's friend is your friend, in online networks is often very similar to transitivity in face-to-face networks.

Furthermore, certain functions, like the fact that we have friends and the fact that we want to be influenced by each other and do influence each other, occurs independent of whether it's online or offline. The fundamental fact of connection and the fact of social influence are unchanged, and their existence is not affected by the invention of online media.

But there are other things that are affected by online media. A very trivial example is just the scale of our interaction. Our ability to track large numbers of people is definitely facilitated by the invention of these tools. Another example is our ability to work together. For example, the way that anonymous people can come together to create things of value, like Wikipedia, for instance, is facilitated by the internet, by the creation of this online world in which we can interact. But our desire to share, to work together, to write Wikipedia, our desire to cooperate with each other and to work together is a fixed part of human nature. Maybe 10,000 years ago, a group of non-strangers banded together to kill a mastodon. Now, a much larger group of strangers can band together to write a Wikipedia entry. That fundamental property of banding together, you see, is the same, but the scale and the purpose to which it's put can be different.

I often summarise this by saying that the online world is the same as, but different to, the face-to-face world.

Well, so you say that online connections are fundamentally different from physical ones, but I just wonder, staying on social media and digital connections here, which is so much a part of people's lives, particularly for younger generations, the amount of face-to-face contact that people are having is diminishing and the amount of contact via digital connections is increasing. I just wonder, are things changing in some way, particularly for younger generations, in that emotion and behaviours are more likely to spread via digital connections now than they were in the past?

Well, I would definitely decry the reduction in face-to-face contact. I think that's very important. But I also think it's important not to be too alarmist about it either. For example, when the telephone was invented, there was a moral panic about it that people would now use the telephone instead of going on these Jane Austen-type extended visits on horseback to their neighbours, staying with them for weeks, whereas now they would just call them, and how bad that would be. There was concern that men would become rapacious predators of women using the telephone, that they would use it to proposition women, and that we might become polygamous as a result. Of course, none of that happened. We just put the telephone in

the service of fundamental aspects of our sociality. We are primarily a monogamous species. We have a certain number of friends. This hasn't changed. You don't generally use the phone to just randomly dial a stranger and befriend them. We use the phone to call our real friends.

So, I want to emphasise, first of all, the importance of face-to-face relationships. I don't think the recent invention of these electronic media has yet been able to modify our fundamental human nature. And it would take thousands of years before we evolved to be different creatures because of the existence of these technologies. I mean, it could happen over thousands of years, but it has not happened over the last couple of hundred. So these media have not fundamentally changed us nor, as a related point, should they. I think that the importance of face-to-face relationships is unmodified. And so to the extent that we spend more time online and less time in face-to-face relationships, I would say that is bad, in fact. That's not good for our physical or our mental health. But I wouldn't panic about it is what I'm saying.

Staying on this idea of online connections and the influence that it can have on our behaviour, on our emotional state, and so on and so forth, I suppose the major difference that I see between the way we used to connect and the way things are now is that we have an ability to connect with one another digitally. And this makes it much harder for us to control what types of influences that we have; who we're being influenced by. Furthermore, both negative and positive behaviours can be contagious. The question is, how can you limit your exposure to negative influences? Let's say pre-internet, you could choose not have contact with certain people ... It wouldn't be that difficult to not be in contact with those people who you thought might have been a negative influence. Now, we have so much information coming down to us, whether it's through the news or social media. How can we, in some way, control the negative and positive influences, but also further to this, do negative emotions like fear or anger spread differently from positive ones like joy or gratitude?

OK, on that point, just on face-to-face networks, that's, again, a good question: do emotions spread with different spreading parameters? And the answer is yes, some emotions spread differently than others. In our own work, we have found, for example, that happiness spreads more robustly than unhappiness.

Regarding emotional contagion, you can ask about why it occurs in the first place. It's not hard to construct an argument from evolutionary biology as to why we humans would experience emotions. In other words, why is it to our advantage to have the capacity to experience fear or disgust or anger or joy, for example? But what's interesting is that not only do we have those internal states, but we show them on our faces. And not only do we show them on our faces, but you can read my emotions. And not only do you read my emotion, but you copy it. It would seem that emotional contagion is a very deep and fundamental aspect of human emotional experience. In fact, emotions are a primitive form of communication. And emotional contagion serves a purpose. Nicholas has seen a lion or a dangerous fire. I haven't seen it yet. But I can see on his face that he's afraid. It's to my survival advantage to copy that fear.

And then, having made that first-order claim about the importance of emotional contagion, then you can look subordinately at which emotions spread and how. And here, you can have a broad division between what we might call informational emotions like fear and disgust. The spread of

Emotional contagion is a very deep and fundamental aspect of human emotional experience. In fact, emotions are a primitive form of communication.

these emotions is to communicate information about the environment. On the other hand, there are social bonding emotions like awe and happiness. One of their theorized reasons that something like happiness spreads is that it serves to bind groups together. So emotions can spread for different reasons, and they can spread at different rates. And you're absolutely right that some emotions will spread more rapidly than others. Often, it's those emotions for which it's most advantageous that we quickly copy others, like fear, that spread the easiest.

Now, your question about emotional contagion was embedded in a larger question. Could you remind me what that was?

I was just wondering whether we're able to control what influences us given the number of influences that are out there and the degree to which we connect with one another?

Yeah, the good with the bad. So here, I would say that the question is why do we live socially in the first place? If every time I came near you, you lied to me, you gave me misinformation, or you infected me with a deadly germ, or you stole from me, or you injured me, or you killed me, we would be better off living atomistically, separate from each other. But that's not the case. We live socially. So it must be the case that the benefits of a connected life outweigh the costs. And, in fact, I would argue that, in a very real sense, the spread of germs is the price we pay for the spread of ideas.

In other words, we assemble each other to derive benefits from interconnection. And one of those benefits is the spread of useful information, which we talked about at the beginning. The fact that I can learn from other people is extremely efficient and highly relevant to my ability to survive. But when I come near you, in order to cooperate with you to achieve some greater objective like killing a mastodon or gaining information, I also put myself at risk of being exposed to falsehoods or being exposed to germs. But on balance, as I said, the benefits of connected life outweigh the cost. There's more good than bad that comes from social connection, although both good and bad do come from it. That is true.

One concept that you write about that I found fascinating was this idea of a social genome – you argue that connection is not merely a metaphor, but it's also a biological and social force. It's a set of traits that we use to build societies, love, friendship, fairness, and so on. Now, I just wonder, with the complexity of connection these days, whether … Is there a danger in contemporary society of an erosion of these traits? Because the way we connect appears to be so different to the way we had traditionally connected in the past – it was more tribal. Now, there are so many ways for us to connect with people from different societies, we are exposed to many more ideas.

Yes and no again. One of my favourite anecdotes about this is that if you could have talked to my Greek grandmother, who was born in the 19th century, when she was a little girl in a village in Anatolia when she was 11, and asked her how many friends she had when she was growing up, she would say, "Well, I had one or two best friends, and there were four or five of us girls who hung out together." And if you ask my daughter, Eleni, the same question a hundred years later when she was 11, even though she had an iPhone in her pocket, she would give you the same answer: "I have one or two best friends, and there are four or five of us girls who hang out together."

That's because there's something intrinsic about human sociality, which has evolved and is unaffected by technology. So in answer to your question, I would once again say yes and no. I would say that, yes, there are new technologies that do affect how we connect with each other, but those technologies are still too recent to have been able to fundamentally modify the course of our evolution, and I would say that we have these long-evolved social traits that are unaffected by the technology. And that's actually what I'm most interested in scientifically. I'm interested in our evolved humanity.

For example, we haven't talked about this yet, but many readers take for granted that they have friends in the first place. But why is that? That's a very weird phenotype. Other animals have sexual partners like we do. But we also befriend each other. We form long-term, volitional, non-reproductive unions to unrelated conspecifics. Namely, we have friends.

We have these ties with people who are not our kin, that are enduring and that are very valuable to us. And our bodies and minds have evolved to really want those connections. I mean, if you just think about how you feel in the presence of your friends, your heart rate goes down and your body changes. We've done some research on biomarkers, and your circulating biomarkers change when you're in the presence of your friends. Your body responds favourably, and it evolved to respond favourably, in the presence of friends. Now, why is that? Well, because you're more likely to survive when you're with your friends. When you're all alone, you're more vulnerable. And having friends is very unusual phenotype in the animal kingdom. We do it. Certain other primates do it. Elephants do it. And certain cetacean species do it.

And so we've been shaped by natural selection to have friends, and, here I go again, this is a very deep and fundamental aspect of our lives – one that I find endlessly fascinating and that I have devoted my life to studying. ◻

CONNECTION

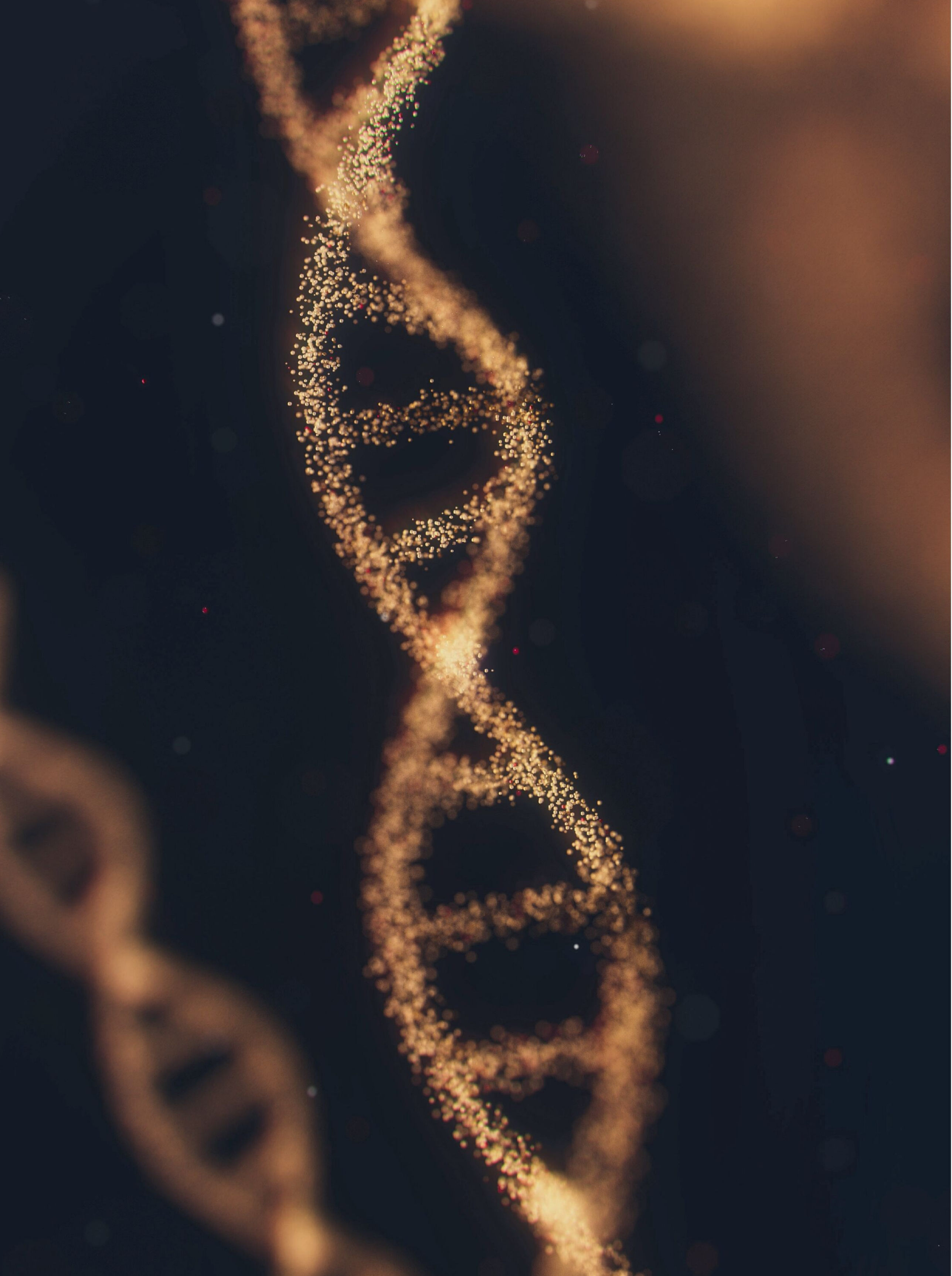
/kəˈnekʃn/

noun:

1. Something that connects two facts, ideas, etc.;
2. The act of connecting or the state of being connected;
3. A point, especially in an electrical system, where two parts connect;
4. A train, bus or plane at a station or an airport that a passenger can take soon after getting off another in order to continue their journey;
5. A means of travelling to another place;
6. A person or an organisation that you know and that can help or advise you in your social or professional life;
7. People who are your relatives, but not members of your close family.

Origin:
late Middle English: from Latin *connexio*(*n*-), from *connectere*, from *con*- 'together' + *nectere* 'bind'. The spelling *-ct* (18th century) is from *connect*, on the pattern of pairs such as collect, collection.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary



by Nigel Warburton

Philosophical connections

Philosophers have always interacted with one another. The cut and thrust of argument lies at its heart and that usually requires questioning, argument, counter-argument, assessing the impact of new evidence, imagining challenging thought experiments, and so on. At their best, philosophers test their ideas to destruction by allowing others to criticise them and responding to those criticisms. They try to do that to their own arguments too, of course, but the easiest way to come up with the strongest arguments against your position is to seek out those who disagree with you. That involves connecting with other thinkers. It also involves forming networks with people you trust and want to interact with.

Historically this sort of interaction has occurred face-to-face in philosophical conversation. We have a sense of what that might have been like for the greatest Athenian philosophers, thanks to Plato's Socratic dialogues. Dialogue is still one important way philosophers connect with each other, and it can appear brutal to outsiders as one philosopher delivers an argument, and others try to tear it to pieces. Yet that's a kind of compliment – engaging with another person's thought as a serious attempt to get closer to the truth, or at least to eliminate ideas which can be proven false. It also provides the stimulus for a philosopher to strengthen their case and show that it is not undermined by the criticisms. Although that sometimes turns into a kind of gladiatorial combat or at worst a clash of egos, it shouldn't. At its best, this is a kind of stimulating collaborative thinking in real time.

After the invention of writing, philosophers could interact asynchronously, connecting with one another through the exchange of draft manuscripts, inviting comments and criticisms. Once a philosopher had hit on a fair version that could be written up and circulated, other philosophers would continue to

Ancient philosophers are not desiccated corpses preserved in a museum, but are still capable of connecting posthumously with us through their words.

discuss and comment on it. When a philosopher today reads a work written over two thousand years ago as philosophy and not simply as a phenomenon in the history of ideas, the present-day thinker connects in a special way with the past thinker's work: as a critical thinker thinking about the same topic. So, for example, today philosophers read and think critically about Aristotle's ideas, interpreting and modifying them for present circumstances, treating him to some degree as if he were our contemporary, discarding some elements and developing others. At its worst, this way of connecting with thinkers of the past ignores the historical contexts that gave meaning to those thinkers' writings, and some historians of ideas would no doubt prefer philosophers didn't do this. Yet most great philosophers have treated past thinkers in this way. Some have even developed their best ideas through imagined conversations with long-dead writers; others have consciously reconstructed their intellectual forebears' ideas in ways that make them more plausible. Ancient philosophers are not desiccated corpses preserved in a museum, but are still capable of connecting posthumously with us through their words, and so are part of an ongoing interaction.

Connecting synchronously face-to-face through the spoken word, or asynchronously via writing in the form of drafts, correspondence, and published works were for over two millennia the only options available to philosophers. All that has now changed. The digital revolution has ushered in radical changes in the ways we can connect with one another.

As a graduate student in the 1980s I began writing my PhD dissertation on an electric typewriter before switching to keying it into a mainframe computer – that made corrections and rewrites so much easier. Personal computers weren't generally available. The mainframe printed out my drafts on wide folding paper with huge margins. The margins gave plenty of space for my supervisor's handwritten critical comments. He would annotate my draft, send it to me in the university's internal mail (snail mail) and then we would meet to discuss it. New media have transformed that sort of interaction. Today two philosophers exchanging ideas would typically send drafts in digital form by email as attachments. That means that in principle philosophers with access to the internet can connect with thinkers just about anywhere in the world almost instantaneously, exchanging thoughts in written form. That is a remarkable and quite recent transformation. From a café in Oxford I can solicit comments on something I'm writing from a philosopher in Australia without the hassle and delay of printing it, and at no charge. This possibility has sped up the process of comment and criticism that is integral to serious philosophy and made possible meaningful connections between philosophers separated by vast distances. Famously, the philosopher Derek Parfit made extensive use of this technology in his later work, sending multiple drafts to numerous critics across the globe and replying at length via email. Probably no philosopher in

the history of the subject has ever had so many detailed exchanges with other thinkers about their developing ideas. He was a workaholic and exceptional in his energy for this kind of critical engagement, but almost all philosophers today connect in this way to a lesser degree, and the development of ideas is benefiting from that.

For those who want a synchronous interaction, we all have access to online video conferencing. That was the stuff of sci-fi when I was a student. It means that we can now connect with individuals, conferences, and conversations that are taking place on the other side of the world in real time. Although even the best video conferencing still fails to provide all the non-verbal cues of an in-the-room experience, it's rapidly improving. Young philosophers take much of this for granted. I doubt they think much about it. But philosophical thinking is being transformed and accelerated by these developments.

The possibilities of philosophical connection opening up through AI are bewildering. It's already, for instance, possible to create an avatar of a thinker (living or dead) by training AI on the written words of that person. That could provide new ways of connecting – albeit indirectly – with other thinkers and their ideas. Instead of just reading David Hume's *Enquiries*, I could have a quasi-conversation with his avatar about his essay on miracles or his thoughts on causation, or I could spend an evening discussing the limits of free speech with John Stuart Mill in virtual form. My personal avatar (if I took the plunge and gave permission for its development) could have a thousand simultaneous conversations with other philosophers while I go off on holiday and watch the waves breaking on the shore and the sun descending on the horizon. Whether such developments will amplify or destroy philosophical connections remains to be seen. But today we are in an age of super-connection, and philosophical interaction is thriving. ◘

Fuel and fire

If fuel were fire
Then agent and action would be one.
If fire were different from fuel,
Then it could arise without fuel.
It would be forever aflame;
Flames could be ignited without a cause.
Its beginning would be meaningless.
In that case, it would be without any action.

Since it would not depend on another
Ignition would be without a cause.
If it were eternally in flames,
Starting it would be meaningless.
So, if one thinks that
That which is burning is the fuel.
If it is just this,

How is this fuel being burned?

If they are different, and if one not yet connected isn't connected,
The not yet burned will not be burned.

By Nagarjuna, from *The Fundamental Wisdom Of The Middle Way*

Composition 8, 1923, by Vasily Kandinsky

by André Dao

Cultural connections

In 1842, after a series of military defeats through the course of the First Opium War, the Chinese Qing dynasty signed the Nanjing Treaty with Great Britain, ceding, among other things, the island of Hong Kong to the British. The treaty itself was signed on the HMS Cornwallis, one of the British gunboats sitting in the Yangtze river, ready to bombard Nanjing city. The symbolism was rich: it was thanks to superior military technology, as represented by the Cornwallis, that the British were able to compel the Chinese to sign what came to be known as the first of the 'unequal treaties'.

