

NOVEL THINKING

NewPhilosopher



TOM CHATFIELD
Imaginary realities

MARINA BENJAMIN
The impulse to novelty

ANDRÉ DAO
The cycle of novelty

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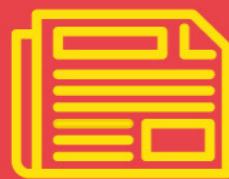
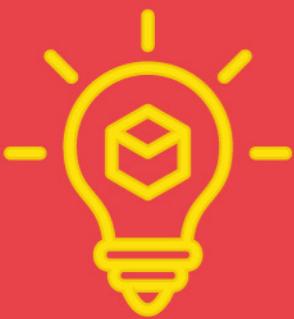
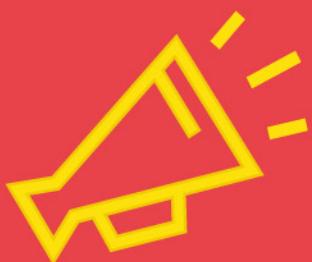
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"Novelty has a tendency to make us philosophers."

— Virginia Woolf

Novelty

Constantly looking outwards, humans have crossed continents and oceans, invented technological wizardry, created and consumed artwork, even hurled ourselves into outer space. Our curiosity appears to have no limits. However, this seeking instinct means that it has always been difficult to focus on what's in front of us, to not be drawn into the pull of 'the new' — forever seeking that which we haven't previously seen or experienced.

Ancient philosophers from Cicero to Pliny the Elder wrote of our fondness for novelty and warned of the problems this caused for us. But if the Ancients, without the lure of incessant technological change and the chatter of the online world, found it tough, what chance do we have? Are we doomed to be stuck in an eternal return of purchasing objects and novelty-seeking online, searching for new information, new items, new technology, new news?

To be fair, seeking in of itself isn't something to be avoided — in fact, it's that very seeking that helps us grow, learn, change, and improve ourselves and our place in the world. Nor is the internet and all that it offers the cause of our ills; we're blessed with a cornucopia of ideas and information that would have made an Enlightenment scholar weep with joy. The issue is that, when bundled with our seemingly insatiable desire for novelty, this abundance of information and ideas presents a problem: if we allow our curiosity to run rampant online, we'll simply get very little else done.

If there's no off button, if we don't actively use restraint, then the novelty machine that is the internet will consume all our available free time.

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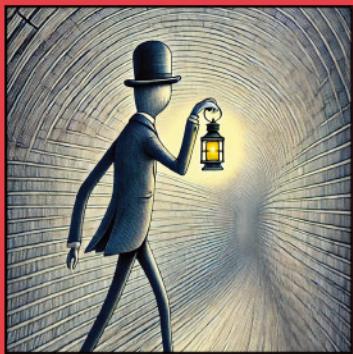
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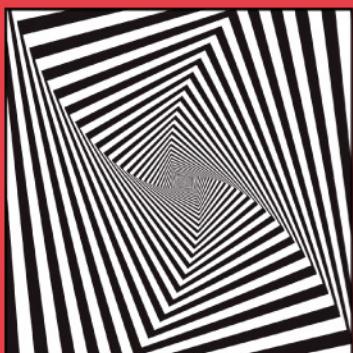
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Patrick Stokes is Associate Professor in philosophy at Deakin University, Melbourne. He specialises in 19th and 20th century European philosophy, personal identity, narrative selfhood, moral psychology, and death and remembrance. Stokes is the author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

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.

Melissa Chandon

Melissa Chandon is a contemporary artist based in the US. On top of scores of group exhibitions, Chandon has had numerous solo exhibitions in New York, California, Santa Fe, Utah, and The Netherlands. Her art is in public and private collections around the world, including at Napa Valley Museum, Morris Graves Museum, Triton Museum of Art, Stanford Medical Center, and in the private collections of Queen Raina Al Abdullah of Jordan and Chevy Chase.

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.

Antonia Case

Antonia Case is Editorial Director of *New Philosopher*, 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. Case was selected as 'philosopher in residence' for the 2016 Brisbane Writers' Festival.

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.

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Alvaro Hidalgo is a graphic designer and illustrator who formerly worked as an art director in design projects and as a film editor and post-producer in audiovisual projects. His illustration work uses a combination of traditional techniques and digital image processing, and Hidalgo's award-winning illustrations have graced the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Womankind*, and have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Wired*, *Newsweek*, and *The Atlantic*.

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.

André Dao

André Dao is a Melbourne-based writer, editor, and artist. His debut novel, *Anam*, was shortlisted for the 2024 Miles Franklin and Prime Minister's Literary Awards. 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.

Zan Boag

Zan Boag is Editor-in-Chief of *New Philosopher*, published in English, Arabic, Korean, and Chinese, and was Editorial Director of the international magazine *Womankind*. In 2017 he won the Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Professionals Award and was shortlisted for Editor of the Year in the Stack Awards. Boag was a judge at the AOI World Illustration Awards and is the host of the philosophical discussion series Bright Thinking.

Russel Herneman

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.

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.

Kelly Truelove

Kelly Truelove is an independent research analyst and was previously founder & CEO of Clip2, a technology startup company, where he led extensive technical investigations and tracking efforts into extant file-sharing systems and distributed systems development platforms. Truelove holds a Ph.D. in physics from the University of California, Berkeley.

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“It is rare to see a professional economist, in interpreting the past or forecasting the future, quoting what a businessperson or newspaper writer thinks is going on, let alone what a taxi driver thinks. But to understand a complex economy, we have to take into account many conflicting popular narratives and ideas relevant to economic decisions, whether the ideas are valid or fallacious.”

- **Robert J. Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events***

In late 1929, two weeks before the most catastrophic stockmarket crash in US history, Professor Irvin Fisher, one of the most respected economists in the United States, assured investors that stock prices had reached “what looks like a permanently high plateau”. The esteemed Yale economist suggested that in a matter of months the stockmarket should be “a good deal higher than it is today”. Instead, only a few weeks later, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had lost some 50 per cent of its value.

The assumption that ‘things are different now’ is one that ordinarily accompanies stockmarket bubbles. New technology drives a ‘new normal’ that is reflected in elevated share prices, or so investors are led to believe. In the 1920s, technological advancements in the automotive, radio broadcasting, electricity, consumer goods, and aviation industries led to widespread speculation in the stockmarket. By late 1929, dinner table conversation was rife with stories of fortunes made on stocks that exploited this ‘new norm’.

The current Artificial Intelligence (AI) boom is no different. Andrew Ng, the co-founder of Google Brain, called AI the “new electricity”, while Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Alphabet, declared: “AI is one of the most important things humanity is working on. It is more profound than, I dunno, electricity or fire.” In recent years, the AI narrative has fuelled investor excitement, sending the S&P 500, the US major index, to record highs. It resembles the euphoria

associated with the dot-com era in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when stocks with anything internet-related floated to glorious heights. ‘New economy stocks’ were touted as the leaders of the future while ‘old economy stocks’ were left to adapt or die.

In his book, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral & Drive Major Economic Events*, economist Robert J. Shiller discusses how popular narratives spread, much like a contagious disease. The hype surrounding AI and the cryptocurrency Bitcoin are examples of successful economic narratives (“People are interested in Bitcoin precisely because so many other people are interested in Bitcoin”, writes Shiller). When narrative epidemics catch on, they can fling prices into the stratosphere, as happened to Bitcoin, which surged almost 40 per cent in less than twenty four hours in 2019. British economist John Maynard Keynes labelled it “animal spirits” – the instincts and emotions that drive human behaviour.

Shiller, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, argues that economists are too often buried in economic modelling to notice the wild weather patterns of economic narratives. But he thinks they’d be well advised to start incorporating these ‘animal spirits’ and their associated effects into forecasting models. “The study of the viral spread of popular narratives that affect economic behaviour, can improve our ability to anticipate and prepare for economic events,” he concludes.

Filling the void

The human love of novelty could be said to be little more than a desire to suppress boredom. So fearful are our minds of becoming bored that we will latch on to anything to keep ennui at bay.

The phenomenology of boredom has been studied by philosophers since medieval times. In his essay, *On Tranquility*, the Roman philosopher Seneca refers to boredom as “an agitation of a mind which can find no issue because... of the hesitancy of a life which fails to find its way clear.” In other words, we suffer boredom when we are restless for something, but do not know exactly what that is. We yearn to be mentally occupied – to have a goal, a plan, a desire – but nothing seems to pique our interest in any meaningful way. We wish to be consumed by a task that makes time flow, rather than drag.

Central to boredom is a sense that life is on repeat – a ceaseless repetition of daily routines with each day much resembling the next. “How long the same things?” writes Seneca. “Surely I will yawn, I will sleep, I will eat, I will be thirsty, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? But do all things go in a circle?”

It is the nature of the human mind to be active, naturally restless and desirous of action, so when nothing novel is forthcoming, a quiet agitation can creep in. It’s why the bored today reach for their phone or their computer, or mindlessly eat as an antidote to this insufferable affliction.

But we needn’t be afraid of boredom, argues British philosopher Bertrand Russell. “All great books contain boring portions, and all great lives have contained uninteresting stretches... No great achievement is possible without persistent work, so absorbing and so difficult that little energy is left over for the more strenuous kinds of amusement.” Rather, the onset of boredom should signal that we are momentarily mentally disengaged – and needful of change, a break, or new ways of connecting to the world.

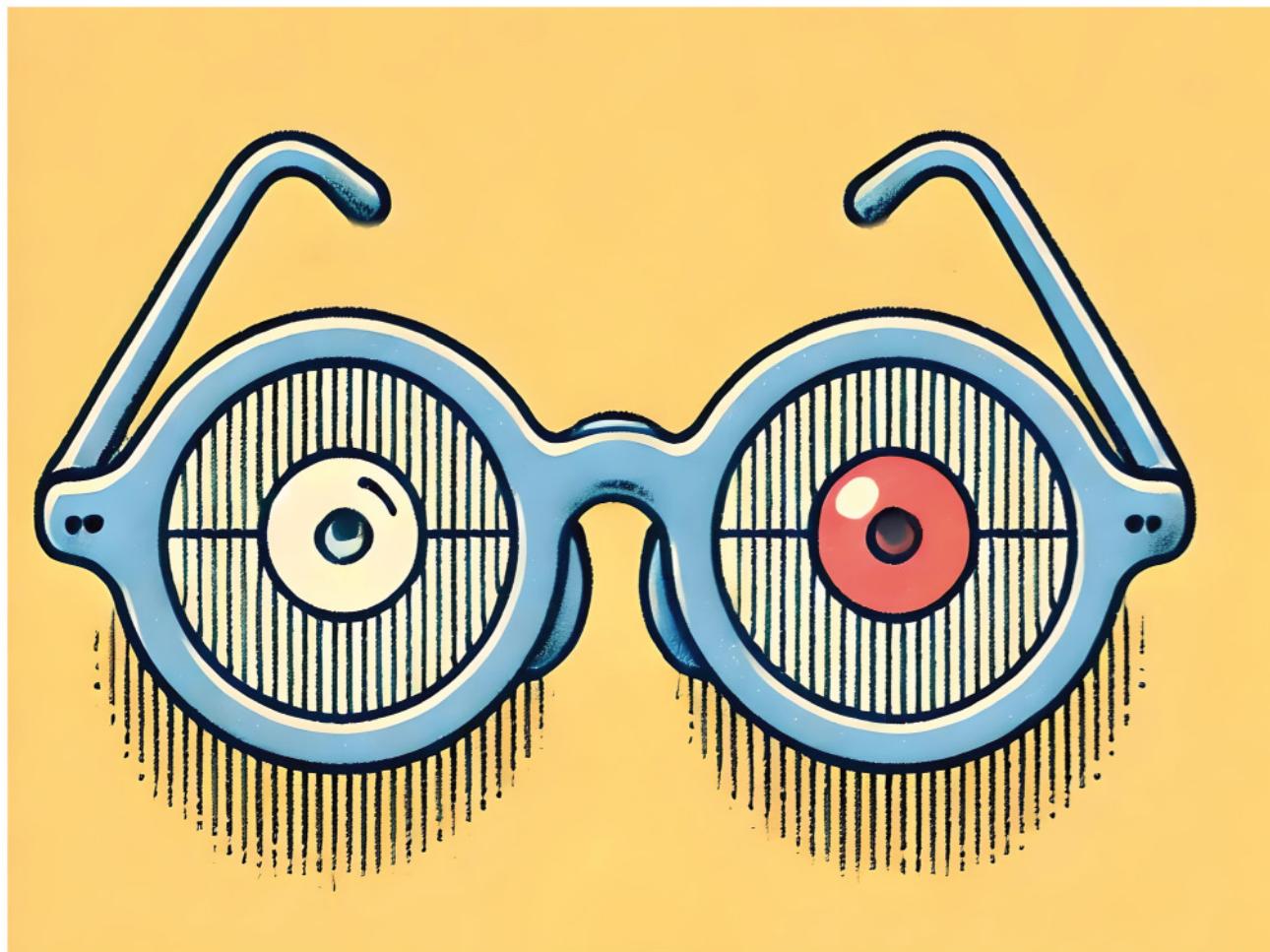


The Cactus Lover, by Carl Spitzweg, 1855



“Anything that is in the world when you’re born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works. Anything that’s invented between when you’re fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you’re thirty-five is against the natural order of things.”

- Douglas Adams



“I do think that people literally get addicted to cell phones and social media, yes. It’s important to recognise that addiction is a spectrum disorder, and it is possible to be a little bit addicted. Also, the same brain mechanisms that mediate severe addiction also mediate our minor addictions. So we’re all evolutionarily designed to approach pleasure and avoid pain. And that kind of neurobiological wiring is exactly what has kept us alive for millennia. And it’s also the very same wiring that makes us all vulnerable to addiction. So I don’t think that anybody is immune from this problem. And I do believe that smartphones are addictive. They’ve been engineered to be addictive and that doesn’t really – you know, we don’t really need more studies to show that that’s true. All you need to do is go outside and look around.”

– Anna Lembke, Chief of the Stanford Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic
at Stanford University

Get love without chance

When scientist Maria Skłodowska first laid eyes upon Pierre Curie standing in the recess of a French window, she was struck by his open expression and the slight detachment in his attitude. “His smile, at once grave and youthful, inspired confidence,” she recalled. Maria had been hunting for laboratory space and a mutual colleague suggested she meet Pierre, an established physicist and laboratory chief. A year later they married.

Today, 381 million people worldwide do not rely on serendipity or chance encounters to find love, but dating apps, a consumer product birthed from recent developments in smartphone, mobile internet, and cloud computing technology. Users on dating apps pay a monthly fee to a company to search for love, thereby making dating apps the quintessential capitalist creation – turning love into profit.

In his book, *In Praise of Love*, French philosopher Alain Badiou likens dating apps to an arranged marriage where “advanced agreements”

replace “chance encounters and in the end any existential poetry”. Within the search interface, users are presented with profile shots of prospective ‘lovers’ in much the same manner as any e-commerce offering – from vacuum cleaners to air fryers. Users swipe right on profiles or press ‘like’ or a ‘heart icon’ – and if the buyer and seller come to a ‘match’, a market transaction is consummated, prompting an introductory message.

Central to Badiou’s philosophy is the idea that love is an event, an unpredictable encounter, that challenges the existing order and creates something novel. He argues that true love requires embracing the risk of the unknown and the possibility of transformation. “Love isn’t simply about two people meeting and their inward-looking relationship: it is a construction, a life that is being made, no longer from the perspective of One but from the perspective of Two,” he writes.

But dating apps, which advertise their services with slogans such as

“Get love without chance!” and “Be in love without falling in love!”, seek to minimise the risks and vagaries of love. Certainly, one can mitigate the risk of ‘falling’ in love and being hopelessly heartbroken when there are quite literally tens of millions of other possible candidates to take their place.

But love cannot be reduced to the first encounter, stresses the philosopher. Love takes time to flourish. It is a “tenacious adventure”. One needs a good dose of tenacity to not give up at the first hurdle, disagreement, or quarrel. “Real love is one that triumphs lastingly, sometimes painfully, over the hurdles erected by time, space and the world.” Of course, the duration of time necessary for love to flourish, as Badiou describes, is hampered somewhat in the gamified world of dating apps. And in true capitalist fashion, no dating app wants to see its user-base diminished by the attainment of love, but rather it demands that players keep on searching, ad infinitum.