Chinese defeat in the Opium Wars (a second war was fought, and won, by the British and the French in 1860) sparked a national crisis. For centuries, the connection between China and Europe had centred around mutually beneficial trade. Indeed, the European taste for Chinese products, including tea, silk, and porcelain, was so popular that China was running a trade surplus – which meant that European silver was flowing into China to buy those products, and not enough was flowing back out. It was a desire to correct this imbalance by forcing the Chinese to buy opium grown in British India that sparked the wars in the first place. While China was no stranger to conflict with its trading partners, these past conflicts ebbed and flowed with victories and defeats. What marked the Opium Wars as different was the utter severity and comprehensiveness of the defeat – in 1860, French and British troops stormed the very heart of the empire, the Forbidden City – with no prospect of a counterbalancing victory in sight.

But as the Chinese philosopher Yuk Hui explains, the crisis engendered by the Opium Wars was not only that China had suffered military defeat, or even that it had lost swathes of territory and prestige. Instead, the crisis ran much deeper, to the core of Chinese civilisation. As Hui puts it, such a crisis forces a culture to re-evaluate its *episteme* – the aesthetic, social and political framework that conditions what a given society understands to be true or false. Long accustomed to thinking of itself as the Middle Kingdom – literally, the centre of the world, and the source of superior arts of mind and body – the Qing Dynasty was confronted with the disturbing thought that the European episteme might be superior. To prevent full colonisation, would China have to adopt European ways?

The Qing Dynasty's response was to try to have it both ways. Yes, they would adopt European technology – not only the weapons that had been so devastating in war but the industrial machinery that had built and paid for those weapons. And they would do so as quickly as possible. In a word, they would modernise. But they would not change their thinking or their culture. As the slogan for the modernisation movement put it, "Chinese substance and western function". Or as a similar movement in Japan put it not long after: "Japanese soul and western knowledge".

The fundamental problem with such an approach, according to Hui, is that it assumes that technology is a mere tool – something to be mastered. Ironically, this is a rather Cartesian belief, insofar as it keeps intact the mind/body split: namely, the Qing Dynasty believed that it would be possible to separate Chinese thought from the European tools that were to be mastered. To put it another way, the Chinese – along with every other people who have tried to 'catch up' to European modernity, tacitly accepted a core tenet of western philosophy: that technology is universal. A tool, on this view,

has the same rationality – or function – across time, space, and cultures. A hammer – or a warship – is no different in Queen Victoria's Britain than in Qing Dynasty China.

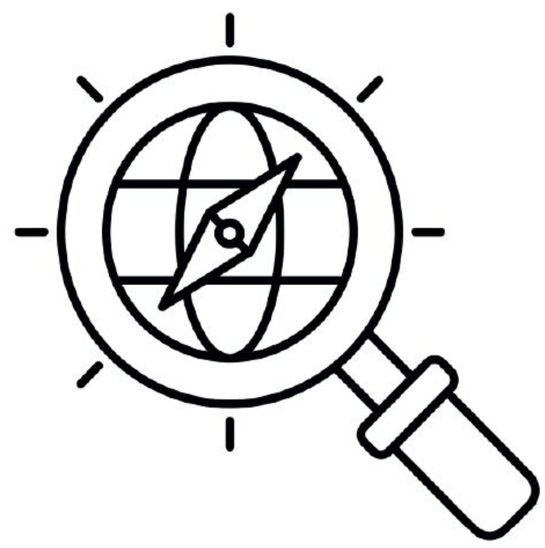
It is this seemingly commonsensical position that Hui takes apart in his philosophy of technology. Hui insists that all scientific and technical thinking (or technics), far from being free-floating, emerges from specific, local milieus – including local concepts of cosmology and morality. One example of this is Chinese medicine, which uses the same principles found in Chinese cosmology – such as Yin-Yang, and harmony – to understand the body. Another is Polynesian navigation, the ability to navigate across vast stretches of the Pacific without modern equipment. To look only for the tools that made such endeavours possible would be to miss the point. One must look instead for what Hui calls 'cosmotechnics' – the cosmological conditions shaping the way a culture thinks about making things.

A key source for understanding a particular cosmotechnics is to look at mythology. For instance, the central myth about technology for the Ancient Greeks – and therefore the founding myth of western technology – is the story of Prometheus, the Titan who bequeathed fire to humanity by stealing it from the gods. The myth dramatises, in Hui's words, the "radical separation between the world of the gods and the world of man that was necessary for the development of Greek rationality" – a rationality founded on a series of binaries between gods/humanity, nature/culture, eternal/mortal, permanent/changing, and so on. The idea of the tool that is fundamentally separate to its user belongs to this rationality.

Now compare that to Chinese myths about Shennong, the 'divine farmer', god of fire and inventor of agriculture and medicine. In one story, it is said that he risked being poisoned by trying hundreds of plants to discover which were edible and which were not. As Hui explains, unlike Greek mythology, with its Titan rebelling against the gods to raise human beings above animals with the use of fire, "in Chinese mythology there was no such rebellion and no such transcendence granted; this endowment is seen instead as owing to the benevolence of the ancient sages". In traditional Chinese philosophy, there is no separation between nature and culture, no elevation of humanity above its environment.

Chinese and western technics thus have completely different origins. The failure to recognise that, says Hui, led the Qing Dynasty to an unthinking adoption of western technology. A similar story was repeated around the world as European colonisation and domination spread. The result is a world that is increasingly homogenous in its attitude towards technology.

The spread of digital technologies is a perfect illustration of the loss of what Hui calls technodiversity, for these products have "ontological and epistemological assumptions" baked into them – think of the way social networks "presuppose that society is a collection of social atoms and that human relations can be known and studied via data connectivity". As these networks become ubiquitous, other,



less atomised forms of life are pushed to the margins.

The Qing Dynasty's response to the Opium Wars reverberates in the present. Hui describes the "ecstasy and hype" that have long replaced traditional reflection on technology in China, "propelling the country into the unknown: all of a sudden, it finds itself as if in the midst of an ocean without being able to see any limit, any destination". This headlong rush into the abyss is not confined to contemporary China. It is, as Nietzsche argued long ago, the troubling condition of modern humanity. The point of turning to cosmotechnics is precisely to find a way out of this condition – to re-discover the limits and purpose of the things we make. ◘

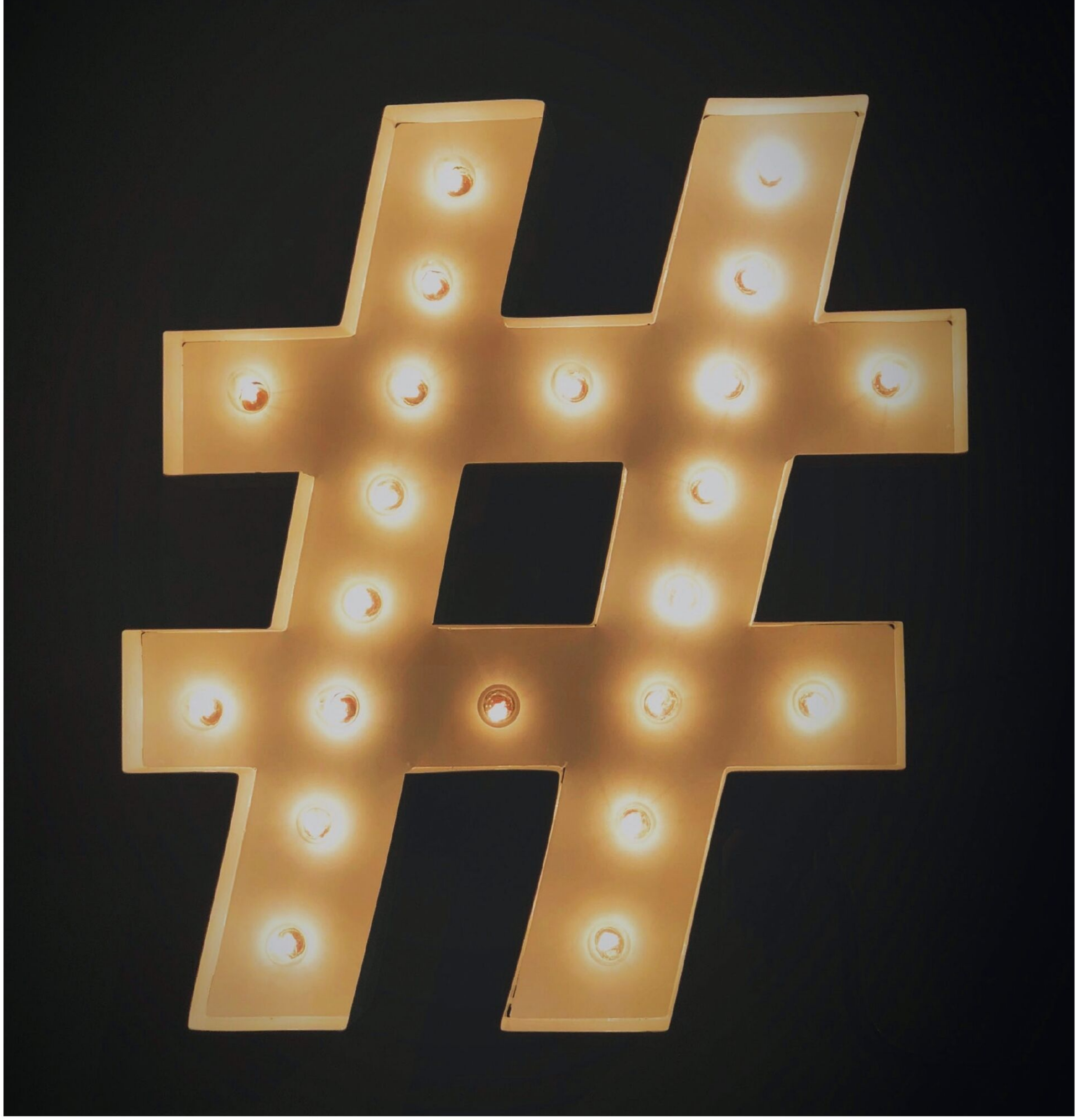


Photo by John Tyson

"When individuals have received repeated expected gratifications (or rewards) from internet use over time, their internet use behaviour can turn into a conditioned habit (operant conditions). If these individuals subsequently preoccupy themselves with this habit due to deficient self-regulation of their internet use behaviour, they can go one step further and isolate themselves from society to the extent of becoming addicted to internet use."

Carolyn A. Lin, David J. Atkin. 2007

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by Aristotle

Birds of a feather

Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods; even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all; for what is the use of such prosperity without the opportunity of beneficence, which is exercised chiefly and in its most laudable form towards friends? Or how can prosperity be guarded and preserved without friends? The greater it is, the more exposed is it to risk. And in poverty and in other misfortunes men think friends are the only refuge. It helps the young, too, to keep from error; it aids older people by ministering to their needs and supplementing the activities that are failing from weakness; those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions – 'two going together' – for with friends men are more able both to think and to act. Again, parent seems by nature to feel it for offspring and offspring for parent, not only among men but among birds and among most animals; it is felt mutually by members of the same race, and especially by men, whence we praise lovers of their fellowmen. We may even in our travels how near and dear every man is to every other. Friendship seems too to hold states together, and lawgivers to care more for it than for justice; for unanimity seems to be something like friendship, and this they aim at most of all, and expel faction as their worst enemy; and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality.

But it is not only necessary but also noble; for we praise those who love their friends, and it is thought to be a fine thing to have many friends; and again we think it is the same people that are good men and are friends.

Not a few things about friendship are matters of debate. Some define it as a kind of likeness and say like people are friends, whence come the sayings 'like to like', 'birds of a feather flock together', and so on; others on the contrary say 'two of a trade never agree'. On this very question they inquire for deeper and more physical causes, Euripides saying that 'parched earth loves the rain, and stately heaven when filled with rain loves to fall to earth', and Heraclitus that 'it is what opposes that helps' and 'from different tones comes the fairest tune' and 'all things are produced through strife'; while Empedocles, as well as others, expresses the opposite view that like aims at like. The physical problems we may leave alone (for they do not belong to the present inquiry); let us examine those which are human and involve character and feeling, e.g. whether friendship can arise between any two people or people cannot be friends if they are wicked, and whether there is one species of friendship or more than one. Those who think there is only one because it admits of degrees have relied on an inadequate indication; for

Photo by Cyrus Gomez

even things different in species admit of degree. We have discussed this matter previously.

The kinds of friendship may perhaps be cleared up if we first come to know the object of love. For not everything seems to be loved but only the lovable, and this is good, pleasant, or useful; but it would seem to be that by which some good or pleasure is produced that is useful, so that it is the good and the useful that are lovable as ends. Do men love, then, the good, or what is good for them? These sometimes clash. So too with regard to the pleasant. Now it is thought that each loves what is good for himself, and that the good is without qualification lovable, and what is good for each man is lovable for him; but each man loves not what is good for him but what seems good. This however will make no difference; we shall just have to say that this is 'that which seems lovable'. Now there are three grounds on which people love; of the love of lifeless objects we do not use the word 'friendship'; for it is not mutual love, nor is there a wishing of good to the other (for it would surely be ridiculous to wish wine well; if one wishes anything for it, it is that it may keep, so that one may have it oneself); but to a friend we say we ought to wish what is good for his sake. But to those who thus wish good we ascribe only goodwill, if the wish is not reciprocated; goodwill when it is reciprocal being friendship. Or must we add 'when it is recognised'? For many people have goodwill to those whom they have not seen but judge to be good or useful; and one of these might return this feeling. These people seem to bear goodwill to each other; but how could one call them friends when they do not know their mutual feelings? To be friends, then, the must be mutually recognised as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other for one of the aforesaid reasons.

Now these reasons differ from each other in kind; so, therefore, do the corresponding forms of love and friendship. There are therefore three kinds of friendship, equal in number to the things that are lovable; for with respect to each there is a mutual and recognised love, and those who love each other wish well to each other in that respect in which they love one another. Now those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them pleasant. Therefore those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves, and not in so far as the other is the person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant. And thus these friendships are only incidental; for it is not as being the man he is that the loved person is loved, but as providing some good or pleasure. Such friendships, then, are easily dissolved, if the parties do not remain like themselves; for if the one party is no longer pleasant or useful the other ceases to love him.

Now the useful is not permanent but is always changing. Thus when the motive of the friendship is done away, the friendship is dissolved, inasmuch as it existed only for the ends in question. This kind of friendship seems to exist chiefly between old people (for at that age people pursue not the pleasant but the useful) and, of those who are in their prime or young, between those who pursue utility. And such people do not live much with each other either; for sometimes they do not even find each other pleasant; therefore they do not need such companionship unless they are useful to each other; for they are pleasant to each other only in so far as they rouse in each other hopes of something good to come. Among such friendships people also class the friendship of a host and guest. On the other hand the friendship of young people seems to aim at pleasure; for they live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them; but with increasing age their pleasures become different. This is why they quickly become friends and quickly cease to be so; their friendship changes with the object that is found pleasant, and such pleasure alters quickly. Young people are amorous too; for the greater part of the friendship of love depends on emotion and aims at pleasure; this is why they fall in love and quickly fall out of love, changing often within a single day. But these people do wish to spend their days and lives together; for it is thus that they attain the purpose of their friendship.

Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of own nature and not incidentally; therefore their friendship lasts as long as they are good-and goodness is an enduring thing. And each is good without qualification and to his friend, for the good are both good without qualification and useful to each other. So too they are pleasant; for the good

are pleasant both without qualification and to each other, since to each his own activities and others like them are pleasurable, and the actions of the good are the same or like. And such a friendship is as might be expected permanent, since there meet in it all the qualities that friends should have. For all friendship is for the sake of good or of pleasure-good or pleasure either in the abstract or such as will be enjoyed by him who has the friendly feeling-and is based on a certain resemblance; and to a friendship of good men all the qualities we have named belong in virtue of the nature of the friends themselves; for in the case of this kind of friendship the other qualities also are alike in both friends, and that which is good without qualification is also without qualification pleasant, and these are the most lovable qualities. Love and friendship therefore are found most and in their best form between such men.

But it is natural that such friendships should be infrequent; for such men are rare. Further, such friendship requires time and familiarity; as the proverb says, men cannot know each other till they have 'eaten salt together'; nor can they admit each other to friendship or be friends till each has been found lovable and been trusted by each. Those who quickly show the marks of friendship to each other wish to be friends, but are not friends unless they both are lovable and know the fact; for a wish for friendship may arise quickly, but friendship does not.

This kind of friendship, then, is perfect both in respect of duration and in all other respects, and in it each gets from each in all respects the same as, or something like what, he gives; which is what ought to happen between friends. Friendship for the sake of pleasure bears a resemblance to this kind; for good people too are pleasant to each other. So too does friendship for the sake of utility; for the good are also useful to each other. Among men of these inferior sorts too, friendships are most permanent when the friends get the same thing from each other (e.g. pleasure), and not only that but also from the same source, as happens between ready-witted people, not as happens between lover and beloved. For these do not take pleasure in the same things, but the one in seeing the beloved and the other in receiving attentions from his lover; and when the bloom of youth is passing the friendship sometimes passes too (for the one finds no pleasure in the sight of the other, and the other gets no attentions from the first); but many lovers on the other hand are constant, if familiarity has led them to love each other's characters, these being alike. But those who exchange not pleasure but utility in their amour are both less truly friends and less constant. Those who are friends for the sake of utility part when the advantage is at an end; for they were lovers not of each other but of profit.

For the sake of pleasure or utility, then, even bad men may be friends of each other, or good men of bad, or one who is neither good nor bad may be a friend to any sort of person, but for their own sake clearly only good men can be friends; for bad men do not delight in each other unless some advantage come of the relation.

The friendship of the good too and this alone is proof against slander; for it is not easy to trust any one talk about a man who has long been tested by oneself; and it is among good men that trust and the feeling that 'he would never wrong me' and all the other things that are demanded in true friendship are found. In the other kinds of friendship, however, there is nothing to prevent these evils arising. For men apply the name of friends even to those whose motive is utility, in which sense states are said to be friendly (for the alliances of states seem to aim at advantage), and to those who love each other for the sake of pleasure, in which sense children are called friends. Therefore we too ought perhaps to call such people friends, and say that there are several kinds of friendship-firstly and in the proper sense that of good men qua good, and by analogy the other kinds; for it is in virtue of something good and something akin to what is found in true friendship that they are friends, since even the pleasant is good for the lovers of pleasure. But these two kinds of friendship are not often united, nor do the same people become friends for the sake of utility and of pleasure; for things that are only incidentally connected are not often coupled together.

Friendship being divided into these kinds, bad men will be friends for the sake of pleasure or of utility, being in this respect like each other, but good men will be friends for their own sake, i.e. in virtue of their goodness. These, then, are friends without qualification; the others are friends incidentally and through a resemblance to these.