“We must re-invent love but also quite simply defend it, because it faces threats from all sides.”

Alain Badiou

“[The] selective concern with the ‘inner drama’ enables the writer or artist to capture the essential feature of human experience; it allows him to penetrate beneath the encrusted surface of ordinary experience to the hidden and unfamiliar significance beneath it. In this way the artist can often make us see the familiar in a new light. As Anaïs Nin writes: ‘It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it.’”

– Orville Clark

THE DAILY EMERGENCY



The news media has been described as a “time machine” because it is deliberately short sighted. The news media could also be called a “novelty machine” due to its emphasis on the new – a novel episode, disruption, or interruption – that stands out due to its break from the familiar or routine. A random act of violence or a shock fall in the stockmarket will demand more media space than a chronic issue that plagues society over the long term. “For this reason, society’s biggest problems do not routinely dominate media coverage,” writes Thomas E. Patterson, Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Novel stories stimulate interest and curiosity, and news organisations, which operate under the economic imperative of attracting and retaining a large audience for advertisers, rely on citizens’ “need to know” (otherwise known as click-bait) for survival. “The latest news abruptly replaces the old... Each day is a fresh start, a new reality. Novelty is prized, as is certainty. Journalists must have a story to tell, and it must be a different one than yesterday’s,” Patterson writes in *Time and News: The Media’s Limitations as an Instrument of Democracy*.

Patterson argues that as political parties and representative institutions have weakened, the public increasingly expects the news media to take a lead role in setting the public agenda, and organising public opinion and debate. But the news media are poorly suited to this

role, he argues. News stories require a specific event to give the story a sense of immediacy, and policy matters are by their very nature drawn out affairs extending over months or many years. Few news stories manage to get repeat airtime, wiped out by more ‘pressing’ events – producing in the news media a chaotic disjointedness, much like a case of ADHD, where the immediate or urgent is preferred over sustained thinking. The news has become “an endless stream of emergencies,” argues critic James Fallows. Whereas chronic societal problems tend not to change much from day to day, and therefore receive scant media attention.

Perhaps more concerning is the illusion of ‘reality’ one gets from perusing the news. People feel as though news media gives them an insight into the broader economic and societal picture, but Patterson argues that this sense is largely misguided. He cites a Swedish study by Jörgen Westerståhl and Folke Johansson, which examined the media’s coverage of seven major policy areas, such as crime, the economy, and defence, and found that “in practically no case was there any correspondence between the factual and the reported development”. It explains why economic shocks (property and stockmarket crashes) come almost ‘out of the blue’ for investors when, in actual fact, crashes are a result of a cumulative building up of pressure over a period of time. The bigger picture is lost in a sea of ‘right now’ emergencies – the media being less a mirror of a society than a daily collage of the day’s most novel events.

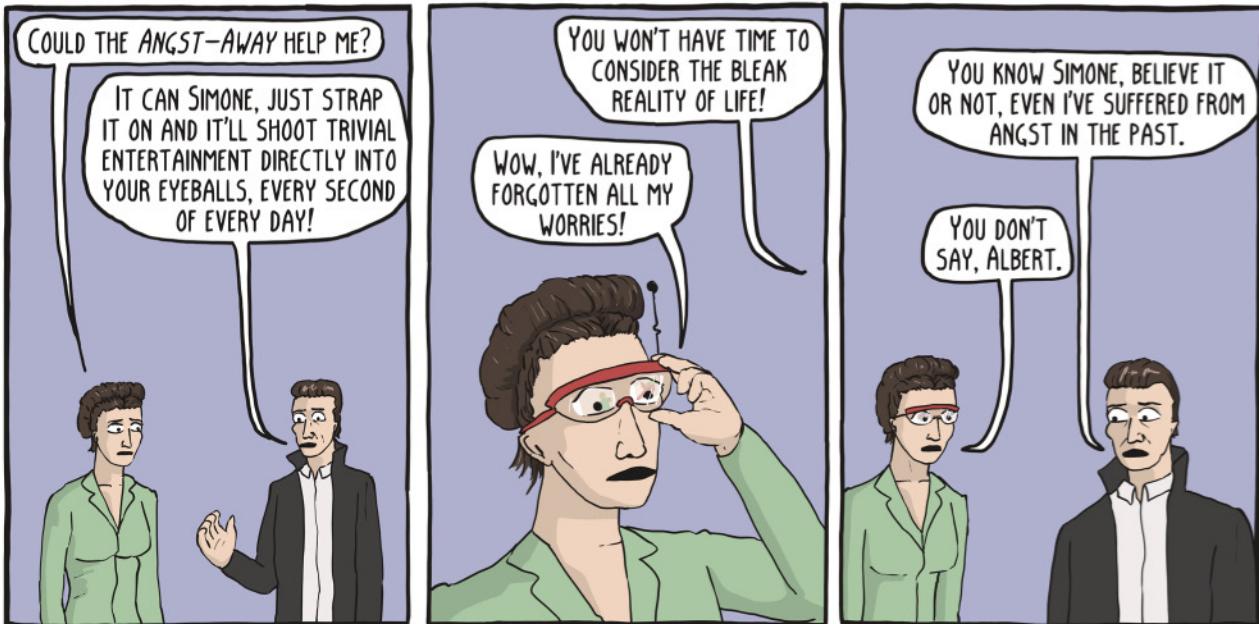


“Isn’t it true to say that ... Novelty is mistaken for Progress?”

Frank Lloyd Wright

Existential shopping network





(Simone and Albert are standing in a room.)



(Albert is wearing the device and looking at it.)



(Simone and Albert are standing in a room.)



(Simone and Albert are standing in a room.)



(Simone and Albert are standing in a room.)



(Simone and Albert are standing in a room.)



(Albert is standing alone in a room, looking confused.)

by Marina Benjamin

The impulse to novelty

I recently re-read Annie Ernaux's autobiographical masterpiece *The Years* ahead of attending its first theatre adaptation in the UK. A personal account, but narrated in the choral 'we', it documents Ernaux's life and times, from her working-class childhood in 1940s provincial Normandy to her metropolitan heyday in Paris as a teacher, mother, and celebrated writer. 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; new kinds of homes with new kinds of fittings; fads that disappear almost as soon as they arrive, displaced by the next new thing, as well as new personal and political dawning: new rules, laws, and loves. Ernaux keeps the reader alert to the way individuals are swept up in the constant churn of the world, their personal lives shaped by a succession of collective experiences. Novelty here is a marker of time.

The theatre production felt appropriately frenetic, since the rolling round of years was staged quite literally, using a circular track that resembled a circus ring around which various

time-stamped novelties got wheeled towards the audience, then away again. You had the sense that everything new got its brief moment in the sun before being consigned to history's shredder. Where, you began to wonder, lay the substance of a life? And that, perhaps, is the point of *The Years*. It invites you to question whether we amount to anything before we die – given we all follow the same well-worn circuit as everyone who has ever lived before us.

Chasing the new has always been about grasping for tomorrow. Pulling the near horizons of the future close enough for us to see and feel what tomorrow might bring: which is to say that I don't think you can separate novelty from time.

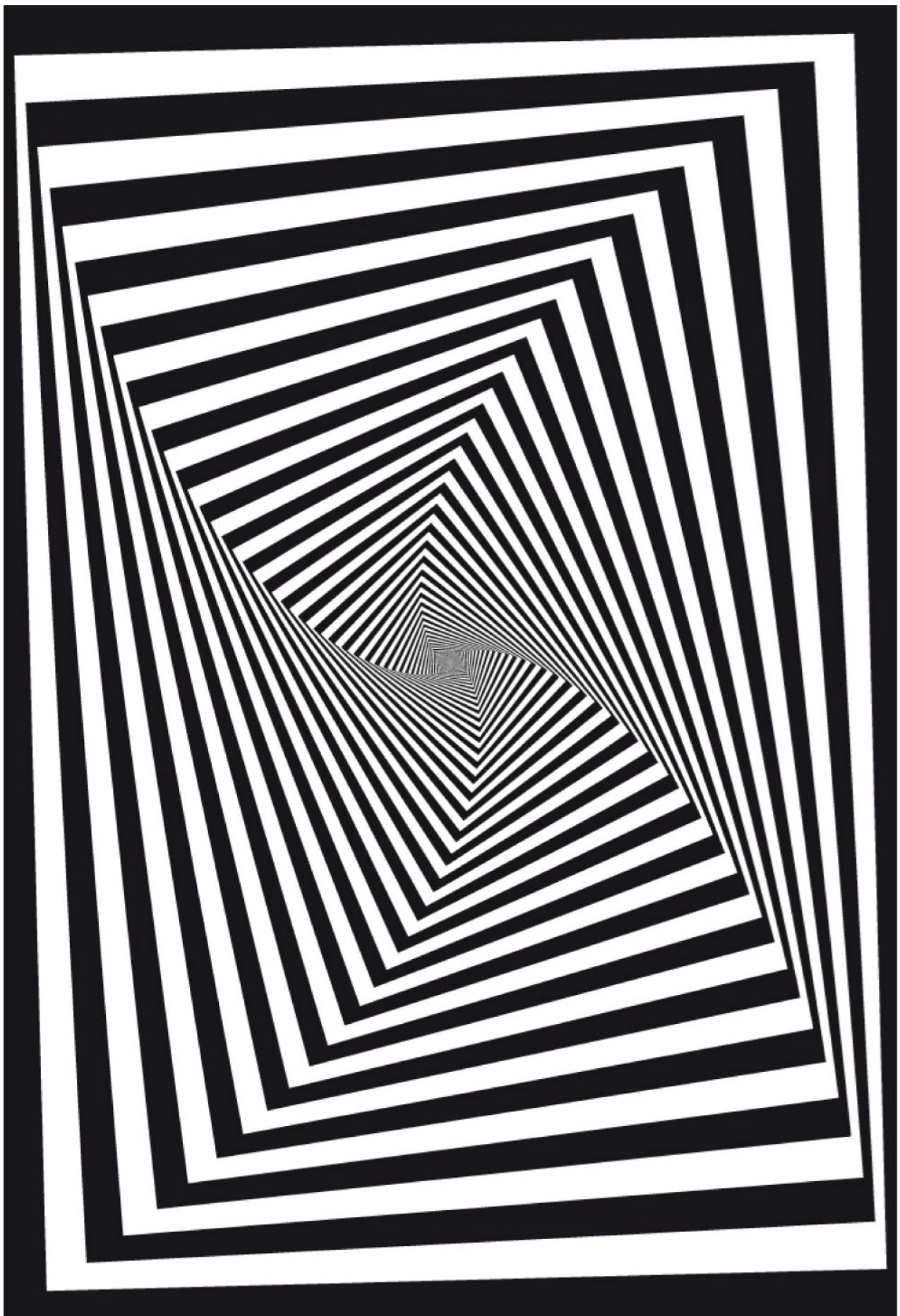
At its extreme, the determined pursuit of novelty looks like an attempt to outrun or outpace time, as if it might be possible to buy or cheat your way out of death itself by reaching for the rebirth that lies beyond it – the symbolic one delivered by the 'ping' of the new.

This weird logic puts reminds me of a relative of mine, a shopping addict who is adept at generating all manner of excuses for constantly acquiring stuff;

new cars, new clothes, new furniture. She claims she deserves it. That she's had a hard time and could use a reward; or she insists that she truly needs new curtains, plant pots, bicycles, holidays. She expresses an avid interest in novelty for the sake of novelty, and scans the internet to feed her habit, searching out the latest model of this or that or the next season's hot new drop. She thinks of herself as fashion-forward, wants to be on top of things (news, gadgetry, inside-track knowledge), and strives to stay ahead of herself (see 'death', above).

On one memorable occasion, after she'd returned home at the end of a two-week stay, when it seemed she'd admirably restrained herself from shopping, I discovered that she'd stuffed several bags full of new purchases, fripperies mainly – clothing, perfumes – behind the armoire in the spare room, burying evidence of an addiction that in rare, lucid moments clearly shamed her. I felt a surge of pity for her in that split second.

When she defended her addiction, I mostly felt censorious. There was the environment to think about, after all, the sweat-shop labour, the enslavement



of the Global South in service to the consumer hunger of the Global North. As for the immoral waste of it all... the idea of casually casting out what was surplus to need when so many people the world over had to make do with less than enough.

Over time, I realised that her shopping habit was less about constantly seeking the thrill of the new (though that's how she would explain it) than it was a desperate attempt to fill a yawning existential hole inside her. The fear that in herself she isn't enough – isn't good enough, doesn't amount to enough, doesn't mean enough.

*

As a teenager studying economics, I remember being profoundly struck by one of the first concepts I learned about: the law of diminishing marginal utility. This states that if the consumption of a good or service increases, the satisfaction it yields increases at an ever-decreasing rate, to the point where it reaches zero. Satisfaction maxes out when marginal utility is zero. So, your second slice of pizza will be incrementally less

delicious than your first; your third slice more so. By time you're onto your fourth or fifth, you may not find it delicious at all.

Diminishing marginal utility is an important predictor of consumer behaviour in explaining why demand curves in micro-economic models tend to slope downward. Its why restaurants are able to profit from offering all-you-can-eat buffets, and why the Zara model of fast fashion works, by spurning the idea of shifting volume and instead producing limited editions of weekly fashion fixes that people can wear once then throw away.

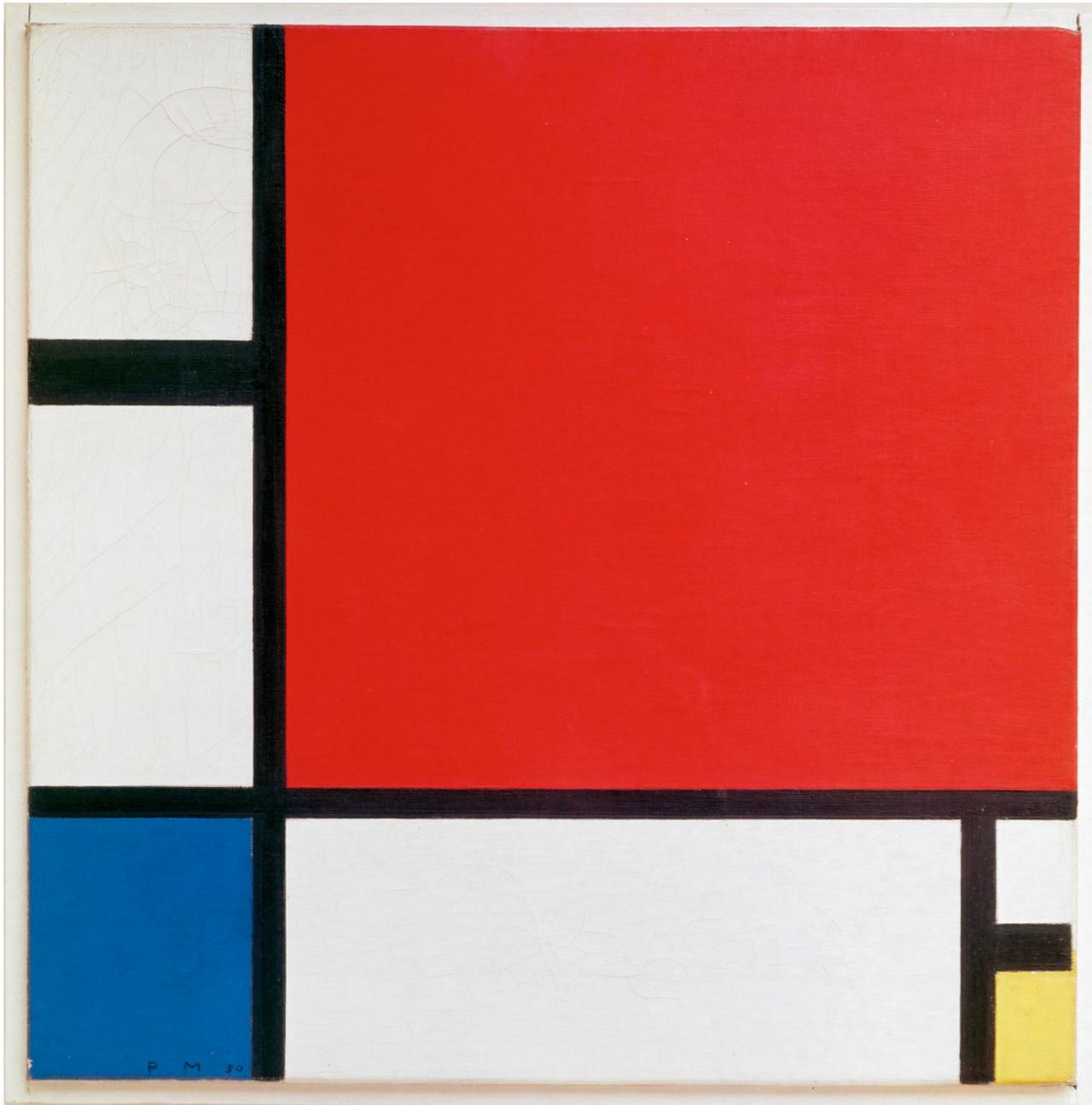
The late French philosopher Jean Baudrillard understood that the speed of our consumption – of new things, information, and events – was a critical factor in hoodwinking us out of our fear of endings. His theory, in short, was that in our rush to consume everything all at once we empty the present of its content. According to Baudrillard, the more we consume the faster the process runs, until – if we move fast enough – we overtake the speed at which time processes through our lives and begin to move backwards. Time on this model isn't linear but curved like a boomerang.