As in regard to the virtues some men are called good in respect of a state of character, others in respect of an activity, so too in the case of friendship; for those who live together delight in each other and confer benefits on each other, but those who are asleep or locally separated are not performing, but are disposed to perform, the activities of friendship; distance does not break off the friendship absolutely, but only the activity of it. But if the absence is lasting, it seems actually to make men forget their friendship; hence the saying "out of sight, out of mind". ◘

Nishi-takashimadaira
Shin-takashimadaira
Takashimadaira
Nishidai
Hasuno
Shimura-sanchome
Shimura-sakaue
Motohasunuma
Itabashihoncho
Itabashi kuyakushomae
Thru to Saitama Stadium Line
Saitama Stadium Line
Mita Line
Thru to Tobu Tojo Line
Wakoshi
Tobu Tojo Line
Chikatetsu-narimasu
Chikatetsu-akatsuka
Heiwadai
Hikawadai
Kotake-mukaihara
Senkawa
Kanamecho
Hikarigaoka
Narima-kasugacho
Toshimaen
Nerima
Selbu Yurakucho Line
Selbu Ikebukuro Line
Thru to Selbu Ikebukuro Line
Shin-egota
Ochiai-minami-nagasaki
Nakai
Selbu Shinjuku Line
Thru to JR Chuo Line
Chuo Line
Ogikubo
Nakano
Ochiai
Tozai Line
Takadanobaba
Minami-asagaya
Shin-koenji
Higashi-koenji
Shin-nakano
Higashi-nakano
Shin-okubo
Oedo Line
Nakano-sakaue
Nishi-shinjuku
Shinjuku-nishiguchi
Honancho
Nakano-fujimicho
Nakano-shimbashi
Nishi-shinjuku-gochome
Tochomae
[Tokyo Metropolitan Government]
Meidaimae
Thru to Keio Line
Keio Line
Sasazuka
Keio new Line
Keio Inokashira Line
Yoyogi-uehara
[Yoyogi Park]
Yoyogi-koen
Thru to Odakyu Line
Odakyu Line
Shimo-kitazawa
Chiyoda Line
Shibuya
Thru to Tokyu Den-en-toshi Line
Futako-tamagawa
Tokyu Den-en-toshi Line
Tokyu Oimachi Line
Tokyu Toyoko Line
Thru to Tokyu Toyoko Line and Minatomirai Line, Sotetsu Line
Jiyugaoka
Den-en-chofu
Ookayama
Tokyu Meguro Line
Thru to Tokyu Meguro Line and Sotetsu Line
Hatanodai
Tokyu Ikegami Line
Nishi-magome
Magome
Nakanobu
Togoshi
Togoshi-ginza
Gotanda
Takanawadai
Osaki
Shinagawa
Oimachi
Keikyu-kamata
Keihin-tohoku Line
Thru to Keikyu Line
Keikyu Line
Tenkubashi
Haneda Airport Terminal 3
Haneda Airport
Ikebukuro
Mejiro
Zoshigaya
Kishibojimmae
Waseda
Shin-otsuka
Higashi-ikebukuro-yonchome
Higashi-ikebukuro
Gokokuji
Edogawabashi
Kagurazaka
Yurakucho Line
Shinjuku
Seibu-shinjuku
Shinjuku Line
[Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden]
Shinjuku-gyoemmae
Shinjuku-sanchome
Yotsuya
Yotsuya-sanchome
Sendagaya
Shinanomachi
Yoyogi
Kita-sando
Harajuku
Fukutoshin Line
Kokuritsu-kyogijo
Meiji-jingumae (Harajuku)
[Meiji Jingu Shrine]
Hanzomon Line
Aoyama-itchome
Galemmae
Oedo Line
Nogizaka
Akasaka
Omote-sando
Ginza Line
Roppongi-itchome
Hibiya Line
Ebisu
Naka-meguro
Hiro-o
Roppongi
Namboku Line
Meguro
Shirokanedai
Shirokane-takanawa
Mita Line
Sengakuji
Asakusa Line
Takanawa Gateway
Tamachi
Mita
Akabanebashi
Azabu-juban
Kamiyacho
Toranomon Hills
Tameike-sanno
Akasaka-mitsuke
Nagatacho
Hanzomon
Kojimachi
Kudanshita
Ichigaya
Akebonobashi
Shinjuku Line
Yotsuya
Iidabashi
Ushigome-kagurazaka
Ushigome-yanagicho
Wakamatsu-kawada
Nishi-waseda
Higashi-shinjuku
Shin-koshinzuka
Nishi-sugamo
Shin-itabashi
Itabashi
Otsuka-ekimae
Otsuka
Akabane
Akabane-iwabuchi
Shimo
Oji-kamiya
Oji
Oji-ekimae
Nishigahara
Komagome
Yamanote Line
Sugamo
Sengoku
Hakusan
Hon-komagome
Todaimae
Kasuga
Korakuen
Jimbocho
Maruunouchi Line
Tokyo Sakura (Toden Arakawa)

英語

M BUREAU OF TRANSPORTATION TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT Tokyo Metro Co.,Ltd. © 2023.03

Interviewee: Kenneth Gergen
Interviewer: Zan Boag

Meaningful connections

Kenneth J. Gergen, PhD, is a founding member, President of the Taos Institute and Chair of the Board, and the Mustin Professor of Psychology at Swarthmore College. He has been the recipient of two Fulbright research fellowships. Gergen has published over 300 articles in journals, magazines and books, and his major books include *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, *The Saturated Self*, *Realities and Relationships*, and *An Invitation to Social Construction*. Gergen has served as the President of two divisions of the American Psychological Association, the Division on Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, and on Psychology and the Arts. He has served on the editorial board of 35 journals, and as the Associate Editor of *The American Psychologist* and *Theory and Psychology*.

Zan Boag: *You've discussed the effect of technology on human connection in your work. How do you think digital communication has transformed our understanding of connection?*

Kenneth Gergen: Before treating how our understanding of connection has been changed, I need to talk a bit about the actual connections. One might say we are drowning in connection. Not only have we inherited the past century's technologies of enhanced connection – the automobile, telephone, radio, mass publishing, air travel, and television, but we now have the internet and smartphones, with their supply of listservs, social media, and the 24/7 availability of others. Now, at least one result of this enhanced connectivity is a fragmenting of society. Where once I had written optimistically about the possibility that our communication technologies would invite global understanding and good will, their most common use is the creation and/or fortification of islands of meaning. The technologies enable people to locate the like-minded around the world, and to remain in continuous contact with few spatio-temporal barriers. Whether it be a friendship group, a religion, political party, ethnicity, or minority, for example, there is affirmation for remaining within these communities of coherence and approbation for straying.

With these preliminaries in place, a brief word about our understanding of connection. I can well imagine significant differences, depending on the community. For a family or friendship group, digital communication might enhance the significance of connection. Rather than drifting apart, it is a means of continuously affirming the

Photo by Rodolfo Cuadros

importance of their bond. For other groups, connection may symbolise the accretion of power, for others connection is a means of defence, and in the business world connection can represent opportunity. Yes, there is transformation in meaning everywhere, but in my view, of many different kinds.

In The Saturated Self, *you write about how the demands of modern society can lead to a "saturated" self. How do you think individuals can maintain a coherent sense of self in an increasingly connected world?*

The interesting thing about the question is the assumption that a coherent sense of self is either good or desired. I tend to view the value placed on coherence as culturally and historically situated. In small villages of pre-modern times, I suspect coherence was not an issue. Because communities were rather stable and travel was arduous, there might be little question of "who am I" or "what kind of person am I?" One was bound into a community of coherence in which there was little deviation. After the Enlightenment, I might argue that personal coherence gained significant dimension. As we constructed a concept of the rational mind, and rationality was signalled by logical coherence, self-contradiction was a sign of mental insufficiency. However, in my view, it was only in the 20th century that coherence – in the sense of a true or authentic self – became a central criterion of evaluation. This could also be traced to communication technologies. On the one hand, such technologies had invited us to swim in a sea of differing and often competing realities. One could be an artist and an entrepreneur, a Jew and a Buddhist, married and gay, or could adopt new identities – as a hippy, a feminist, a homosexual, or a rocker. At the same time, you have the fragmentation I discussed earlier, groups pulling you into their particular communities. With these emerging evolutions and conflicts, questions were indeed invited as to, "Who am I?", "What do I truly care about?", "Where is the core?" Authenticity and commitment became significant issues of the times.

I also feel that for a certain cultural segment, the recent decades have seen a significant sea-change in the orientation to coherence, identity, and authenticity. For those of us growing up during the second half of the 20th century, such matters could be significant. We were caught in the quandary identified by David Riesman and his colleagues in their 1950 book, *The Lonely Crowd*, between being inner- or other-directed. Whereas the former were guided by their own values and principles, they were more influenced by the opinions of those about them. Riesman clearly preferred the former. As social saturation continued, Zygmunt Bauman's 2003 book, *Liquid Love* joined the defence of coherence, decrying the loss of the meaningful bonds that permitted self-definition. Yet, for more recent

"There's no way your authentic self actually likes reading Sartre."

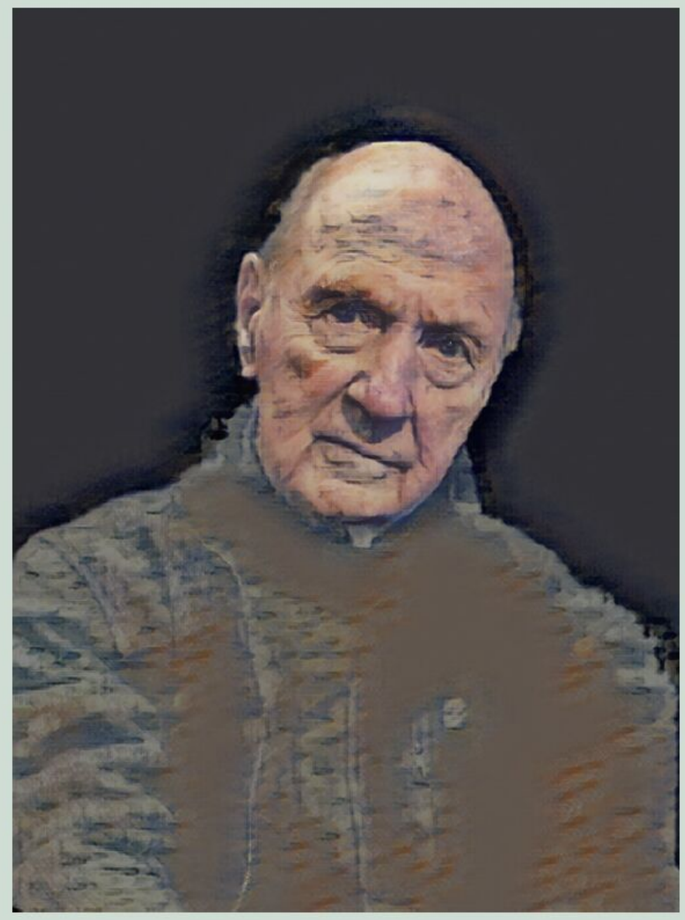
generations – unburdened with the tradition of bounded being – multiple realities, plastic identities, and fluid boundaries of the self are not disturbing; they are only 'natural'. In many respects, this is essentially the cosmopolitan culture of today. And if you consider Kwame Anthony Appiah's book on cosmopolitan ethics, you can see how this cultural form may provide the blueprint for a future in which we can all live together on the planet.

What do you think of digital and virtual connection? Is it fundamentally different from physical, in-person connection?

Of course, there are obvious ways in which the digital and virtual are different – as in the amount of visual, tactile, and auditory information available, along with reliance on nonverbal cues and the sense of a shared space. The question we hear so often, however, is an evaluative one, which generally features critics of virtual connection. One might say these are defenders of the past, the good old days when we enjoyed tactile relations in the family, the community, in friendships and romances. Now we may lament the loss of those days, and I can also join that chorus from time to time. But I think we should take a more differentiated look, which would include a look at the rich potentials of various forms of mediated relations. I celebrate the fact that many of the meetings I must attend take place online. No travel is necessitated, there is specified time limit, and captions clarify muffled or strongly accented voices. I am elated at being relieved of arduous travel in speaking at distant conferences. I would rather see many athletic contests via television than being in attendance. Where there is physical separation – in the case of both family and friends – mediated communication has played a continuously solidifying and supportive role in my relationships.

My greatest worries at present have to do with the general dissolving of civil society, the erosion of the relational process out of which the recognition and significance of 'we' is created. It is not simply the fragmentation process I mentioned earlier. It's also the way in which the virtual world allows critique to be lifted out of the conversational flow of face-to-face relations, thus removing responsibility for one's utterances, and denying replies that might otherwise ameliorate or qualify the criticism. As a result, in the United States at least, social media have become cesspools of venom, epithets hurled in both directions across the islands of meaning, and with escalating antipathy. Televised news and the blogosphere function in a similar way, glorifying one political party or ideology while demonising the opposition.

On a more subtle level, this erosion of relational process is furthered by the increasing capacity of digital technology to replicate human behaviour. Of course, the capacity to 'cathect' human replicas is scarcely new. A child's love for a doll is but one example. With video games, a world of avatars emerged, enabling one to identify with or interact with a human likeness of one's creation. The fact that online pornography business is worth some hundred billion dollars signals the extent to which digital images are replacing actual partners in fulfilling erotic desires. The 2013 film, *Her*, in which the protagonist falls in love with an operating system capable of responding to his ideas and needs, is now becoming prophetic. Colleagues everywhere rhapsodise over



Kenneth Gergen

the gratifying and informative time spent in conversing with their private chat bots. The point is that as we become increasingly attached to human replicas, participation in the human process of constructing meaning and value recedes. And it is this process on which the very possibility of a viable society rests.

Jean-Paul Sartre argued that the self is constantly in a state of becoming and is defined through the gaze of the Other. What do you think of Sartre's individualistic approach to identity and freedom?

In my younger days I was quite enamoured by Sartre's writings. For me his emphasis on human freedom, self-determination, and authenticity were stirring invitations to resist bourgeois

conventions. Ultimately, however, I found myself resisting Sartre. There was first the ease with which existentialist ideas could be absorbed by individualist ideology, with individualist ideology then supporting Darwinian and Hobbesian views of the *socius* as an all against all test of survival. Such ideas were invitations to an alienated way of life. This was also the motivating spark for my attempt in *Relational Being* to develop an alternative view, one that traces all human meaning to relational process. Echoing Wittgenstein, an utterance does not become an intelligible word until we coordinate ourselves around its use. But the key word here is 'coordinate', as meaning in this instance doesn't reside in the individual but in a process of coordination. Thus, to speak of 'human beings', and to attribute to them thought, emotion, intention and the like, requires a preceding process of relating. In this sense, relational process precedes persons. If free of all relationally generated meaning, there would be neither culture nor morality. Our central concern, then, should be with relational process – the forms, outcomes, and limitations of our movements together.

You often discuss how individuals put forward different versions of themselves depending on the context of the relationship. With the rise of social media and online personas, do you think we are seeing a more fragmented version of the self in the online world?

I'm not so fond of the idea of "putting forward" different versions of the self, as for me this carries connotations of a Goffman-like dystopia in which we are all manipulating personas to achieve our ends. From the standpoint of relational theory, whatever we accept as intelligible action emerges within the process of relating. So, let us imagine that in every relationship in which I participate, the two of us will become byproducts of our coordination. I relate with a young person, and because we have both been brought up in the culture, we will co-create each other – for example – with me as teacher and he as student. And because we both move through many different kinds of relations each day, we will become different persons through the journey. My teacher-being, if you will, is relationally specific. With continuing development, we acquire multiple potentials for being. We become multibeings, as I like to put it.

The social media are unusual, in this sense, as we must typically imagine the relationship in which we are participating. And because we are not acting within the ongoing flow of conversation, we have time to reflect on our audience and what might or not be acceptable. In effect, the relationship is de-naturalised. Further, once one defines the audience, self-expressions are typically circumscribed. "This is who I am" – for you! In terms of your question, this is the emergence of a fragmentated self. And, yes, the media do allow and invite a fragmented version to be shared. But let's not view social media as the source of fragmentation; fragmentation as a circumscribing of self-expression is the stuff of everyday life.

In Relational Being, *you discuss the importance of dialogue and co-creation in relationships. How do you think this applies, in a broader context, to the way societies engage with one another across cultural divides?*

First of all, let's make a distinction between societies and the people who constitute these societies. This is not an ontological distinction but a discursive one. That is, we are simply using two different traditions of discourse – micro and macro – to speak of the same thing. Remove all the people and there is no society, and vice versa. Yet, the distinction is important in this case, because these discourses point to different answers to your question, each significant in its own way. First, on the level of personal

Echoing Wittgenstein, an utterance does not become an intelligible word until we coordinate ourselves around its use.

interchange, co-creation is the essential process through which meaning originates. Or to put it another way, meaning is a form of coordinated action. In this sense, differences in cultural background represent differences in the skills one brings to the relationship. Metaphorically, the challenge of a westerner and an Asian understanding each other is akin to their bringing different dances to the floor. It is here, however, that technologies of connection have come to play an increasingly significant role. Because these technologies have enabled cultural ways of life to leap territorial boundaries, the idea of separate cultures begins to dissolve. Bakhtin has never been more relevant; polyphony does not refer to a cultural condition, but a to a rapidly accelerating process. It's no longer the study of culture that is important, but the process of culturing.

Now, when we turn to the macro discourse of society, we must also realise that our analysis is typically relying on the discursive logics of the micro. We understand that 'individuals have interactions', and it is thus intelligible for you to ask about the relations between societies or cultures. But the metaphor does have important analytic potentials. Consider again what I am calling 'the dances' in the interpersonal case. These are commonly shared patterns of exchange. Question and answer, 'please' and 'thank you' are like minimal *pas des deux* – or adjacency pairs as conversation analysts would put it. But there are more extended forms, such as ongoing arguments and the game of mutual blame. Or, on the more complex and extended level, carrying out a romance, friendship, or raising children. But now let's return to the case of societal interaction, and the patterns of relationship between and among them.

My attention is riveted in this case to what I see as a danse macabre, the unfolding relationship holding between and among sovereign powers. Because heads of state are primarily engaged in enhancing the welfare of their own nation, they enter a relational dance largely as competitors. Yes, cooperation is possible, but only insofar as it will enhance one's outcomes in the larger sea of competition. Thus, international relations are largely carried out as a complex array of zero-sum games, marked by manipulation, deception, exploitation, and mistrust. We have now reached a point in history at which this form of relationship invites global annihilation. With the rate at which our life-sustaining environment is deteriorating, it is imperative that we develop and nourish an alternative dance – one of collaboration, trust, and mutual support – in achieving the common good. Human survival is at stake.

In his work on the 'self-interpreting' nature of human beings, Charles Taylor discusses how our identities are shaped by narratives and social contexts. What do you think of Taylor's view that the self is shaped by broader cultural narratives and the 'social imaginary'?

I am very fond of Taylor's work, and actually of Taylor himself. He is one of the most gentle and caring interlocutors I have ever known. Earlier in my career I was inspired by his critiques of the application of the natural science model to human affairs. There were also occasions in which we were both championing the significance of human meaning and its lodgement in social process. However, where Taylor viewed the locus of meaning in the subjectivity of the individual, I was moving in a post-structural direction in which meaning is located in the social process itself. It is by remaining committed to an internal world of meaning, that Taylor can speak of being shaped or influenced by that which is other, i.e. cultural narratives and social imaginaries. Now, we might both agree that the broadly shared cultural narratives are reflected in the lives of individuals. But rather than embracing the more dualist orientation where the culture shapes the individual, I prefer to view the mutually engaged process of sharing as the origin of one's incorporating the narrative. Where this makes a difference, however, is that Taylor is circumspect about cultural shaping. For example, he is highly critical of the influence of modernist instrumentality on the individual. In part I agree, but this kind of analysis puts culture 'out there', and invites the belief that one can live separately or without this culture. In contrast, I am more concerned with the ways in which we are part of this culture, how we may be supporting it in many subtle ways, and the ripple effects that may occur in acts of resistance.