The path it traces, first towards and then away from The End – death, hellfire, apocalypse – is an asymptote.

How to tame the impulse towards novelty, given that its pleasures are short-lived, if not illusory? I certainly don't have an answer. But I have an analogy, and it takes the form of another book I've read recently, William Golding's *The Inheritors*. The novel is a paean to the Neanderthals whom we meet just as they are on the verge of being eclipsed by Homo sapiens. Golding reimagines the Neanderthals as an intuitive and joyous people, keenly attuned to nature, while also anticipating the belief systems and clan loyalties that subsequent scholars of the prehistoric world have come to believe Neanderthals possessed.

Golding penned *The Inheritors* as an angry riposte to H.G. Wells' dismissal of Neanderthals as brutes. It contains a warning against romanticising the new, since the evolutionary new boys on the block, the swifter, smarter, more resourceful sapiens, don't always recognise the Neanderthals as human. More: they fail to understand the value of what they supplant. Golding makes you ask who, really, are the brutes. ■

His theory, in short, was that in our rush to consume everything all at once we empty the present of its content.



Composition II in Red, Blue, and Yellow, by Piet Mondrian, 1930

“And I will capture your minds with sweet novelty.”

Ovid

GREAT MINDS like to think

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NOVEL THINKING

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by Antonia Case

Nothing but change

“If you can in one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.” These words were reportedly inscribed on the wash-basin of Cheng Tang, the first king of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE), and the daily reminder emphasised continuous improvement.

It is a nice motto to live by, and certainly more romantic than American poet Ezra Pound’s take on it, “Make it New”, which became a catchphrase of the modernist movement. “Make it New” encouraged writers and artists to break from tradition

and drive for innovation and constant change. It inspired Marcel Duchamp to submit a toilet to a New York art exhibition to rupture traditional approaches to art and forge a new way of seeing (a trend that has continued to the present day. In 2019, an Italian artist duct-taped a banana to a wall, selling it for \$120,000).

Although Pound encouraged artists to “Make it New”, it took him over 50 years to complete his modern epic *The Cantos*. Pound never fully finished the poem to his satisfaction either. “I cannot make it cohere,” he complained as

the final sections of the poem came out in fragments, the remaining six cantos written from his daughter’s crumbling 13th century estate, Brunnenburg Castle, in Italy.

Most of us have an antagonistic relationship to change; we tend to fight it as if it shouldn’t be happening. We prefer it when life coasts along with a sense that everything is stable and more-or-less on track. But as French philosopher Henri Bergson notes, “for a conscious being, to exist is to change... to go on creating oneself endlessly.” Life is “endlessly continued

creation,” he writes, where we find ourselves caught between two states – one of creation and the other destruction. But we tend to notice ‘change’ when it’s abrupt and final, such as after a divorce, or when we resign from a job, or sell our ‘forever home’, change careers, or when a loved one has died. When we can no longer return to our previous state, when the life we once had has vanished forever, do we acknowledge that change has befallen us. But Bergson argues that change is unceasing, not just in these decisive moments. Our past “follows us at every instant” and leans over the present which is about to join it, and the direction it takes is “new, unique, and unforeseen”. The universe is a “continual creation of novelty”.

“It is expedient to disregard this uninterrupted change, and to notice it only when it becomes sufficient to impress a new attitude on the body, a new direction on the attention,” Bergson writes in *Creative Evolution*. “Then, and then only, we find that our state has changed. The truth is... that our state itself is nothing but change.”

It is a comforting thought to acknowledge that we press upon our future at every moment in utterly

novel ways – never predictable, nothing decided. But it also helps explain that sense of quiet desperation we feel when life is going well for us, a sensation like trying to contain sand spilling through one’s fingertips – how to stop the flow, just for a second, so we can savour the good times? Bergson didn’t like “clock time” – time quantified by the ticking of a mechanical clock. He preferred “duration” (*la durée*), where time is experienced as a fluid and continuous flow, rather than as a series of discrete moments. We are the dancer who moves through time, making it up as she goes along. “Pure duration is the form which our conscious states assume when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states,” he writes.

Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus acknowledged that the only constant in life is change. “All things are in a state of flux.” ... “Everything changes and nothing stands still.” Driving this constant process of change is the tension of opposites, thought Heraclitus, such as life and death, wet and dry, day and night, war and peace. Conflict and discord are essential to the creation of new things;

novelty arises from the dynamic interplay of opposing forces.

Ask any novelist what’s central to their plot and they will say “conflict”. Macbeth is conflicted between his lust for power and his morality (what’s the right thing to do?). Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter battle it out in the wizarding world – Voldemort wants immortality and Harry Potter wants to save his friends and avenge the death of his parents. Two opposing forces come together and create a new world order, a new dish, or a new art movement.

Interestingly, at the time Heraclitus was writing about opposition and unity in Ancient Greece, some 8,000 kilometres away in China, Laozi is credited with writing the *Tao Te Ching*, a foundational text of Taoism. According to tradition, Laozi worked as an archivist in the Imperial Library of the Zhou Dynasty court, where – disillusioned with the corruption he witnessed – he left the court to live as a hermit. As he departed, a border guard asked him to write down his teachings, resulting in the *Tao Te Ching*, a short text composed of 81 chapters, exploring the Tao (the Way).

We are all familiar with the *Taijitu*, commonly known as the Yin-Yang

Conflict and discord are essential to the creation of new things. Novelty arises from the dynamic interplay of opposing forces.

The swirling pattern of the two halves indicates that Yin/Yang are interdependent – complementary rather than opposing forces – out of which arises a harmonious balance.

symbol, a circle divided into two swirling sections, one black and one white. The black section typically represents Yin, which is associated with qualities such as darkness, passivity, receptivity, femininity, the moon, and the earth. The white section represents Yang, which is associated with opposing qualities such as light, activity, assertiveness, masculinity, the sun, and heaven.