In your research, you highlight the idea of interconnectedness in global society. How do you think global crises like climate change or pandemics influence our sense of shared humanity and the connections we form with people across the world?

I think for the vast share of those people who are conscious of the climate crisis, there is an enhanced sense of 'we together' – meaning all peoples on earth. Connections are welcomed, as it is 'we together' who must join in action to save the future. And indeed, there are many movements – great and small – that attempt to build global connection. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, many of those who head up our institutions – especially government and business – are caught

up in a Darwinian vision of competition. The concept of a shared humanity is peripheral, and wherever the idea might be employed in the service of environmental enhancement (thus reducing the gain of such institutions), it might even be suppressed.

You've had a long career studying human connection. Looking back, how have your own relationships shaped your ideas about the relational self and the importance of connection in your personal life?

Among the earliest origins of this work were my experiences of homelife in one culture, and daily relations in another. My father was a mathematics professor and my mother an educated New Englander. But my daily life with friends was spent in the southern culture of the US. The differences in the vocabularies, values, and criteria of acceptability required two very different versions of 'me' to show up. I spent my college years in an entirely different milieu, and then a requirement for military service required yet another form of being. At that time, I was quite concerned with issues of identity, authenticity, and coherence. It was only in my graduate studies that I could begin to raise serious questions about the tradition of a coherent or unified self, and could begin to see how such a conception functioned as a paean to provincialism.

There is so much to say here, but one interesting turn in the story is a case in which the theoretical vision created the experience of relating – as opposed to my experiences giving me grist for the theoretical mill. In writing *Relational Being* I proposed that whatever constitutes intelligible personhood has its origins in relationships. Thus, I wanted to argue, the content of thought, our motives, values, pleasures can all be traced to relations. As I began to fill out this logic, often citing relationships from which I had drawn my thoughts, values, appreciations, and desires I was moved. I began to recall these relationships with deep gratitude for their gifts to my life.

If you could offer some advice for individuals seeking to cultivate deeper and more meaningful connections in a rapidly changing, often fragmented world, what would it be?

On the one hand, if deeper and meaningful connections don't depend for you on frequent face-to-face meetings, I don't see this as necessarily a problem for many people. If you wish to make a commitment to a particular group – intellectual, ideological, religious... or are engaged in a niche pursuit such as bee keeping, deep sea diving, or collecting stamps – comrades can be located on the internet, and available for communication around the clock. I was told of a man who wanted his laptop with him on his deathbed, because he wished to be close to those with whom he had grown close in their playing chess. Or, one might say, in certain respects cultural fragmentation has made meaningful connection more available.

It is when 'deep and meaningful' requires a committed face-to-face relationship – as in traditional marriage or old-world friendship – that digitalisation and fragmentation take their toll. Our technologies have created not only an ever-more-rapidly moving river of meaning and value, but the continuous development of new technologies. These, in turn, create new challenges to relationships. The simple shift from a land-line telephone to a mobile phone was a major catalyst to cultural patterns of relationship. At present, one cannot fathom the transformations that will result from the developments in AI. The point is that unless one simply drops off the grid, which many people do, one is virtually destined to become a rolling stone, moving adaptively and creatively with the changing cultural landscape. Face-to-face commitments are not easily accommodated.

In this context, let me return to your very first question... on the changing conceptions of connection. Here I propose that as populations are increasingly caught up in the turbulence of techno-induced disruption, a change is taking place in our view of 'deep and meaningful'. Rather than centring the source of such treasures in a single individual, or even a small handful of close associates, the direction will be centrifugal. The joys of depth and meaning will be distributed across multiple relations, where 'quality time' will be located wherever the dance of coordination permits. One may have 'close friends' the world over, and find sudden and fleeting moments of compassion, longing, mutual regard, or inspiration at the next turn in the path. Bauman may decry these as liquid relations, but a recent cartoon in one of our national magazines, features a couple who are agreeing to marriage, only if they can anticipate a divorce within ten years. A sign of the times. ◘

Telephone wires, by Carl Nenzen Loven

"A revolutionary invention like the telegraph may have this result, that it helps men to chatter more and more quickly across the distances of space – and the spiritual emptiness grows."

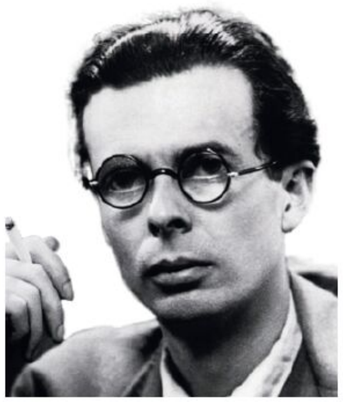
Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 1846

Connection

The Writer

Aldous Huxley
1894 – 1963

Live together



We live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena; they are crucified alone. Embraced, the lovers desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies – all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable. We can pool information about experiences, but never the experiences themselves. From family to nation, every human group is a society of island universes.

The Essayist

Ralph Waldo Emerson
1803 – 1882

Solitude

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual & in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness & meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

The Mystic

Simone Weil
1909 – 1943

Look elsewhere

Not to recognise the existence of a human being as such, to treat him as one of the physical objects amid which we live, is an offense against justice. A man crosses a road. He is knocked down by a car and his leg is broken. The driver had not seen him. It was a pure accident. He is taken to hospital. A few hours later the surgeon walks down the ward and says, 'Whose leg shall I amputate today?' He selects a patient at random, not noticing that one of them has a fractured leg. That man has not been recognised as a human being. During every second that this continues, justice is violated. The order of the universe has been broken. It is not necessary for anyone to be wicked: it is enough that one man should turn his gaze away. He need not even turn it away: he may simply look elsewhere.

What does connection mean to us? Here are six thinkers' views on how we're all connected.

The Mathematician

Alfred North Whitehead
1861 – 1947

Zest of life

The universities are schools of education, and schools of research. But the primary reason for their existence is not to be found either in the mere knowledge conveyed to the students or in the mere opportunities for research afforded to the members of the faculty. Both these functions could be performed at a cheaper rate, apart from these very expensive institutions. Books are cheap, and the system of apprenticeship is well understood. So far as the mere imparting of information is concerned, no university has had any justification for existence since the popularisation of printing in the fifteenth century. Yet the chief impetus to the foundation of universities came after that date, and in more recent times has even increased. The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning.

The Philologist

Friedrich Nietzsche
1844 – 1900

Work of nature

In all events which have value and significance, humanity and nature are intertwined in such a way that one cannot say: here is the work of man, there the work of nature. Everything is a synthesis of both, and nothing can be understood in isolation. This applies not only to physical phenomena but to moral and spiritual ones as well. We think ourselves independent, and yet each of our thoughts bears within it the echo of centuries. Each value we claim to invent is linked by invisible threads to those we have inherited. Each breath we draw is conditioned by air that others have breathed. To tear ourselves from this network would be not to become free but to become meaningless. To see clearly is to recognise how deeply embedded we are. In place, in history, in kinship. Freedom is not disconnection; it is choosing within the given weave of existence.

The Existentialist

Søren Kierkegaard
1813 – 1855

Losing one's self

The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur so quietly that it is as if it were nothing at all. Every other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed. But when one's self is lost, it may not be noticed at all. A person can seem outwardly secure, even successful, but inwardly have lost the most essential connection: the inward relationship to self. And this is not some mystical solitude; it is precisely the point from which one can most truly relate to others. For the self is only found when it relates to something beyond itself, and this is the self's deepest truth. In relating to God, to one's ethical commitments, or to the suffering of another human being, the self is connected. When the individual stands before the universal and says 'I am responsible,' there lies the possibility of connection – not through the crowd, but through conscience.

Pablo Picasso, 1881.
GUERNICA 1937.

Guernica, 1937, by Pablo Picasso

printed in the netherlands
for minerva reproductions,
copenhagen.

connections

by Myisha Cherry

Toxic connections

What does it take to build life-giving relationships? If popular advice is any indication, relationships are about loyalty, unconditional love, and never giving up on the people you care about. "Blood is thicker than water," we're told. "Real friends don't walk away." And we internalise these mantras – sometimes to our own detriment.

But what happens when a relationship depletes us more than it nourishes us? When the person who's supposed to support us constantly belittles us, makes us question our reality, or abuses us? Many of us are reluctant to name these dynamics for what they are: toxic. We'd rather believe that if we just try harder – communicate better, stay patient, love deeper – the relationship will improve. Sometimes it does. But often, it doesn't.

Yet flourishing – true flourishing – requires more than just connection. It requires the right kind of connection. If some relationships make us sick, others make us well. Knowing the difference might be the most important kind of wisdom.

To be sure, unhealthy relationships, like junk food, are not good for you. You might want the person to love you in your love language, but they fail to get it right. Your communication styles might differ, causing every small disagreement to lead to days of silence. Or your partner might refuse to reach certain compromises or reciprocate love when you need it the most. In this dynamic, you are unfulfilled, and the relationship is not being nourished or growing. This can create disappointment, dissatisfaction, and stagnation. But not every unhealthy relationship is toxic.

Toxic relationships, while unhealthy, are so much more. While junk food may bring you zero nutritional benefits, toxic chemicals in your food can chemically alter it, and cause you damage when digested. Toxic relationships are similar. According to Tiera Couch, a licensed clinical social worker who specialises in relational and inter-generational trauma, toxic relationships are "a heavier layer of being unhealthy because it changes the things around it so negatively and so forcefully." She explains that when a person brings toxicity to a relationship via violence, manipulation, or emotional abuse, they might do it to feel good or get their needs met regardless of who they hurt. But as a result, Couch warns, the recipient of that harm is changed in ways that can affect the way they love or show up in relationships going forward. For example, the manipulation can make them emotionally unsafe or distrustful of others. The violence can give them trauma responses. The emotional abuse can diminish their confidence and self-esteem, requiring years of therapy to restore.

Healthy relationships are different from the toxic variety in every way. A healthy relationship involves mutual

Any relationship that steals our joy, undermines our self-worth, creates co-dependency, or impedes our own flourishing is not worth enduring.

respect, trust, honesty, and autonomy. It promotes collaboration and independence, teamwork and autonomy. In healthy relationships, each person nourishes the other and is dedicated to promoting each other's well-being. Just as you can be healthy without being perfect, since you might not always eat the right foods or may lack your ideal aesthetic body, healthy relationships don't require perfection. However, each person becomes a better version of themselves because they are together.

If healthy relationships have all the upsides, while toxicity is destructive, then why are toxic relationships so rampant and long lasting? It's not always toxic at first. In the beginning it presents itself as care and obligation. What ultimatly ended in cruelty and manipulation, often started with kindness and promises. The erosion is slow.

But once it happens, history and emotional connection makes it hard to see it for what it is. Once we recognise the toxicity, things like trauma bonding, a fear of being alone, and the hope that they will change can keep us trapped in the relationship. We also can exercise what the French philosopher Simon Beauvoir calls 'bad faith', where we tell ourselves a lie because we are too afraid to face the truth – that the relationship is not good for us and the person is unlikely to change. Admitting it would require us to draw boundaries or risk losing the relationship.

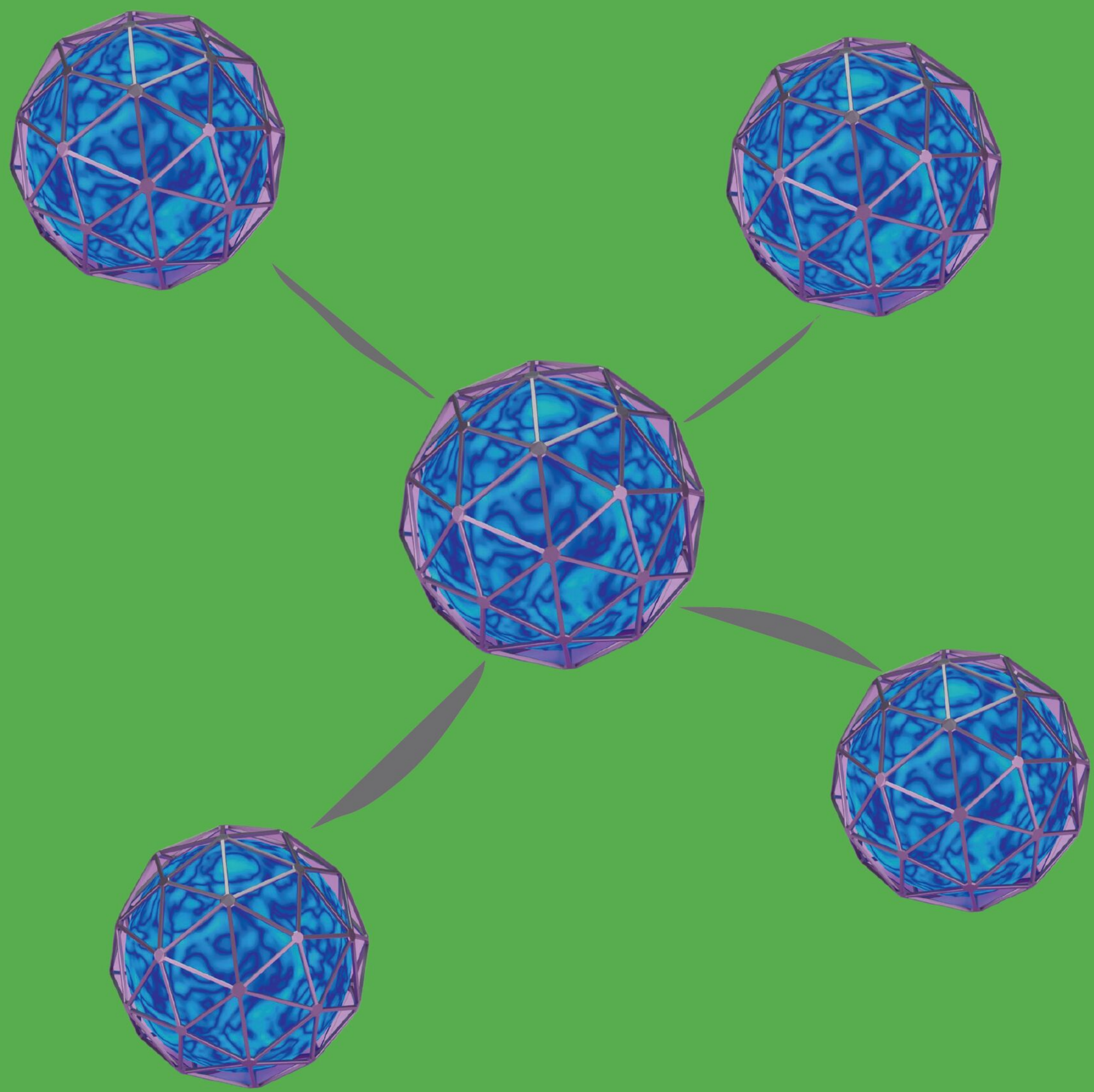
We can even tell ourselves 'Destructive Truths' like 'love is hard' or 'you have to stick it out'. These statements are true in general, but don't always apply to specific cases. When they are forced to apply, it causes ruin. It's like when we try to make a square peg fit into a round hole, causing damage to the peg and the hole. When we use destructive truths by forcing them to apply to our situation, we are playing around with our own destruction. So, while it is true that relationships can be difficult, they needn't be harmful. Yes, some things in life require resilience, but any relationship that steals our joy, undermines our self-worth, creates co-dependency, or impedes our own flourishing is not worth enduring. Accepting difficulty and resilience in these cases are not virtues, but vices that can have devastating consequences.

But there's good news. If de Beauvoir and the Existentialists are right when they say that we self-create and define ourselves, then there is something we can do to recover from the toxicity, no matter how long it takes.

We can begin by resisting the lies and destructive truths. We do this by facing the truths we've been hiding from by admitting that the relationship is indeed toxic, that's it's altering our lives for the worse, and we can do something about it. We can resist the lie that the relationship is all we have, and that person is the only one who loves us, by tapping into our network of friends, talking to a therapist, and educating ourselves on how to heal.

We can let go of the idea that because we love the person, we should be the ones to fix them. The truth is: we are each responsible for our own healing. Our loved ones must do their own work. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't show them compassion. "There's no such thing as a toxic person, just toxic behaviour," explains Couch. "Toxicity is rooted in unresolved pain, trauma, and learning to exist in the world under undesirable conditions… maybe you learned how to survive by manipulating other people because that's what you saw that you needed to do." We can empathise with their experience and yet still choose ourselves without shame. Leaving the relationship is not about giving up on them or portraying them negatively. It's about investing in and saving yourself.

True love is about pursuing the well-being of yourself and your beloved. When the pursuit of other people's well-being compromises our own, then we must choose ourselves. This is one mantra that is always safe to live by – for it exudes practical wisdom and leads to personal wholeness. ◘



Artwork adapted from a photo by Shubham Dhage

"The key is to keep company only with people who uplift you, whose presence calls forth your best."

Epictetus, The Discourses, c. 108 AD

Photo by Vivaan Trivedii

By Rachel Carson, from *Silent Spring*

NOTHING EXISTS ALONE

Of all our natural resources water has become the most precious. By far the greater part of the earth's surface is covered by its enveloping seas, yet in the midst of this plenty we are in want. By a strange paradox, most of the earth's abundant water is not usable for agriculture, industry, or human consumption because of its heavy load of sea salts, and so most of the world's population is either experiencing or is threatened with critical shortages. In an age when man has forgotten his origins and is blind even to his most essential needs for survival, water along with other resources has become the victim of his indifference.

The problem of water pollution by pesticides can be understood only in context, as part of the whole to which it belongs – the pollution of the total environment of mankind. The pollution entering our waterways comes from many sources: radioactive wastes from reactors, laboratories, and hospitals; fallout from nuclear explosions; domestic wastes from cities and towns; chemical wastes from factories. To these is added a new kind of fallout – the chemical sprays applied to croplands and gardens, forests and fields. Many of the chemical agents in this alarming mélange imitate and augment the harmful effects of radiation, and within the groups of chemicals themselves there are sinister and little understood interactions, transformations, and summations of effect.

Ever since chemists began to manufacture substances that nature never invented, the problems of water purification have become complex and the danger to users of water has increased. As we have seen, the production of these synthetic chemicals in large volume began in the 1940s. It has now reached such proportions that an appalling deluge of chemical pollution is daily poured into the nation's waterways. When inextricably mixed with domestic and other wastes discharged into the same water, these chemicals sometimes defy detection by the methods in ordinary use by purification plants. Most of them are so stable that they cannot be broken down by ordinary processes. Often they cannot even be identified. In rivers, a really incredible variety of pollutants combine to produce deposits that the sanitary engineers can only despairingly refer to as 'gunk'. Professor Rolf Eliassen of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology testified before a congressional committee to the impossibility of predicting the composite effect of these chemicals, or of identifying the organic matter resulting from the mixture. "We don't begin to know what that is," said Professor Eliassen. "What is the effect on the people? We don't know."

To an ever-increasing degree, chemicals used for the control of insects, rodents, or unwanted vegetation contribute to these organic pollutants. Some are deliberately applied to bodies of water to destroy plants, insect larvae, or undesired fishes. Some come from forest spraying that may blanket two or three million acres of a single state with spray directed against a single insect pest – spray that falls directly into streams or that drips down through the leafy canopy to the forest floor, there to become part of the slow movement of seeping moisture beginning its long journey to the sea. Probably the bulk of such contaminants are the waterborne residues of the millions of pounds of agricultural chemicals that have been applied to farmlands for insect or rodent control and have been leached out of the ground by rains to become part of the universal seaward movement of water.

Here and there we have dramatic evidence of the presence of these chemicals in our streams and even in public water supplies. For example, a sample

of drinking water from an orchard area in Pennsylvania, when tested on fish in a laboratory, contained enough insecticide to kill all of the test fish in only four hours. Water from a stream draining sprayed cotton fields remained lethal to fishes even after it had passed through a purifying plant, and in fifteen streams tributary to the Tennessee River in Alabama the runoff from fields treated with toxaphene, a chlorinated hydrocarbon, killed all the fish inhabiting the streams. Two of these streams were sources of municipal water supply. Yet for a week after the application of the insecticide the water remained poisonous, a fact attested by the daily deaths of goldfish suspended in cages downstream.

For the most part this pollution is unseen and invisible, making its presence known when hundreds or thousands of fish die, but more often never detected at all. The chemist who guards water purity has no routine tests for these organic pollutants and no way to remove them. But whether detected or not, the pesticides are there, and as might be expected with any materials applied to land surfaces on so vast a scale, they have now found their way into many and perhaps all of the major river systems of the country.

If anyone doubts that our waters have become almost universally contaminated with insecticides he should study a small report issued by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1960. The Service had carried out studies to discover whether fish, like warm-blooded animals, store insecticides in their tissues. The first samples were taken from forest areas in the West where there had been mass spraying of DDT for the control of the spruce budworm. As might have been expected, all of these fish contained DDT. The really significant findings were made when the investigators turned for comparison to a creek in a remote area about 30 miles from the nearest spraying for budworm control. This creek was upstream from the first and separated from it by a high waterfall. No local spraying was known to have occurred. Yet these fish, too, contained DDT. Had the chemical reached this remote creek by hidden underground streams? Or had it been airborne, drifting down as fallout on the surface of the creek? In still another comparative study, DDT was found in the tissues of fish from a hatchery where the water supply originated in a deep well. Again there was no record of local spraying. The only possible means of contamination seemed to be by means of groundwater.

In the entire water-pollution problem, there is probably nothing more disturbing than the threat of widespread contamination of groundwater. It is not possible to add pesticides to water anywhere without threatening the purity of water everywhere. Seldom if ever does Nature operate in closed and separate compartments, and she has not done so in distributing the earth's water supply. Rain, falling on the land, settles down through pores and cracks in soil and rock, penetrating deeper and deeper until eventually it reaches a zone where all the pores of the rock are filled with water, a dark, subsurface sea, rising under hills, sinking beneath valleys. This groundwater is always on the move, sometimes at a pace so slow that it travels no more than 50 feet a year, sometimes rapidly, by comparison, so that it moves nearly a tenth of a mile in a day. It travels by unseen waterways until here and there it comes to the surface as a spring, or perhaps it is tapped to feed a well. But mostly it contributes to streams and so to rivers. Except for what enters streams directly as rain or surface runoff, all the running water of the earth's surface was at one time groundwater. And so, in a very real and frightening sense, pollution of the groundwater is pollution of water everywhere...

It must have been by such a dark, underground sea that poisonous chemicals travelled from a manufacturing plant in Colorado to a farming district several miles away, there to poison wells, sicken humans and livestock, and damage crops – an extraordinary episode that may easily be only the first of many like it. Its history, in brief, is this. In 1943, the Rocky Mountain Arsenal of the Army Chemical Corps, located near Denver, began to manufacture war materials. Eight years later the facilities of the arsenal were leased to a private oil company for the production of insecticides. Even before the change of operations, however, mysterious reports had begun to come in. Farmers several miles from the plant began to report unexplained sickness among livestock; they complained of extensive crop damage. Foliage turned yellow, plants failed to mature, and many crops were killed outright. There were reports of human illness, thought by some to be related.

The irrigation waters on these farms were derived from shallow wells. When the well waters were examined (in a study in 1959, in which several state and federal agencies participated) they were found to contain an assortment of chemicals. Chlorides, chlorates, salts of phosphoric acid, fluorides, and arsenic had been discharged from the Rocky Mountain Arsenal into holding ponds during the years of its operation. Apparently the groundwater between the arsenal and the farms had become contaminated and it had taken seven to eight years for the wastes to travel underground a distance of about three miles from the holding ponds to the nearest farm. This seepage had continued to spread and had further contaminated an area of unknown extent. The investigators knew of no way to contain the contamination or halt its advance.

All this was bad enough, but the most mysterious and probably in the long run the most significant feature of the whole episode was the discovery of the weed killer 2,4-D in some of the wells and in the holding ponds of the arsenal. Certainly its presence was enough to account for the damage to crops irrigated with this water. But the mystery lay in the

fact that no 2,4-D had been manufactured at the arsenal at any stage of its operations. After long and careful study, the chemists at the plant concluded that the 2,4-D had been formed spontaneously in the open basins. It had been formed there from other substances discharged from the arsenal; in the presence of air, water, and sunlight, and quite without the intervention of human chemists, the holding ponds had become chemical laboratories for the production of a new chemical – a chemical fatally damaging to much of the plant life it touched. And so the story of the Colorado farms and their damaged crops assumes a significance that transcends its local importance. What other parallels may there be, not only in Colorado but wherever chemical pollution finds its way into public waters? In lakes and streams everywhere, in the presence of catalysing air and sunlight, what dangerous substances may be born of parent chemicals labelled 'harmless'?

Indeed one of the most alarming aspects of the chemical pollution of water is the fact that here – in river or lake or reservoir, or for that matter in the glass of water served at your dinner table – are mingled chemicals that no responsible chemist would think of combining in his laboratory. The possible interactions between these freely mixed chemicals are deeply disturbing to officials of the United States Public Health Service, who have expressed the fear that the production of harmful substances from comparatively innocuous chemicals may be taking place on quite a wide scale. The reactions may be between two or more chemicals, or between chemicals and the radioactive wastes that are being discharged into our rivers in ever-increasing volume. Under the impact of ionising radiation some rearrangement of atoms could easily occur, changing the nature of the chemicals in a way that is not only unpredictable but beyond control. It is, of course, not only the groundwaters that are becoming contaminated, but surface-moving waters as well – streams, rivers, irrigation waters. A disturbing example of the latter seems to be building up on the national wildlife refuges

Rachel Carson, by Charis Tsevis

at Tule Lake and Lower Klamath, both in California. These refuges are part of a chain including also the refuge on Upper Klamath Lake just over the border in Oregon. All are linked, perhaps fatefully, by a shared water supply, and all are affected by the fact that they lie like small islands in a great sea of surrounding farmlands – land reclaimed by drainage and stream diversion from an original waterfowl paradise of marshland and open water.

These farmlands around the refuges are now irrigated by water from Upper Klamath Lake. The irrigation waters, recollected from the fields they have served, are then pumped into Tule Lake and from there to Lower Klamath. All of the waters of the wildlife refuges established on these two bodies of water therefore represent the drainage of agricultural lands. It is important to remember this in connection with recent happenings. In the summer of 1960 the refuge staff picked up hundreds of dead and dying birds at Tule Lake and Lower Klamath. Most of them were fish-eating species – herons, pelicans, gulls. Upon analysis, they were found to contain insecticide residues identified as toxaphene, DDD, and DDE. Fish from the lakes were also found to contain insecticides; so did samples of plankton. The refuge manager believes that pesticide residues are now building up in the waters of these refuges, being conveyed there by return irrigation flow from heavily sprayed agricultural lands.

Such poisoning of waters set aside for conservation purposes could have consequences felt by every western duck hunter and by everyone to whom the sight and sound of drifting ribbons of waterfowl across an evening sky are precious. These particular refuges occupy critical

positions in the conservation of western waterfowl. They lie at a point corresponding to the narrow neck of a funnel, into which all the migratory paths composing what is known as the Pacific Flyway converge. During the fall migration they receive many millions of ducks and geese from nesting grounds extending from the shores of Bering Sea east to Hudson Bay – fully three fourths of all the waterfowl that move south into the Pacific Coast states in autumn. In summer they provide nesting areas for waterfowl, especially for two endangered species, the redhead and the ruddy duck. If the lakes and pools of these refuges become seriously contaminated the damage to the waterfowl populations of the Far West could be irreparable. Water must also be thought of in terms of the chains of life it supports – from the small-as-dust green cells of the drifting plant plankton, through the minute water fleas to the fishes that strain plankton from the water and are in turn eaten by other fishes or by birds, mink, raccoons – in an endless cyclic transfer of materials from life to life. We know that the necessary minerals in the water are so passed from link to link of the food chains. Can we suppose that poisons we introduce into water will not also enter into these cycles of nature?

The answer is to be found in the amazing history of Clear Lake, California. Clear Lake lies in mountainous country some 90 miles north of San Francisco and has long been popular with anglers. The name is inappropriate, for actually it is a rather turbid lake because of the soft black ooze that covers its shallow bottom. Unfortunately for the fishermen and the resort dwellers on its shores, its waters have provided an ideal habitat for a small gnat, *Chaoborus astictopus*. Although closely related to mosquitoes, the gnat is not a bloodsucker and probably does not feed at all as an adult. However, human beings who shared its habitat found it annoying because of its sheer numbers. Efforts were made to control it but they were largely fruitless until, in the late 1940s, the chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides offered new weapons. The chemical chosen for a fresh attack was DDD, a close relative of DDT but apparently offering fewer threats to fish life. The new control measures undertaken in 1949 were carefully planned and few people would have supposed any harm could result. The lake was surveyed, its volume determined, and the insecticide applied in such great dilution that for every part of chemical there would be 70 million parts of water. Control of the gnats was at first good, but by 1954 the treatment had to be repeated, this time at the rate of 1 part of insecticide in 50 million parts of water. The destruction of the gnats was thought to be virtually complete.

The following winter months brought the first intimation that other life was affected: the western grebes on the lake began to die, and soon more than a hundred of them were reported dead. At Clear Lake the western grebe is a breeding bird and also a winter visitant, attracted by the abundant fish of the lake. It is a bird of spectacular appearance and beguiling habits, building its floating nests in shallow lakes of western United States and Canada. It is called the 'swan grebe' with reason, for it glides with scarcely a ripple across the lake surface, the body riding low, white neck and shining black head held high. The newly hatched chick is clothed in soft grey down; in only a few hours it takes to the water and rides on the back of the father or mother, nestled under the parental wing coverts.

Following a third assault on the ever-resilient gnat population, in 1957, more grebes died. As had been true in 1954, no evidence of infectious disease could be discovered on examination of the dead birds. But when someone thought to analyse the fatty tissues of the grebes, they were found to be loaded with DDD in the extraordinary concentration of 1600 parts per million. The maximum concentration applied to the water was part per million. How could the chemical have built up to such prodigious levels in the grebes? These birds, of course, are fish eaters. When the fish of Clear Lake also were analysed the picture began to take form – the poison being picked up by the smallest organisms, concentrated and passed on to the larger predators. Plankton organisms were found to contain about 5 parts per million of the insecticide (about 25 times the maximum concentration ever reached in the water itself); plant-eating fishes had built up accumulations ranging from 40 to 300 parts per million; carnivorous species had stored the most of all. One, a brown bullhead, had the astounding concentration of 2500 parts per million. It was a house-that-Jack-built sequence, in which the large carnivores had eaten the smaller carnivores, that had eaten the herbivores, that had eaten the plankton, that had absorbed the poison from the water.

Water must also be thought of in terms of the chains of life it supports – from the small-as-dust green cells of the drifting plant plankton.

Even more extraordinary discoveries were made later. No trace of DDD could be found in the water shortly after the

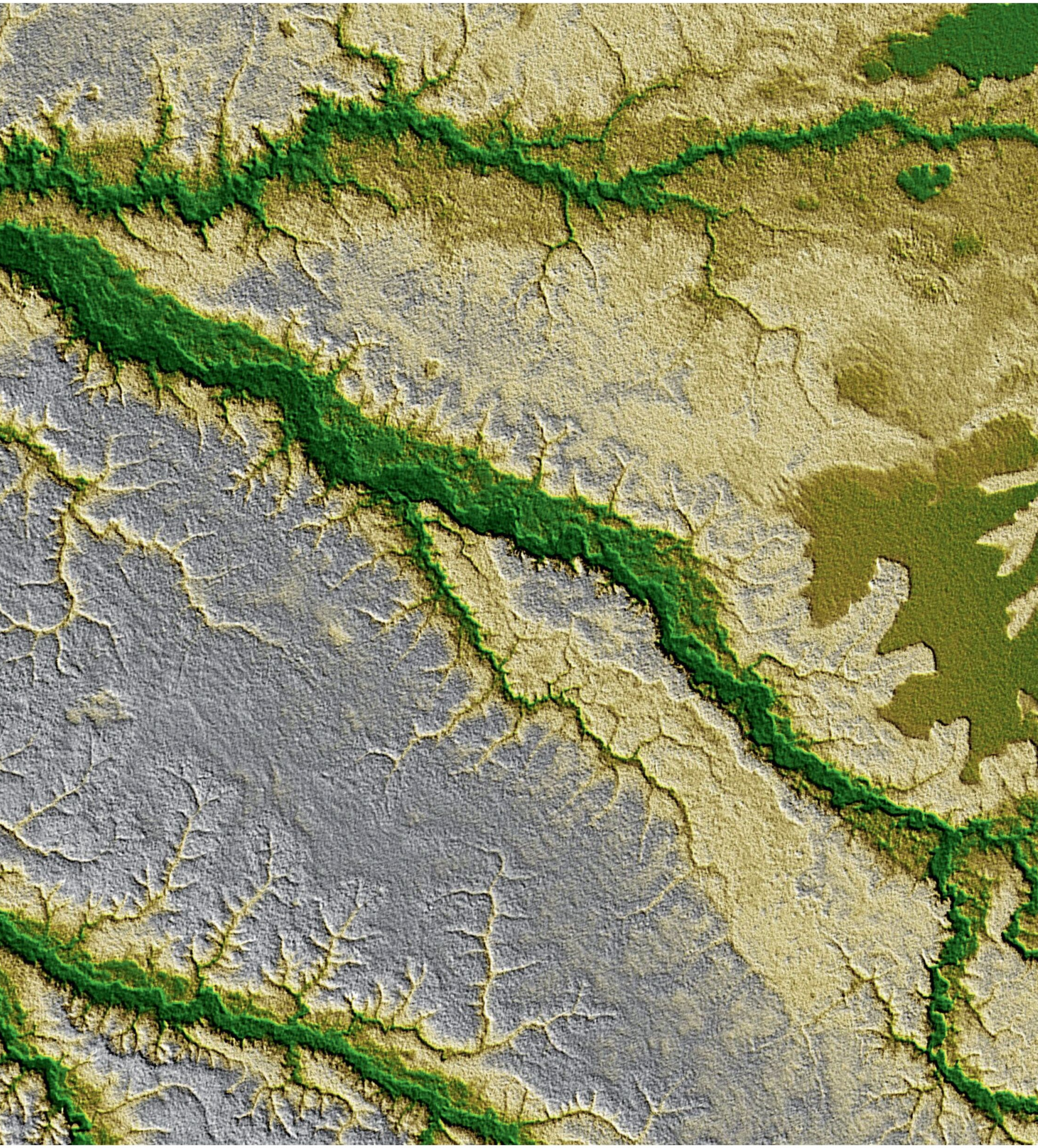
last application of the chemical. But the poison had not really left the lake; it had merely gone into the fabric of the life the lake supports. Twenty-three months after the chemical treatment had ceased, the plankton still contained as much as 5.3 parts per million. In that interval of nearly two years, successive crops of plankton had flowered and faded away, but the poison, although no longer present in the water, had somehow passed from generation to generation. And it lived on in the animal life of the lake as well. All fish, birds, and frogs examined a year after the chemical applications had ceased still contained DDD. The amount found in the flesh always exceeded by many times the original concentration in the water. Among these living carriers were fish that had hatched nine months after the last DDD application, grebes, and California gulls that had built up concentrations of more than 2000 parts per million. Meanwhile, the nesting colonies of the grebes dwindled – from more than 1000 pairs before the first insecticide treatment to about 30 pairs in 1960. And even the thirty seem to have nested in vain, for no young grebes have been observed on the lake since the last DDD application.

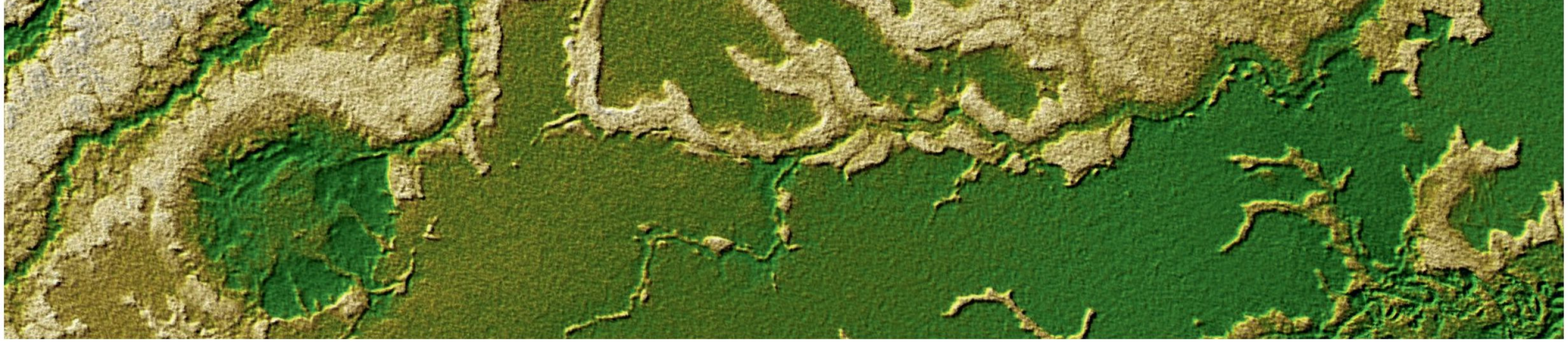
This whole chain of poisoning, then, seems to rest on a base of minute plants which must have been the original concentrators. But what of the opposite end of the food chain – the human being who, in probable ignorance of all this sequence of events, has rigged his fishing tackle, caught a string of fish from the waters of Clear Lake, and taken them home to fry for his supper? What could a heavy dose of DDD, or perhaps repeated doses, do to him? Although the California Department of Public Health professed to see no hazard, nevertheless in 1959 it required that the use of DDD in the lake be stopped. In view of the scientific evidence of the vast biological potency of this chemical, the action seems a minimum safety measure. The physiological effect of DDD is probably unique among insecticides, for it destroys part of the adrenal gland – the cells of the outer layer known as the adrenal cortex, which secretes the hormone cortin. This destructive effect, known since 1948, was at first believed to be confined to dogs, because it was not revealed in such experimental animals as monkeys, rats, or rabbits. It seemed suggestive, however, that DDD produced in dogs a condition very similar to that occurring in man in the presence of Addison's disease. Recent medical research has revealed that DDD does strongly suppress the function of the human adrenal cortex. Its cell-destroying capacity is now clinically utilised in the treatment of a rare type of cancer which develops in the adrenal gland...