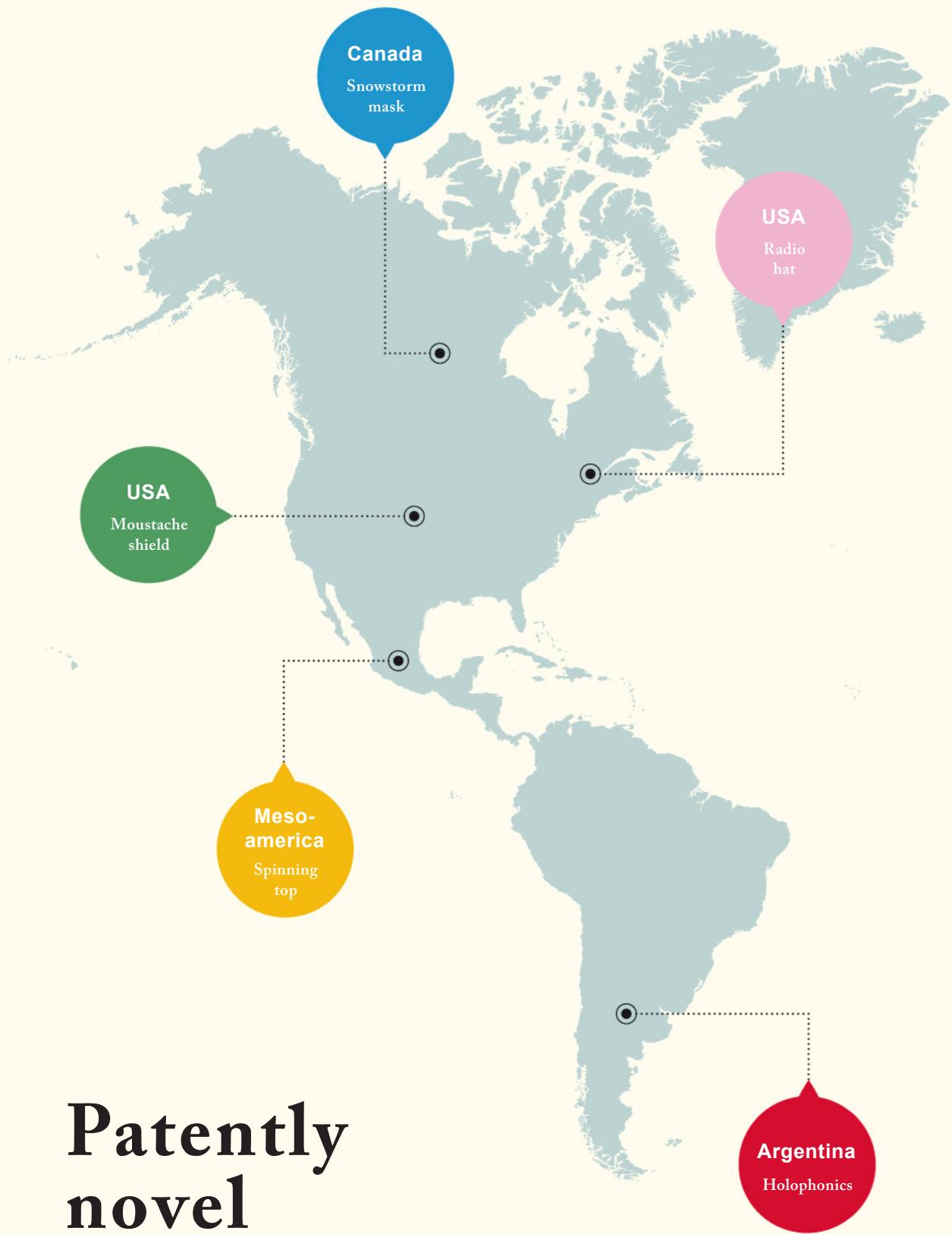
The swirling pattern of the two halves indicates that Yin and Yang are interdependent – complementary rather than opposing forces – out of which arises a harmonious balance.

Like most dilemmas in life – “should I choose a career based on prospects for money or happiness?”, or, “should I put my money in a high-risk

investment or play it safe?”, or “should I settle down and buy a house or travel the world?” – the internal struggle in opposite directions is fraught with tension. But it’s this tug-of-war that brings about new ideas, new plans, new destinies.

In essence, Pound’s rallying cry to “Make it New” is happening to us whether we like it or not. We have no choice but to ride along this current of never-ending newness and novelty – which is life – repeatedly encountering clashes and conflicts of opposing forces, and then finding a resolution of some sort. As Alan Watts says, “The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.” ■







by Tom Chatfield

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. I stop and stare before fully realising why I've done so: neither a driver nor passengers are inside. Smoothly, the steering wheel turns of its own accord.

This isn't yet a familiar sight, but it will become one. Two hundred years ago this land was woodland and scrub. Signposts memorialise the rise and fall of industries, neighbourhoods, ways of life. Now driverless cars whine peacefully past billboards boasting that Anthropic's 'Claude', one of a handful of cutting-edge Large Language Models, is "a jetpack for your thoughts". This is presumably a reference to the effortless ease of science fiction rather than the alarming reality of strapping miniature

jet engines to your body. Although the passion with which novelty is applauded in this city makes me wonder.

I'm here to speak about Artificial Intelligence, a phrase I distrust because it claims and presumes so much. Systems like Claude are formidably – even miraculously – adept at extracting statistical insights from vast amounts of data. But yoking humans and machines together as analogous forms of "intelligence" doesn't, I think, help us understand what's happening on either side. The wonder of AI is precisely the inhuman means through which its insights are achieved; not to mention its capacity to operate far beyond biological scales and speeds.

For the author, cognitive scientist, and AI pioneer Douglas Hofstadter, the philosophical lessons that follow

from this are profound and alarming. As he put it in a 2023 interview, "maybe the human mind is not so mysterious and complex and impenetrably complex as I imagined it was when I was writing *Gödel, Escher, Bach...* It makes me feel, in some sense, like a very imperfect, flawed structure compared with these computational systems that have a million times or a billion times more knowledge than I have and are a billion times faster. It makes me feel extremely inferior."

Hofstadter's concerns align with what Freud termed the "existential insults" suffered by humanity in the face of technological and scientific advances. Once upon a time, we believed the Earth to be the centre of the universe. Humanity bestrode a planet suffused with divine purpose. The existence of



a spiritual realm, underwriting earthly ethics, was as self-evident as our own special status.

Then, across a few centuries, we learned new and startling things. Telescopes showed distant moons orbiting other planets, then distant stars and galaxies scattered through an immeasurably vast cosmos. Beneath our feet we found billions of years of sunken history, complete with vanished species and incremental transitions negating the need for a sacred creator. Freud's work hollowed out the prospect of reasoned self-knowledge; while the rise of computation gradually gave the lie to our uniqueness as rational organisms.

Amidst all this, philosophy's great questions can seem comfortingly ancient. What does it mean to be human? How can we live and die well; seek purpose and beauty; sift truth from falsehood; grasp the stuff of will and consciousness? This seeming continuity, however, conceals epochal changes within the meanings of words like "human", "purpose", "truth", and "consciousness" – not to mention the tools, traditions, and techniques available for exploring these.

To be a citizen of the 21st century is to be born into a vast inheritance of knowledge, scope, and struggle. As the psychologist and philosopher Alison Gopnik argues in her 1998 book *The*

Philosophical Baby, humans are unique in inhabiting an environment that is primarily the product of our imaginations; that is the child of countless minds. "If I look around at the ordinary things in front of me," she writes, "– the electric lamp, the right-angle-constructed table, the brightly glazed symmetrical ceramic cup, the glowing computer screen – almost nothing resembles anything I would have seen in the Pleistocene. All of these objects were once imaginary – they are things that human beings themselves have created. And I myself, a woman cognitive scientist writing about the philosophy of children, could not have existed in the Pleistocene either. I am also a creation of the human imagination, and so are you."

The further we move through history, the larger the human imagination and its works loom; and the more our minds are interwoven with artefacts embodying numberless legacies, experiments, and iterations. This is one of the most obvious ways technological modernity can be said to alienate us from both other creatures and our own origins. At the same time, however, these ancestors remain right beside us in the newness of each child: in their adaptivity and fierce desire to learn; their deep interest in other minds; their playfulness and lack of presumption.

"More than any other creature," Gopnik writes, "human beings are able to change. We change the world around us, other people, and ourselves." Novelty is both our birthright and our supreme survival strategy. In this context, Anthropic's jetpack analogy is a revealing one. People cannot fly, move at five hundred miles an hour, recall a trillion bytes of information, or exchange ideas instantaneously between continents. Yet technological civilisation facilitates these and countless other miracles. The unit of agency that matters isn't the unaided individual: it's humanity itself, enveloped and enhanced by all that we have brought into being.

Like Hofstadter, I am awed and discomfited by what technologies like AI may accomplish and signify. But I am also deeply uncertain. From day to day, I shift between elation and fear, hope and cynicism. And the thing that worries me most of all is the flipside of our appetite for novelty: how soon the shock of the new subsides into normality; how easily we confuse whatever order we're born into with the underlying nature of things. In this sense, the great purpose (if not the tools) of philosophy remains one Socrates set 2,500 years ago: to banish complacency; to insist on wondering at the strangeness of our self-invention. □

ALFRED HARMSWORTH

It is part of the business of a newspaper to get news and to print it; it is part of the business of a politician to prevent certain news being printed. For this reason the politician often takes a newspaper into his confidence for the mere purpose of preventing the publication of the news he deems objectionable to his interests.