The Clear Lake situation brings up a question that the public needs to face: Is it wise or desirable to use substances with such strong effect on physiological processes for the control of insects, especially when the control measures involve introducing the chemical directly into a body of water? The fact that the insecticide was applied in very low concentrations is meaningless, as its explosive progress through the natural food chain in the lake demonstrates. Yet Clear Lake is typical of a large and growing number of situations where solution of an obvious and often trivial problem creates a far more serious but conveniently less tangible one. Here the problem was resolved in favour of those annoyed by gnats, and at the expense of an unstated, and probably not even clearly understood, risk to all who took food or water from the lake. It is an extraordinary fact that the deliberate introduction of poisons into a reservoir is becoming a fairly common practice. The purpose is usually to promote recreational uses, even though the water must then be treated at some expense to make it fit for its intended use as drinking water. When sportsmen of an area want to 'improve' fishing in a reservoir, they prevail on authorities to dump quantities of poison into it to kill the undesired fish, which are then replaced with hatchery fish more suited to the sportsmen's taste. The procedure has a strange, Alice-in-Wonderland quality. The reservoir was created as a public water supply, yet the community, probably unconsulted about the sportsmen's project, is forced either to drink water containing poisonous residues or to pay out tax money for treatment of the water to remove the poisons – treatments that are by no means foolproof.

As ground and surface waters are contaminated with pesticides and other chemicals, there is danger that not only poisonous but also cancer-producing substances are being introduced into public water supplies. Dr W. C. Hueper of the National Cancer Institute has warned that 'the danger of cancer hazards from the consumption of contaminated drinking water will grow considerably within the foreseeable future.' And indeed a study made in Holland in the early 1950s provides support for the view that polluted waterways may carry a cancer hazard. Cities receiving their drinking water from rivers had a higher death rate from cancer than did those whose water came from sources presumably less susceptible to pollution such as wells. Arsenic, the environmental substance most clearly established as causing cancer in man, is involved in two historic cases in which polluted water supplies caused widespread occurrence of cancer. In one case the arsenic came from the slag heaps of mining operations, in the other from rock with a high natural content of arsenic. These conditions may easily be duplicated as a result of heavy applications of arsenical insecticides. The soil in such areas becomes poisoned. Rains then carry part of the arsenic into streams, rivers, and reservoirs, as well as into the vast subterranean seas of groundwater.

Here again we are reminded that in nature nothing exists alone. ◘





Natural connection

By Erich Fromm,
from *The Anatomy Of Human Destructiveness*

"It is the effort of Eros to combine organic substance into ever larger unities, whereas the death instinct tries to separate and to disintegrate living structure. The relation of the death instinct with necrophilia hardly needs any further explanation. In order to elucidate the relation between life instinct and biophilia, however, a short explanation of the latter is necessary.

Biophilia is the passionate love of life and of all that is alive; it is the wish to further growth, whether in a person, a plant, an idea, or a social group. The biophilous person prefers to construct rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and he prefers to see something new rather than to find confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living more than he does certainty. He sees the whole rather than only the parts, structures rather than summations. He wants to mould and to influence by love, reason, and example; not by force, by cutting things apart, by the bureaucratic manner of administering people as if they were things. Because he enjoys life and all its manifestations he is not a passionate consumer of newly packaged 'excitement'.

Biophilic ethics have their own principle of good and evil. Good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, all that enhances life, growth, unfolding. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it into pieces."

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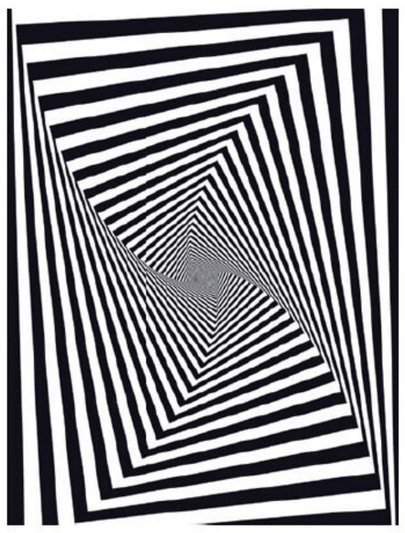
Imaginary realities

It's a breezy crisp afternoon in San Francisco. A white car with a spinning dark scanner set into its roof has just turned across the street in front of me...



The impulse to novelty

For Ernaux, the years don't so much roll by as pop up with a 'ker-ching' at the till. They are clocked by a constant procession of the new: new records, fashions, and technologies...

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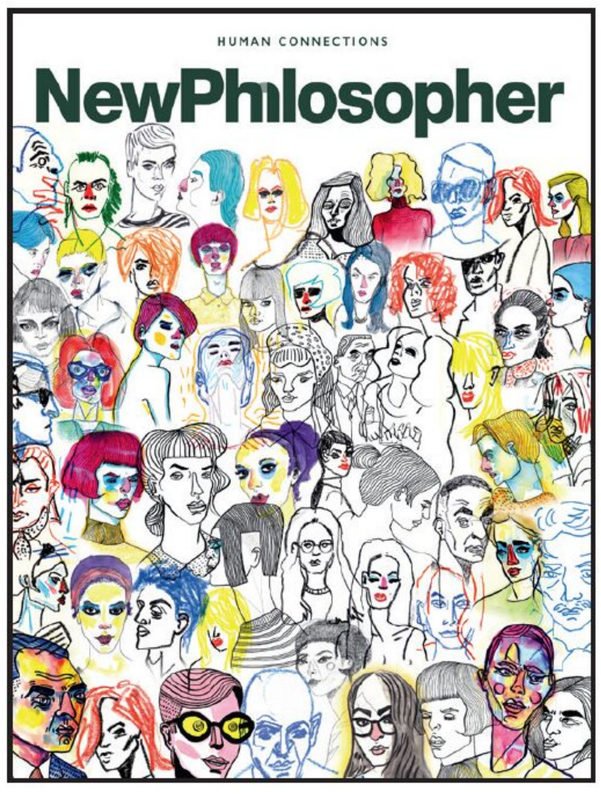

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By John Dewey

Wants, choices and purposes have their locus in single beings; behaviour which manifests desire, intent and resolution proceeds from them in their singularity. But only intellectual laziness leads us to conclude that since the form of thought and decision is individual, their content, their subject-matter, is also something purely personal. Even if "consciousness" were the wholly private matter that the individualistic tradition in philosophy and psychology supposes it to be, it would still be true that consciousness is of objects, not of itself. Association in the sense of connection and combination is a "law" of everything known to exist. Singular things act, but they act together. Nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation. The action of everything is along with the action of other things. The "along with" is of such a kind that the behaviour of each is modified by its connection with others. There are trees which can grow only in a forest. Seeds of many plants can successfully germinate and develop only under conditions furnished by the presence of other plants. Reproduction of kind is dependent upon the activities of insects which bring about fertilisation. The life-history of an animal cell is conditioned upon connection with what other cells are doing. Electrons, atoms and molecules exemplify the omnipresence of conjoint behaviour.

There is no mystery about the fact of association, of an interconnected action which affects the activity of singular elements. There is no sense in asking how individuals come to be associated. They exist and operate in association. If there is any mystery about the matter, it is the mystery that the universe is the kind of universe it is. Such a mystery could not be explained without going outside the universe. And if one should go to an outside source to account for it, some logician, without an excessive draft upon his ingenuity, would rise to remark that the outsider would have to be connected with the universe in order to account for anything in it. We should still be just where we started, with the fact of connection as a fact to be accepted.

There is, however, an intelligible question about human association: – Not the question how individuals or

CONNECTED ACTION

Man is not merely de facto associated, but he becomes a social animal in the make-up of his ideas, sentiments and deliberate behaviour.

singular beings come to be connected, but how they come to be connected in just those ways which give human communities traits so different from those which mark assemblies of electrons, unions of trees in forests, swarms of insects, herds of sheep, and constellations of stars. When we consider the difference we at once come upon the fact that the consequences of conjoint action take on a new value when they are observed. For notice of the effects of connected action forces men to reflect upon the connection itself; it makes it an object of attention and interest. Each acts, in so far as the connection is known, in view of the connection. Individuals still do the thinking, desiring and purposing, but what they think of is the consequences of their behaviour upon that of others and that of others upon themselves.

Each human being is born an infant. He is immature, helpless, dependent upon the activities of others. That many of these dependent beings survive is proof that others in some measure look out for them, take care of them. Mature and better equipped beings are aware of the consequences of their acts upon those of the young. They not only act conjointly with them, but they act in that especial kind of association which manifests interest in the consequences of their conduct upon the life and growth of the young.

Continued physiological existence of the young is only one phase of interest in the consequences of association. Adults are equally concerned to act so that the immature learn to think, feel, desire and habitually conduct themselves in certain ways. Not the least of the consequences which are striven for is that the young shall themselves learn to judge, purpose and choose from the standpoint of associated behaviour and its consequences. In fact, only too often this interest takes the form of endeavouring to make the young believe and plan just as adults do. This instance alone is enough to show that while singular beings in their singularity think, want and decide, what they think and strive for, the content of their beliefs and intentions is a subject-matter provided by association. Thus man is not merely de facto associated, but he becomes a social animal in the make-up of his ideas, sentiments and deliberate behaviour. What he believes, hopes for and aims at is the outcome of association and intercourse. The only thing which imports obscurity and mystery into the influence of association upon what individual persons want and act for is the effort to discover alleged, special, original, society-making causal forces, whether instincts, fiats of will, personal, or an immanent, universal, practical reason, or an indwelling, metaphysical, social essence and nature. These things do not explain, for they are more mysterious than are the facts they are evoked to account for. The planets in a constellation would form a community if they were aware of the connections of the activities of each with those of the others and could use this knowledge to direct behaviour.

We have made a digression from consideration of the state to the wider topic of society. However, the excursion enables us to distinguish the state from other forms of social life. There is an old tradition which regards the state and completely organised society as the same thing. The state is said to be the complete and inclusive realisation of all social institutions. Whatever values result from any and every social arrangement are gathered together and asserted to be the work of the state. The counterpart of this method is that philosophical anarchism which assembles all the evils that result from all forms of human grouping and attributes them en masse to the state, whose elimination would then bring in a millennium of voluntary fraternal organisation. That the state should be to some a deity and to others a devil is another evidence of the defects of the premises from which discussion sets out. One theory is as indiscriminate as the other.

There is, however, a definite criterion by which to demarcate the organised public from other modes of community life. Friendships, for example, are non-political forms of association. They are characterised by an intimate and subtle sense of the fruits of intercourse. They contribute to experience some of its most precious values. Only the exigencies of a preconceived theory would confuse with the state that texture of friendships and attachments which is the chief bond in any community, or would insist that the former depends upon the latter for existence. Men group themselves also for scientific inquiry, for religious

worship, for artistic production and enjoyment, for sport, for giving and receiving instruction, for industrial and commercial undertakings. In each case some combined or conjoint action, which has grown up out of "natural," that is, biological, conditions and from local contiguity, results in producing distinctive consequences – that is, consequences which differ in kind from those of isolated behaviour.

When these consequences are intellectually and emotionally appreciated, a shared interest is generated and the nature of the interconnected behaviour is thereby transformed. Each form of association has its own peculiar quality and value, and no person in his senses confuses one with another. The characteristic of the public as a state springs from the fact that all modes of associated behaviour may have extensive and enduring consequences which involve others beyond those directly engaged in them. When these consequences are in turn realised in thought and sentiment, recognition of them reacts to remake the conditions out of which they arose. Consequences have to be taken care of, looked out for. This supervision and regulation cannot be effected by the primary groupings themselves. For the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them. Consequently special agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to; or else some existing group must take on new functions. The obvious external mark of the organisation of a public or of a state is thus the existence of officials. Government is not the state, for that includes the public as well as the rulers charged with special duties and powers. The public, however, is organised in and through those officers who act in behalf of its interests.

Thus the state represents an important although distinctive and restricted social interest. From this point of view there is nothing extraordinary in the pre-eminence of the claims of the organised public over other interests when once they are called into play, nor in its total indifference and irrelevancy to friendships, associations for science, art and religion under most circumstances. If the consequences of a friendship threaten the public, then it is treated as a conspiracy; usually it is not the state's business or concern. Men join each other in partnership as a matter of course to do a piece of work more profitably or for mutual defence. Let its operations exceed a certain limit, and others not participating in it find their security or prosperity menaced by it, and suddenly the gears of the state are in mesh. Thus it happens that the state, instead of being all absorbing and inclusive, is under some circumstances the most idle and empty of social arrangements. Nevertheless, the temptation to generalise from these instances and conclude that the state generically is of no significance is at once challenged by the fact that when a family connection, a church, a trade union, a business corporation, or an educational institution conducts itself so as to affect large numbers outside of itself, those who are affected form a public which endeavours to act through suitable structures, and thus to organise itself for oversight and regulation.

I know of no better way in which to apprehend the absurdity of the claims which are sometimes made in behalf of society politically organised than to call to mind the influence upon community life of Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Aristotle, Confucius, Homer, Virgil, Dante, St. Thomas, Shakespeare, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Locke, Rousseau and countless others, and then to ask ourselves if we conceive these men to be officers of the state. Any method which so broadens the scope of the state as to lead to such conclusion merely makes the state a name for the totality of all kinds of associations. The moment we have taken the word as loosely as that, it is at once necessary to distinguish, within it, the state in its usual political and legal sense. On the other hand, if one is tempted to eliminate or disregard the state, one may think of Pericles, Alexander, Julius and Augustus Cæsar, Elizabeth, Cromwell,

If the consequences of a friendship threaten the public, then it is treated as a conspiracy; usually it is not the state's business or concern.

Richelieu, Napoleon, Bismarck and hundreds of names of that kind. One dimly feels that they must have had a private life, but how insignificant it bulks in comparison with their action as representatives of a state!

This conception of statehood does not imply any belief as to the propriety or reasonableness of any particular political act, measure or system. Observations of consequences are at least as subject to error and illusion as is perception of natural objects. Judgments about what to undertake so as to regulate them, and how to do it, are as fallible as other plans. Mistakes pile up and consolidate themselves into laws and methods of administration which are more harmful than the consequences which they were originally intended to control. And as all political history shows, the power and prestige which attend command of official position render rule something to be grasped and exploited for its own sake. Power to govern is distributed by the accident of birth or by the possession of qualities which enable a person to obtain office, but which are quite irrelevant to the performance of its representative functions. But the need which calls forth the organisation of the public by means of rulers and agencies of government persists and to some extent is incarnated in political fact. Such progress as political history records depends upon some luminous emergence of the idea from the mass of irrelevancies which obscure and clutter it. Then some reconstruction occurs which provides the function with organs more apt for its fulfilment. Progress is not steady and continuous. Retrogression is as periodic as advance. Industry and inventions in technology, for example, create means which alter the modes of associated behaviour and which radically change the quantity, character and place of impact of their indirect consequences.

These changes are extrinsic to political forms which, once established, persist of their own momentum. The new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganised, because it cannot use inherited political agencies. The latter, if elaborate and well institutionalised, obstruct the organisation of the new public. They prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grow up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal moulds. To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted. This is why the change of the form of states is so often effected only by revolution. The creation of adequately flexible and responsive political and legal machinery has so far been beyond the wit of man. An epoch in which the needs of a newly forming public are counteracted by established forms of the state is one in which there is increasing disparagement and disregard of the state. General apathy, neglect and contempt find expression in resort to various short-cuts of direct action. And direct action is taken by many other interests than those which employ "direct action" as a slogan, often most energetically by intrenched class-interests which profess the greatest reverence for the established "law and order" of the existing state. By its very nature, a state is ever something to be scrutinised, investigated, searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilised, it needs to be re-made.

Thus the problem of discovering the state is not a problem for theoretical inquirers engaged solely in surveying institutions which already exist. It is a practical problem of human beings living in association with one another, of mankind generically. It is a complex problem. It demands power to perceive and recognise the consequences of the behaviour of individuals joined in groups and to trace them to their source and origin. It involves selection of persons to serve as representatives of the interests created by these perceived consequences and to define the functions which they shall possess and employ. It requires institution of a government such that those having the renown and power which goes with the exercise of these functions shall employ them for the public and not turn them to their own private benefit. It is no cause for wonder, then, that states have been many, not only in number but in type and kind. For there have been countless forms of joint activity with correspondingly diverse consequences. Power to detect consequences has varied especially with the instrumentalities of knowledge at hand. Rulers have been selected on all kinds of different grounds. Their functions have varied and so have their will and zeal to represent common interests. Only the exigencies of a rigid philosophy can lead us to suppose that there is some one form or idea of The State which these protean historic states have realised in various degrees of perfection. The only statement which can be made is a purely formal one: the state is the organisation of the public effected through officials for the protection of the interests shared by its members. But what the public may be, what the officials are, how adequately they perform their function, are things we have to go to history to discover.

Nevertheless, our conception gives a criterion for determining how good a particular state is: namely, the degree of organisation of the public which is attained, and the degree

in which its officers are so constituted as to perform their function of caring for public interests. But there is no a priori rule which can be laid down and by which when it is followed a good state will be brought into existence. In no two ages or places is there the same public. Conditions make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different. In addition the means by which a public can determine the government to serve its interests vary. Only formally can we say what the best state would be. In concrete fact, in actual and concrete organisation and structure, there is no form of state which can be said to be the best: not at least till history is ended, and one can survey all its varied forms. The formation of states must be an experimental process. The trial process may go on with diverse degrees of blindness and accident, and at the cost of unregulated procedures of cut and try, of fumbling and groping, without insight into what men are after or clear knowledge of a good state even when it is achieved. Or it may proceed more intelligently, because guided by knowledge of the conditions which must be fulfilled. But it is still experimental. And since conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must always be retried; the State must always be rediscovered. Except, once more, in formal statement of conditions to be met, we have no idea what history may still bring forth. It is not the business of political philosophy and science to determine what the state in general should or must be. What they may do is to aid in creation of methods such that experimentation may go on less blindly, less at the mercy of accident, more intelligently, so that men may learn from their errors and profit by their successes. The belief in political fixity, of the sanctity of some form of state consecrated by the efforts of our fathers and hallowed by tradition, is one of the stumbling-blocks in the way of orderly and directed change; it is an invitation to revolt and revolution.

As the argument has moved to and fro, it will conduce to clearness to summarize its steps. Conjoint, combined, associated action is a universal trait of the behaviour of things. Such action has results. Some of the results of human collective action are perceived, that is, they are noted in such ways that they are taken account of. Then there arise purposes, plans, measures and means, to secure consequences which are liked and eliminate those which are found obnoxious. Thus perception generates a common interest; that is, those affected by the consequences are perforce concerned in conduct of all those who along with themselves share in bringing about the results. Sometimes the consequences are confined to those who directly share in the transaction which produces them. In other cases they extend far beyond those immediately engaged in producing them. Thus two kinds of interests and of measures of regulation of acts in view of consequences are generated. In the first, interest and control are limited to those directly engaged; in the second, they extend to those who do not directly share in the performance of acts. If, then, the interest constituted by their being affected by the actions in question is to have any practical influence, control over the actions which produce them must occur by some indirect means.

So far the statements, it is submitted, set forth matters of actual and ascertainable fact. Now follows the hypothesis. Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is The Public. This public is organised and made effective by means of representatives who as guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, judges, etc., care for its especial interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoint actions of individuals and groups. Then and in so far, association adds to itself political organisation, and something which may be government comes into being: the public is a political state.

The direct confirmation of the hypothesis is found in the statement of the series of observable and verifiable matters of fact. These constitute conditions which are sufficient to account, so it is held, for the characteristic phenomena of political life, or state activity. If they do, it is superfluous to seek for other explanation. In conclusion, two qualifications should be added. The account just given is meant to be generic; it is consequently schematic, and omits many differential conditions, some of which receive attention in subsequent chapters. The other point is that in the negative part of the argument, the attack upon theories which would explain the state by means of special causal forces and agencies, there is no denial of causal relations or connections among phenomena themselves. That is obviously assumed at every point. There can be no consequences and measures to regulate the mode and quality of their occurrence without the causal nexus. What is denied is an appeal to special forces outside the series of observable connected phenomena. Such causal powers are no different in kind to the occult forces from which physical science had to emancipate itself. At best, they are but phases of the related phenomena themselves which are then employed to account for the facts. What is needed to direct and make fruitful social inquiry is a method which proceeds on the basis of the interrelations of observable acts and their results. Such is the gist of the method we propose to follow. ◘

The School of Athens

The School of Athens, 1509-1511, Raphael

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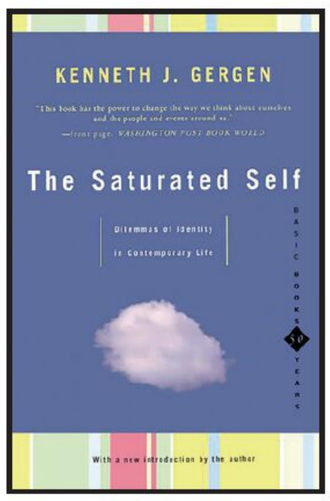
The Saturated Self

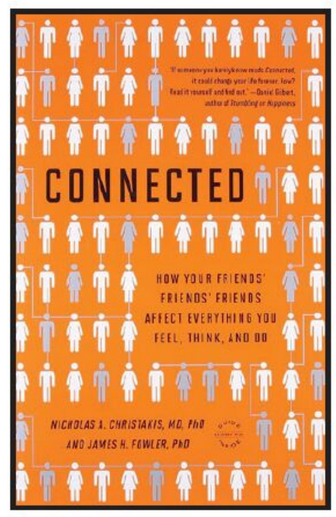


Kenneth Gergen

A state of multiphrenia

This syndrome may be termed multiphrenia, generally referring to the splitting of the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments. This condition is partly an outcome of self-population, but partly a result of the populated self's efforts to exploit the potentials of the technologies of relationship. In this sense, there is a cyclical spiralling toward a state of multiphrenia... It would be a mistake to view this multiphrenic condition as a form of illness, for it is often suffused with a sense of expansiveness and adventure. Someday there may indeed be nothing to distinguish multiphrenia from simply 'normal living'.

Connected

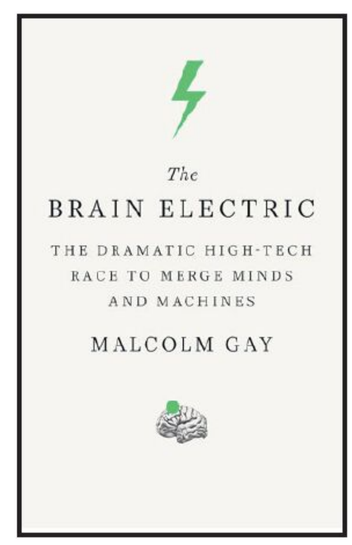


Nicholas Christakis

Our friends' friends' friends

Most of us are already aware of the direct effect we have on our friends and family; our actions can make them happy or sad, healthy or sick, even rich or poor. But we rarely consider that everything we think, feel, do, or say can spread far beyond the people we know. Our friends' friends' friends can influence us, whether it's a wave of happiness that spreads through a network or a fashion trend that catches on. These distant connections mean that our individual actions can ripple through the network, affecting people we have never met. This interconnectedness is not just a curiosity; it has profound implications for our understanding of human behaviour, public health, and social policy.

The Brain Electric



Malcolm Gay

Union of synapses

Using electrodes to ferry Brookman's neural signals into a nearby computer, he would forge what's known as a brain-computer interface – a wildly intricate union of synapses and silicon that would grant his patient mental control over computers and machines. As this pulsing language streamed from Brookman's brain, the machine's algorithms would work to find repeated patterns of cellular activity. Each time Brookman would imagine moving his paralysed arm, the electrodes would capture the resulting neural signals, allowing the computer to identify the unique patterns associated with that intended movement.

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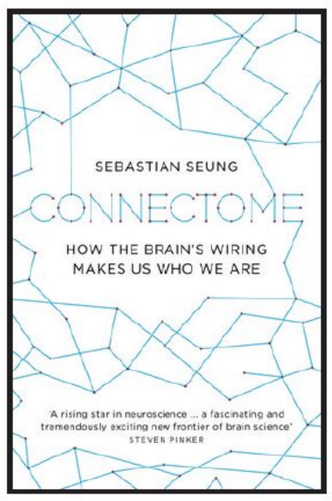
Connectome

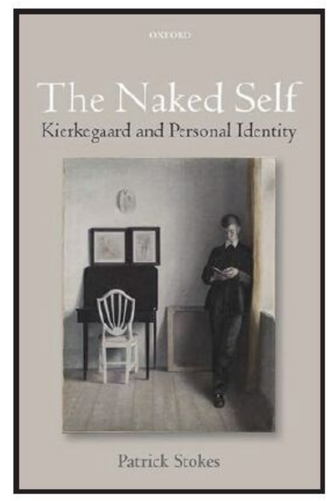


Sebastian Seung

Pattern of connections

The function of a neuron is defined chiefly by its connections with other neurons. This mantra defines a doctrine I'll call connectionism. According to this doctrine, what we know, what we remember, and how we behave all depend on the pattern of connections among our neurons. Change the connections, and you change the function. This idea suggests that our experiences, our learning, and our memories are encoded not just in the activity of neurons but in the very wiring of the neural circuits themselves. Mapping these connections – the connectome – could therefore provide profound insights into who we are, how we think, and how our personalities develop.

The Naked Self

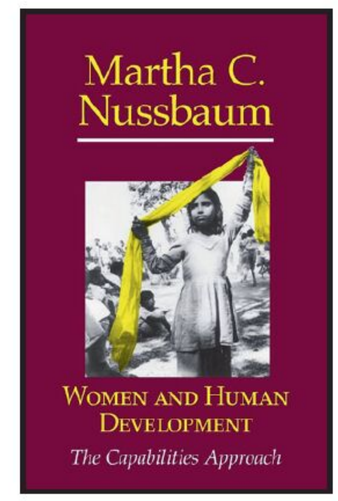


Patrick Stokes

A continual task

Across his relatively short and eccentric authorial career, Søren Kierkegaard develops a unique, and provocative, account of what it is to become, to be, and to lose a self, backed up by a rich phenomenology of self-experience. He suggests that the self is not a static entity but a dynamic process of becoming, a continual task of integrating various aspects of one's existence. This process involves a constant negotiation between one's finite limitations and infinite aspirations, a tension that defines the human condition. Kierkegaard's exploration delves into the depths of despair, not as a mere psychological state but as an existential marker of a self that is not in harmony with itself.

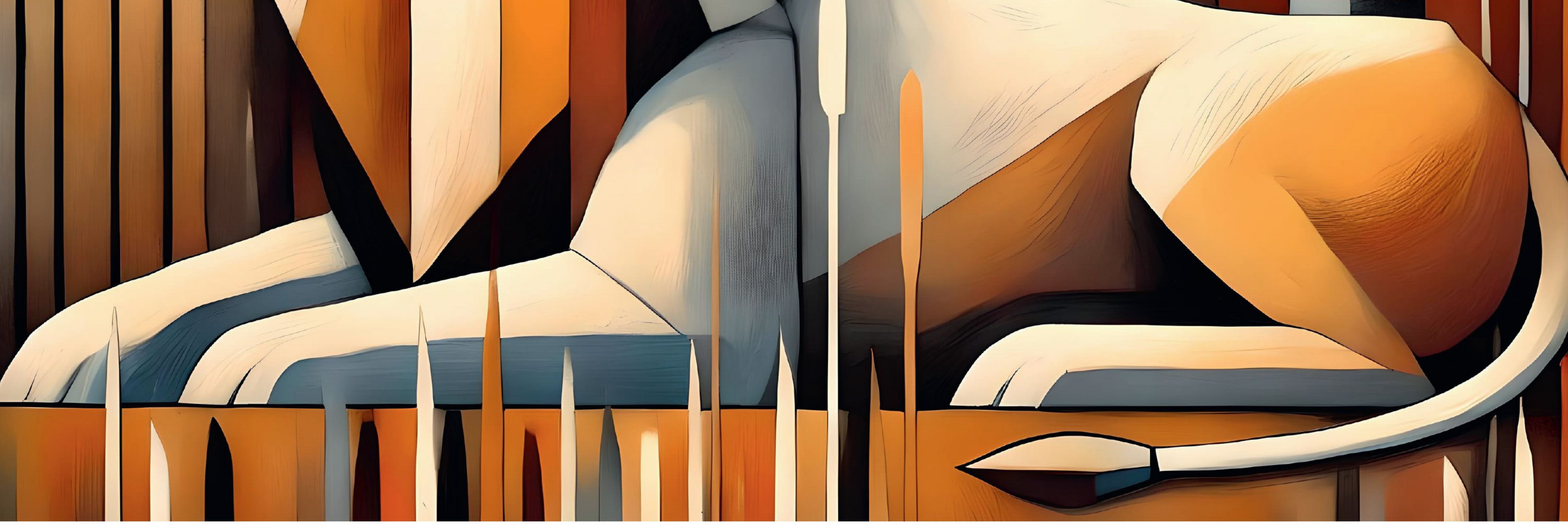
Women and Human Development



Martha C. Nussbaum

Cross-cultural norms

The central goal of public policy should be the capabilities of citizens. The appropriate political goal is that citizens should be placed above a threshold of capability, in all ten areas. This means that they should have the freedom to choose and act, in accordance with a conception of the good that they have formed. The capabilities approach thus commits itself to respect for people's powers of self-definition. At the same time, it holds that there are some capacities without which no human life is worthy of the dignity of a human being. The approach is thus firmly universalist, committed to cross-cultural norms of human dignity and human flourishing.



The four oxen and the lion

Four oxen were in the habit of grazing together in a field. A lion came upon them, but he could not attack them because they kept together and were strong in their unity. Whenever the lion approached, they would turn and face him together, and his power was no match for their collective strength.

However, the oxen began to quarrel among themselves and went their separate ways. One by one, the lion attacked them, and without their strength in numbers, the oxen were defeated.

By Aesop

Documentaries

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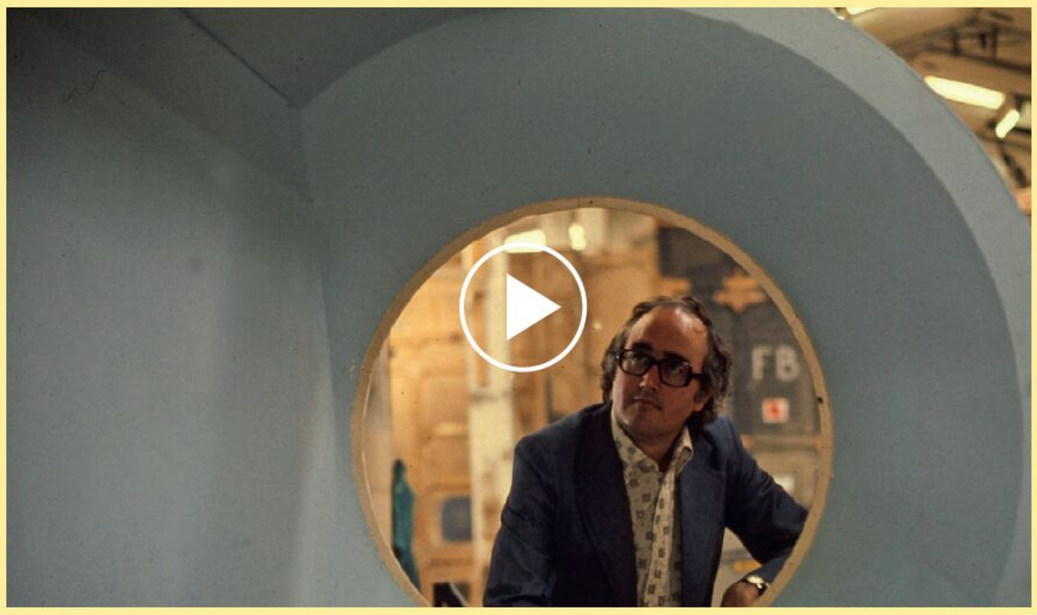
Connections



Connections explores an "Alternative View of Change" that rejects the conventional linear and teleological view of historical progress. James Burke, who presents the series, contends that one cannot consider the development of any particular piece of the modern world in isolation. Episode 1 details the world's dependence on complex technological networks through a detailed narrative of New York City and the power blackout of 1965. Agricultural technology is traced to its origins in ancient Egypt and the invention of the plough. The segment ends in Kuwait where, because of oil, society leapt from traditional patterns to advanced technology in a period of only about 30 years.

Human connections

This documentary, *Neuroscience and the Roots of Human Connections: The Social Synapse*, was recorded at the World Science Festival. Humans work together on enormous scales to build complex tools as large as cities and create social networks that span the globe. What is the key to our success? This program examines the development of the human brain – and the brains of other animals – asking how neurons orchestrate communal behaviour and guide group interactions, demonstrating how our social nature is key to our humanity.

With Louise Barrett, Agustín Fuentes, Kevin Laland, Kevin Ochsner, Dietrich Stout; moderated by John Donvan.

"I believe in art that is connected to real human feeling, that extends itself beyond the limits of the art world to embrace all people who are striving for alternatives in an increasingly dehumanised world."

Judy Chicago

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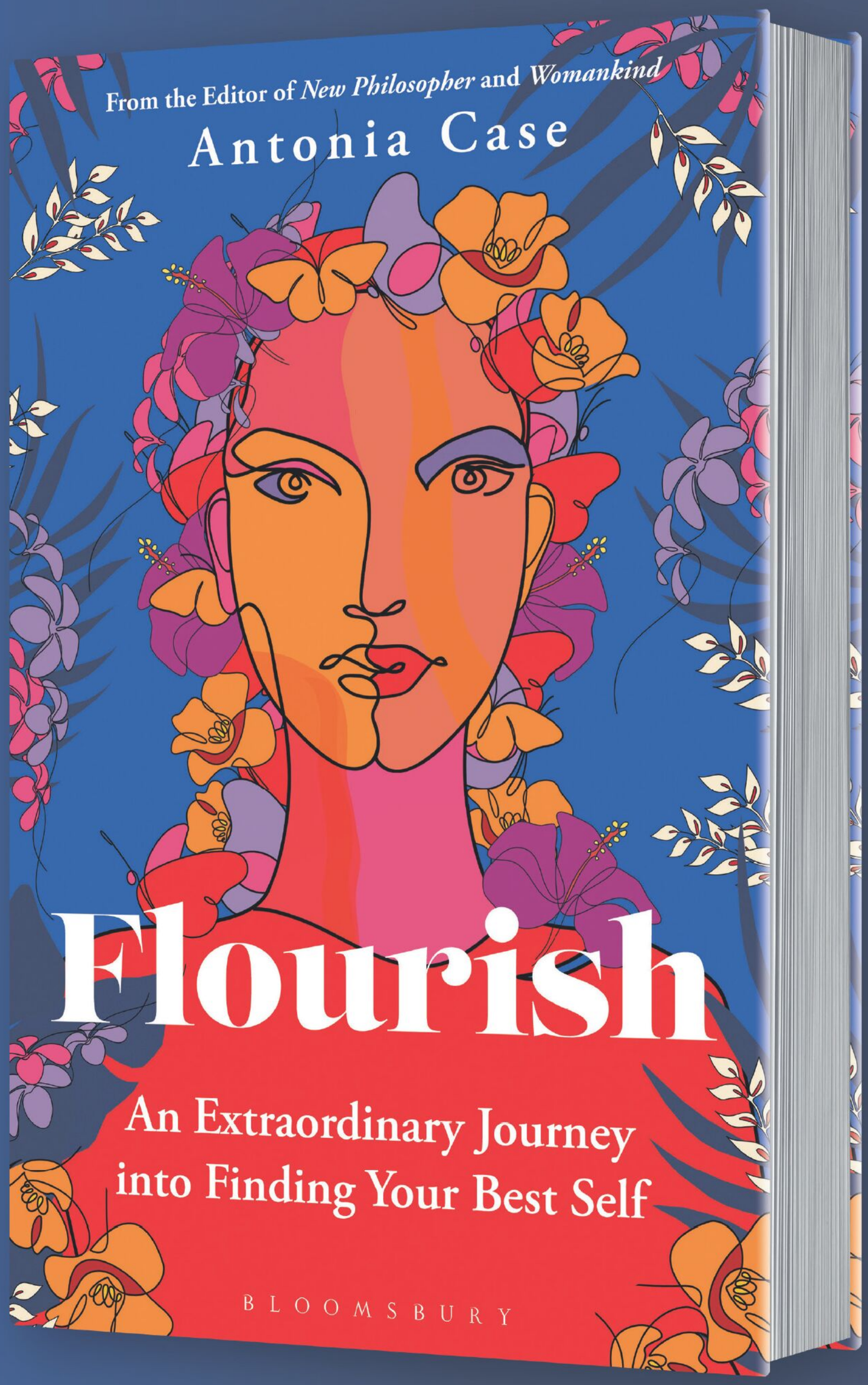

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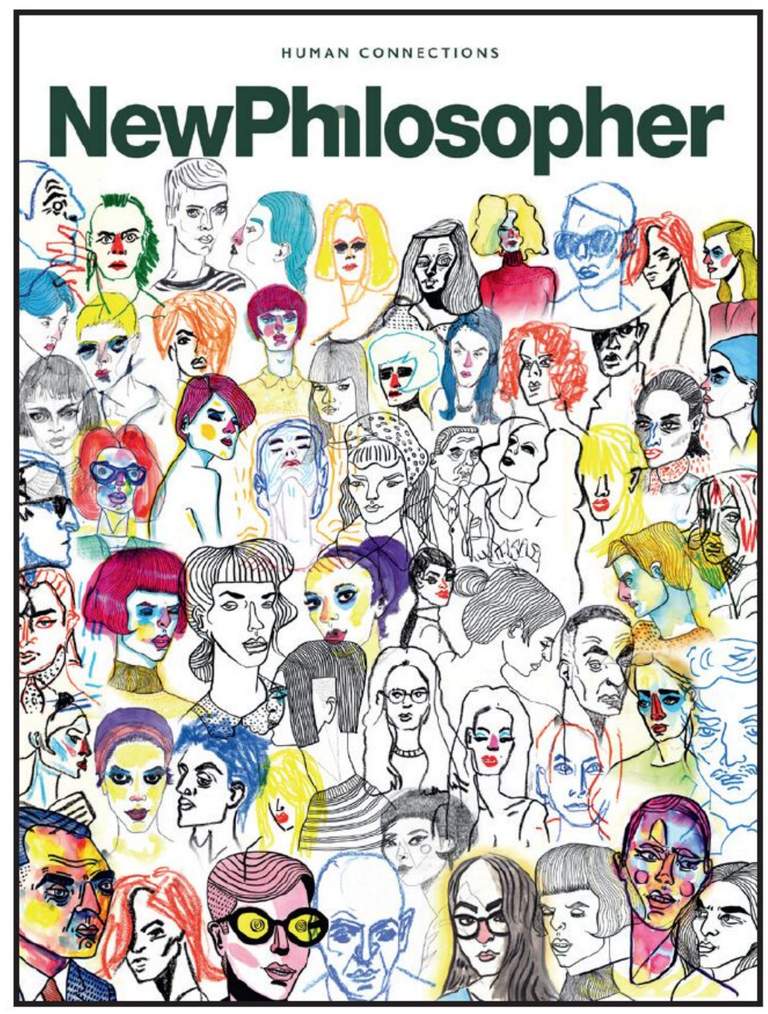

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Extraordinary quality in all respects. *New Philosopher* is one of the best things happening.