DAILY FIX

The 24/7 news cycle serves up novelty each and every minute, filling our minds with information that would otherwise be inaccessible for us. Here's what thinkers through the ages thought of the news, at a time when there was only so much of it.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

That which Heraclitus avoided, however, is still the same at that which we shun today: the noise and democratic chatter of the Ephesians, their politics, their latest news of the "Empire"... their market business of "today" – for we philosophers need to be spared one thing above all: everything to do with "today". We reverence what is still, cold, noble, distant, past, and in general everything in the face of which the soul does not have to defend itself and wrap itself up.

MAHATMA GANDHI

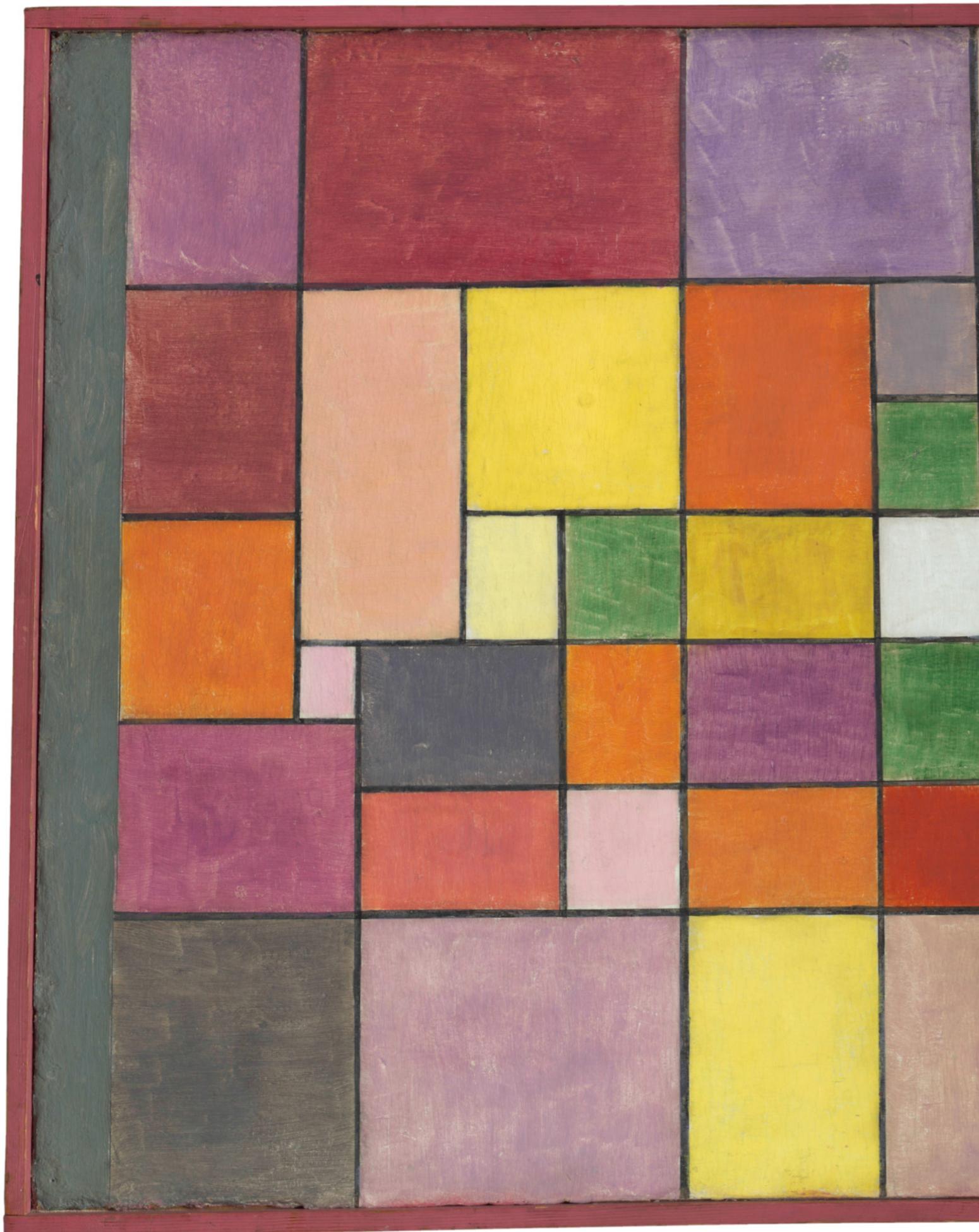
One of the objects of a newspaper is to understand popular feeling and to give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I had come to admitting into my mind the details of some trivial affair, – the news of the street; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber their minds with such rubbish, – to permit idle rumours and incidents of the most insignificant kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought. Shall the mind be a public arena, where the affairs of the street and the gossip of the tea-table chiefly are discussed? Or shall it be a quarter of heaven itself, – an hypæthral temple, consecrated to the service of the gods? I find it so difficult to dispose of the few facts which to me are significant, that I hesitate to burden my attention with those which are insignificant, which only a divine mind could illustrate.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle... I will add, that the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.





Kl 1927 E4

Harmonie der noerdlichen Flora, by Paul Klee, 1927

by Patrick Stokes

The limits of imagination

Close your eyes and imagine a new colour. Not a new shade of an existing colour, but a completely new colour, one you've never seen before. Got it? OK, good. Now, imagine that we're...

Sorry, what? You say you're having trouble visualising a new colour? You keep trying, but no matter what you do, every 'new' colour you imagine is just some variant on all the other colours you have seen before?

Well, don't feel too bad. After all, you're only human, so you can only see light within a certain spectrum. If you were a sparrow, a dog, or a bee, you'd be able to see ultraviolet light as well. (Many flowers would look very different to you, and much more visually complex). Some humans can see UV light too, in fact, due to lacking a lens; they say UV looks whitish-blue. But for the rest of us, the physics of light and the biology of our eyes and brains mean we're limited to a certain, albeit still very rich, range of possible colours.

The idea of a wholly new colour is one that science fiction writers have been playing around with for decades. H.P. Lovecraft's chilling 1927 story *The Colour Out of Space* imagines a meteorite hitting a Massachusetts farm, bringing with it an alien entity which poisons the landscape and deforms and deranges both humans and animals. This life form is nothing like any organism we've ever seen. It takes the form of a completely new colour, "almost impossible to describe; and it was only by analogy that they called it colour at all."

Now, there's another question: even if you could see a completely new colour, either in your imagination or in the world, how could you then explain what it looked like? When people who have been unable to see since birth are asked things like, "do you just see black?" many struggle to answer, precisely because they don't know what 'black' looks like. The problem here is that our colour definitions are what

philosophers of language call "ostensive", the sort of thing you learn by someone pointing at something. We know what blue is because we've seen enough blue things to use the concept successfully, and we can learn new colour-names by alluding to objects of the same hue ("duck-egg blue") and even argue about them ("no, I'd say that's more cerulean than cobalt").

But how would you do that with a completely new colour? Lovecraft, for instance, doesn't even try. Under some experimental conditions it seems people can see otherwise impossible combinations of 'opposing' colours, such as red and green. A 1983 study claimed that some participants, when presented with just the right visual stimuli, were indeed able to see new combined colours such as redgreen or blueyellow. Some even reported being able to visualise the new colour after the experiment was over, at least for a while. But they struggled to describe what they'd seen, beyond descriptors like 'reddish-



green'. Try imagining 'reddish-green' and see how far you get. It seems that without actually seeing a new colour, we can't even imagine it. Why?

Philosophers have long recognised our imaginations aren't limitless. Most philosophers accept that we cannot imagine things that are conceptually (not just physically or practically) impossible, for instance. In the 18th century, David Hume argued that we cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, for instance – and, as we cannot conceive such a thing, we decide that it's not actually possible. (Presumably, for Hume, the bottom of a mountain standing on a plain would still count as a valley. No disrespect to the father of the Scottish Enlightenment, but honestly it's not his best example.) You can think phrases like "mountain without a valley" or "square circle" or "triangle whose interior angles sum to more than 180 degrees" all you want. But when you do so, whatever you're imagining won't really be that. There's simply nothing for a square circle to look like. (What about those M.C. Escher-style drawings of 'impossible' staircases and the like? They're optical illusions. They couldn't exist in 3D.)