I love how the writing reminds me that the types of issues we are grappling with today are similar to those grappled with by philosophers for centuries.

I love this magazine. I no longer like reading or listening to mainstream news as it is not good for my health. Your magazine is good for me. It has real discussions that relate to life rather than reporting sensational 'news'. Thank you.

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Your magazine is so helpful and is churning up the little grey cells, as Hercule Poirot says.

Thank you, this world is brighter, more aware, and more meaningful with your publication in it.

Great magazine. Finally one worth reading. Will recommend it to all friends.

This is a quality magazine: intelligent, lucid, lively, and beautifully designed and produced. Recommended.

A magazine that treats its audience as intellectual equals, that doesn't insult their intelligence by simplifying or manipulating concepts or appealing to crass consumerism as do most of the publications out there. Thank you for creating something that brings philosophy out of the sandstone universities and into our lounge rooms without losing its depth or critical stance.

You have introduced such a wonderfully fresh & intelligent publication to expand our minds & hearts. Thank you.

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In a country so defined by the shallow, crass propaganda and cognitive conformity coming out of its papers, magazines, and broadcasters, yours is a true gem. You have no idea how happy I was to discover it, it has given me hope for the future of this country's media landscape and for the public discussion emanating from it.

I have to say that it is a tremendous relief and joy that your publication has arrived. Your magazine provides oxygen to the soul. I have often felt alone, alienated or old-fashioned in my outlook but now know I have a soulmate to reflect and take action with, namely *New Philosopher*.

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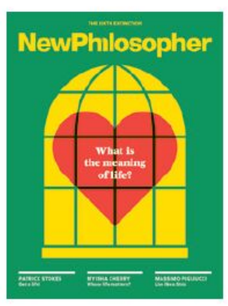
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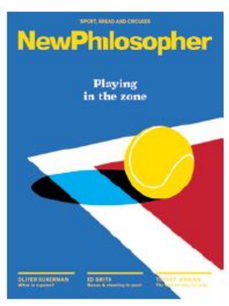
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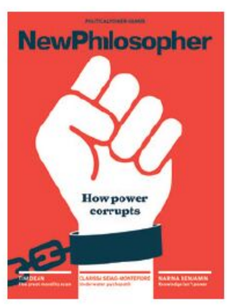
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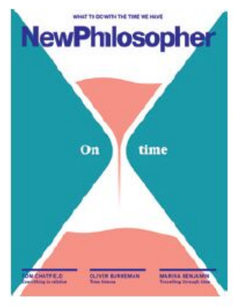
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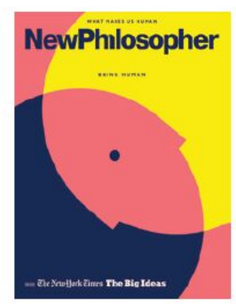
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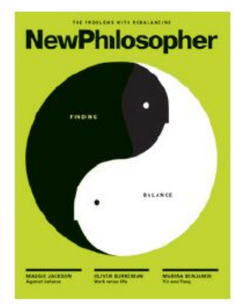
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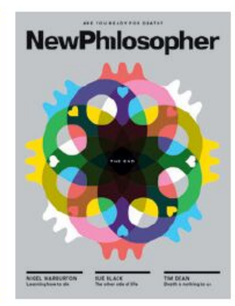
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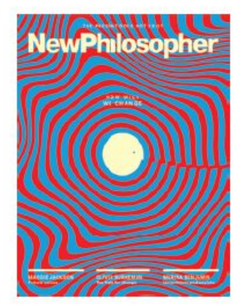
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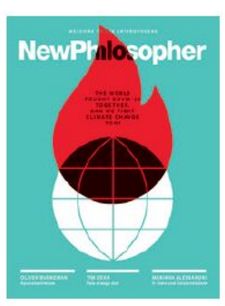
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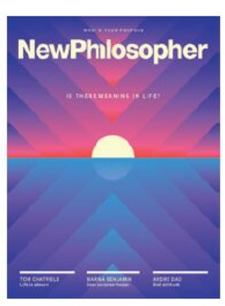
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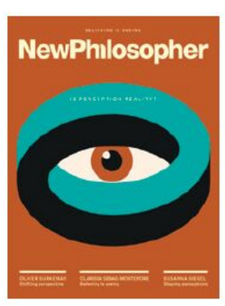
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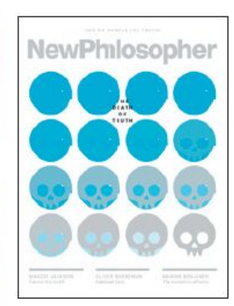
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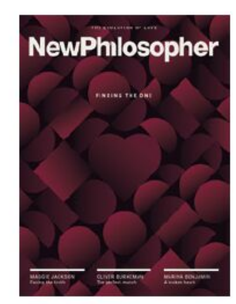
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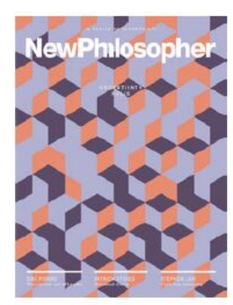
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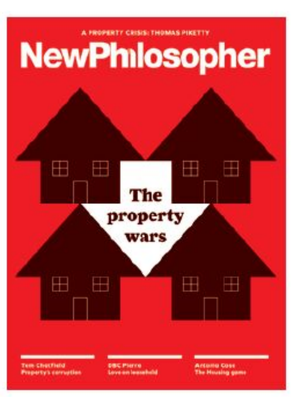
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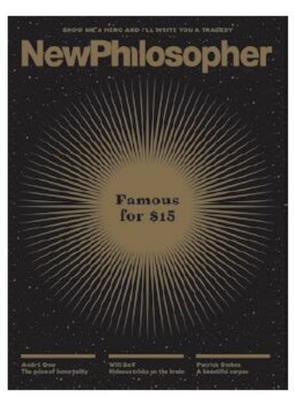
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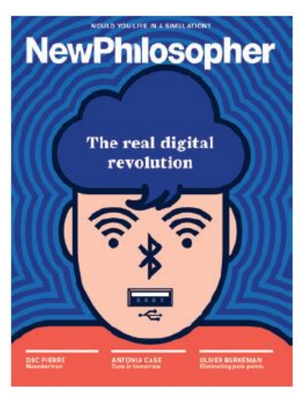
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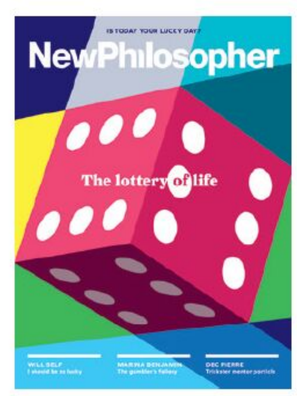
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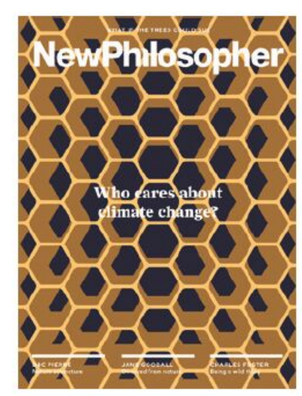
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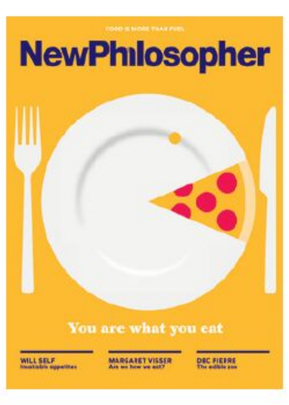
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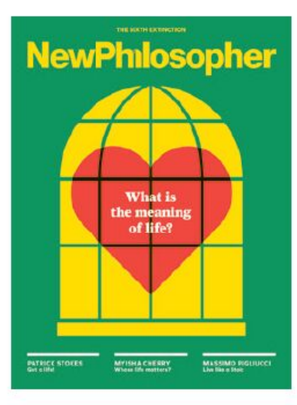
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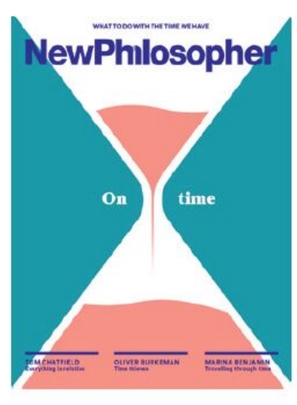
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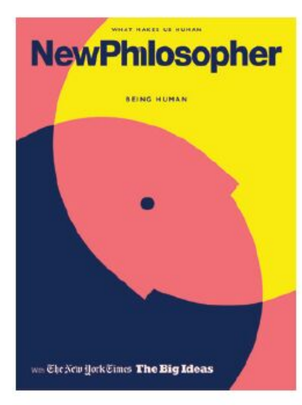
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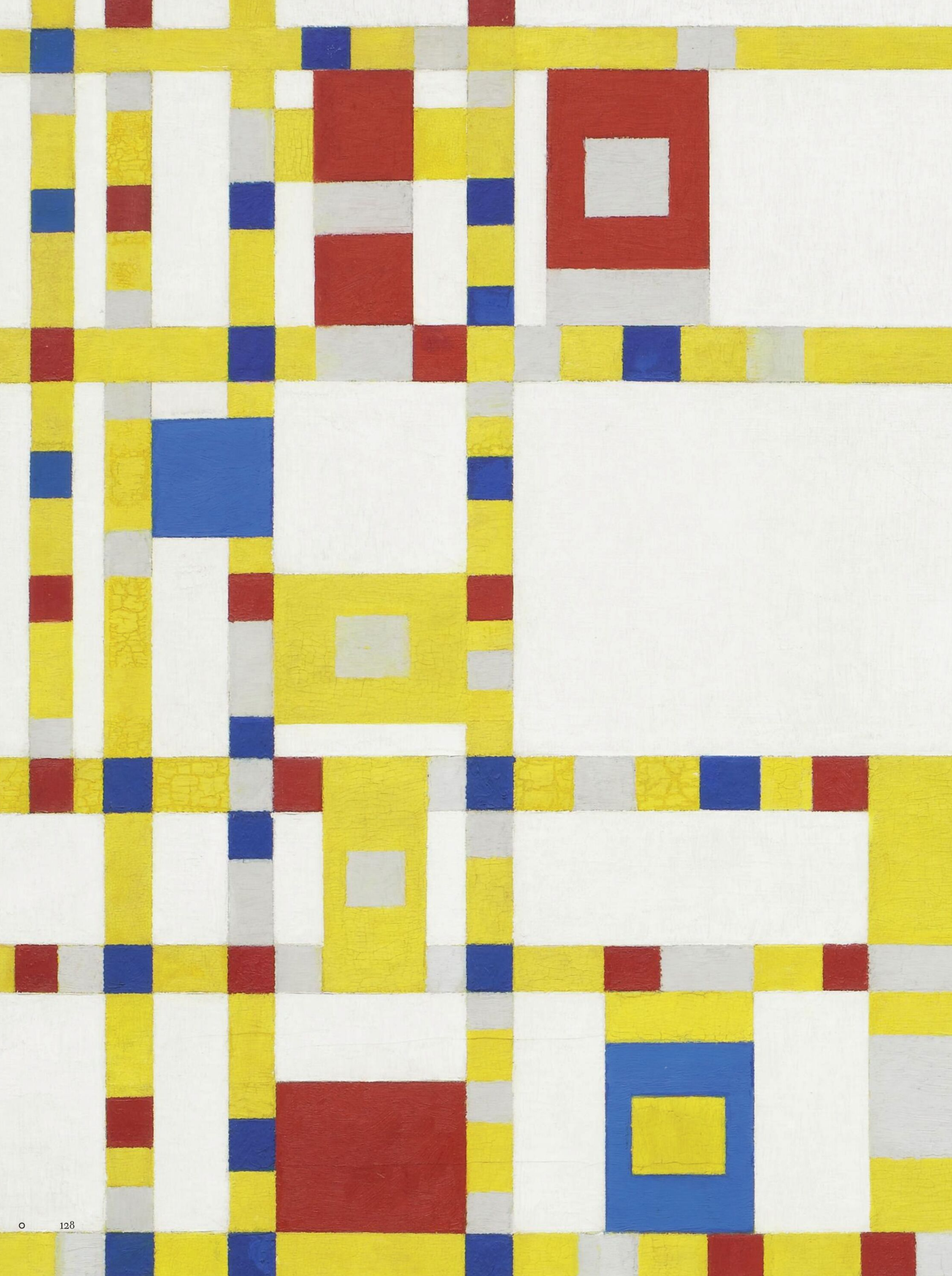

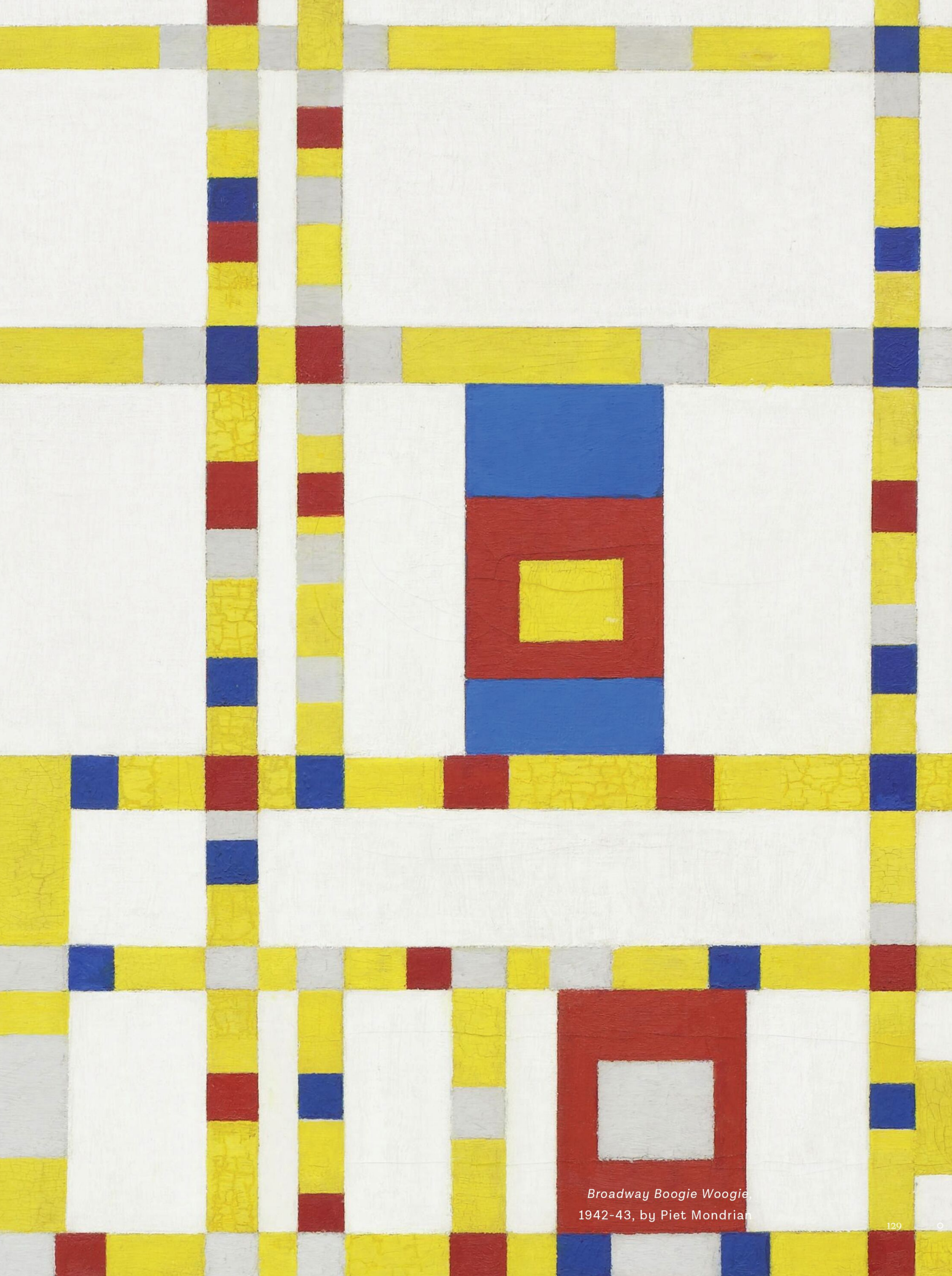

Broadway Boogie Woogie,
1942-43, by Piet Mondrian

13 questions:

Holly Lawford-Smith

In conversation with Zan Boag

Holly Lawford-Smith is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Melbourne

What is your demon?
Misanthropy. Luckily I am also an introvert so I can mostly keep it obscured from view.

What is the most important part of your education?
Definitely philosophy. I discovered it quite by accident at university and never looked back.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?
Andrea Dworkin. I think I had become so caught up in the abstracted calm of philosophy that the experience of reading her was really shocking and disruptive, but in a good way. It reminded me that there are many different ways to make a point.

The question you'd most like to ask others?
Consider the current social justice cause you're most committed to: can you accurately state your opponents' criticism? And do you have a satisfactory rejoinder?

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?
This feels like a beauty pageant question. "World peace". Does universal basic income count as one thing? If so then I'll have that, for the poorest countries funded by the richest.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?
Garlic prawns, smoked mussels, fresh oysters, maybe some smoked fish. Can I have dessert too? If so, black forest cake. Now I'm hungry (but hopefully not about to die).

What do you doubt most?
That the people most convinced of their own moral goodness are actually the good ones.

Your favourite word?
Kuala Lumpur. So fun to say. Gulab Jamun is a close second, and also delicious.

What is your motto?
I do not have a motto. I think mottos are things annoying people have.

What does it mean to be human?
Intelligence, self-awareness, morality, the capacity for self-restraint. I mainly think about this in connection to feminism: what makes humans different from animals?

What illusion do you suffer from?
That it is possible to make a difference by thinking hard about a topic and publishing your conclusions in an academic journal. It feels like something, but it is nothing.

What is a good death?
Quick, and as painless as possible. Definitely not preceded by a lengthy decline, or the kind of pain or discomfort that means you are merely enduring your life. But now I am generating counterexamples: couldn't a murder be all of these things, and still a bad death? Yes.

What is the meaning of life?
It is up to each person to make her own life meaningful by pursuing the things that she considers valuable. These might not be the things the culture around her values. ◘

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