For Hume, no matter how powerful our imagination is, "it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses". Ideas, on Hume's empiricist model, are the echoes of impressions – that is, things we've previously encountered with our senses. Complex ideas are made up of simple ideas, and simple ideas, in turn, are copies of simple impressions. Perceptions, not concepts, are the fundamental building blocks of our entire mental lives.

If Hume is right, there's nothing really new in our heads, because everything in there came in through our eyes and ears first. Look close enough, and anything you imagine will turn out to be made up of more basic elements you've previously experienced. That still leaves imagination with a very wide scope, because the possible combinations of our simple impressions is vast. Ultimately, though, even the most original, plucked-from-thin-air thing you can imagine is a mosaic made up of things you've previously seen (or heard, smelled, touched, or tasted) at some point in the past.

Needless to say, not everyone agrees with Hume. But there does seem to be something to the idea that when we try to imagine completely new things, we can only work with what we already have. If I ask you to imagine a totally new animal, the odds are pretty high that what you'll come up with is based on some animal you've seen, or at least seen a picture of. Perhaps, like the centaur or the unicorn, it will be a sort of Frankenstein's monster, composed of parts of other, more familiar animals stuck together. The first person to come up with the idea of a unicorn had clearly seen both a horse and a narwhal horn before, and the inventor of the mermaid was familiar with both humans and fish. Even the most outrageously weird aliens in science fiction always seem to have some sort of similarities with organisms we're more familiar with, such as limbs, eyes, and mouths. That's not just to make the costumes cheaper, either: if they were too different from all the other life forms we've come across, audiences would likely struggle to recognise them as aliens at all.

There does seem to be something to the idea that when we try to imagine completely new things, we can only work with what we already have.

In fact, that was precisely Lovecraft's motivation for making his extraterrestrial menace a new colour. Instead of little green men he wanted to come up with something truly alien, something that confounded our very sense of what a life form would look like. What better, then, than something we are incapable of visualising, something even a writer of Lovecraft's gifts could never describe? His monster is "no fruit of such worlds and suns as shine on the telescopes and photographic plates of our observatories", but "just a colour out of space – a frightful messenger from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it".

Perhaps the true horror in Lovecraft's tale lies in the thought that there might be things we cannot imagine. At the end of the story, the alien colour shoots off into the heavens, leaving death and devastation in its wake. But a witness sees a fragment of the colour sink back into the Earth – and knowing the unearthly hue still remains, "he has never been quite right since". ■

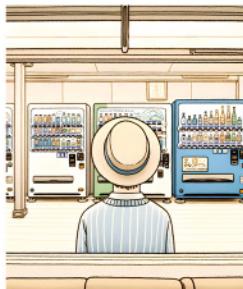


“Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision.”

David Hume

Online at

newphilosopher.com



Flourishing enough

I recently visited Japan for the first time. When I got back, and people asked me what I had found most interesting or surprising, I found myself talking about small things...



The self that is not a self

Existence is suffering. We don't have to look far to see the truth of this dictum: there's the news, of course, which is more often than not a litany of tragedies and atrocities...

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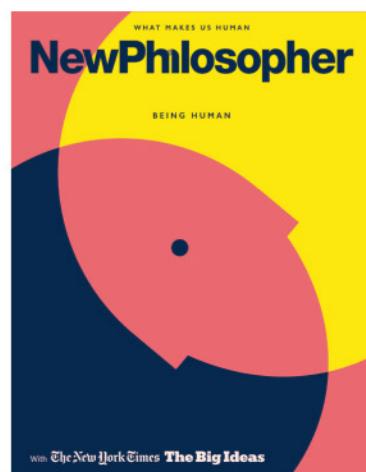
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Interview with:
Daniel Lieberman

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

A dopamine-fuelled world

Vaka 'A Hina, sculpture in Christchurch, New Zealand, by Michal Klajban



Daniel Z. Lieberman is a clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at George Washington University. Lieberman is a recipient of the Caron Foundation Research Award, and has published over 50 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. He is the co-author of the international bestseller *The Molecule of More* and the author of *Spellbound: Modern Science, Ancient Magic, and the Unconscious Mind*.

Zan Boag: Clearly, given your research and writing, we're going to be speaking about dopamine, but I'd like to look at it through the lens of novelty and the influence of novelty in our lives – why we're drawn to it and what sort of effect this has on the decisions we make throughout our lives. But first I wanted to find out a little bit about dopamine in humans. Are we the only animals who have dopamine? And why does it exist in our brains at all?

Daniel Lieberman: We are not the only animals who have dopamine, but we certainly have more sophisticated dopamine circuits than any other animals; all mammals have it. It might be surprising to hear that the animal that has probably the most dopamine after humans are corvids – crows, blackbirds. And if you go on YouTube, you can see them solving these multi-step problems. There's food that they can't get without a tool like a stick, but the stick can't be obtained without solving some

other problem. And they go through this in a brilliant way. They're very, very clever. But other animals that we think of naturally as intelligent, such as dolphins and apes, they also have significant amounts of dopamine as well.

I'd like to stop you for a second there. How does dopamine relate to intelligence?

I think we need to take a little bit of a step back to answer that question, and we do have to talk a little bit about what dopamine is and what it does. Most people think of dopamine as being the 'reward molecule'. It gives you a kick when you experience novelty or some other kind of reward, like eating when you're hungry, finding a new romantic partner, that sort of thing. And that's an important part of what dopamine does. But more generally, what it does is it orients us to maximising resources in the future. So for example, if there is an attractive



reproductive partner out there, we'll get dopamine, and that will give us the desire to be with this person. It will give us the motivation to do all the hard work of getting dressed up and going out to a club, and then it will give us the excitement.

That's part of what dopamine does. It gives us desire and motivation for things that have the potential to make our life better, and that is active in a circuit deep inside our brain. But there's another dopamine circuit that gives us the tools to accomplish these things. And that's a dopamine circuit in the frontal lobes, which is the most advanced part of the brain in humans. Dopamine is very much about the future. Unlike the present, the future does not have a physical existence. It's all hypothetical, it's all possibilities. When I think about

what I'm going to do after this interview, it is just imaginary. It's not real.

Since dopamine evolved to help us think about things that were not yet real, humans were able to adapt that to allow us to think about abstract things, things like logic, reason, justice, beauty, music, all of these other things that don't have a physical existence – the laws of science, chemistry, and that all involves these frontal lobes that are more advanced in humans than any other animals. And so dopamine has moved from this thing that gives us desire and motivation to something that really allows us to master our environment by using these abstract laws of nature, of science, and even of aesthetics to mould the world, to allow us to extract the maximum amount of resources.

I can't help but think of another question that I wanted to ask you that was related to the effect that dopamine has on love and our desire to seek partners. You use the example of Mick Jagger and George Costanza – that when it comes to love, they're essentially the same person. Now, what issues do people face, clearly not just Mick Jagger and the fictional George Costanza, but what issues do people face when it comes to dopamine, novelty, and love? I'm thinking in particular how people have an ease of access to potential partners through dating apps or social media and so forth. Does this have an effect on how people seek love and their ability to retain a partner?

So our brains evolved in an environment of scarcity. We were always living on the brink of starvation. And so having this dopamine drive to constantly



"I'm looking for a way to break my addiction to novelty."

go out and seek things that are going to make our future more secure was very adaptive and very helpful for us. But we no longer live in an environment of scarcity. We now live in an environment of plenty and the dopamine system that was so useful to our evolutionary ancestors has become a potentially dangerous liability. We see that most clearly with food. The problem today in most countries is not starvation, it's obesity because these dopamine circuits that would make us work as hard as we could to find sources of food to prevent starvation now make us gorge ourselves on potato chips and French fries and that sort of thing. And it's very similar with love. The days when we would have to work very, very hard to find one partner are not so very old.

Maybe a hundred years ago, maybe 50 years ago, it was like that. Now we've got these dating apps that are basically like 7-Eleven for junk food, but for sex and partnership. And so, when we experience love, we go through different stages. There's a dopamine phase and there's a non-dopamine phase as well. The dopamine phase is the excitement of the new partner, and we get very excited thinking about being with this person. And if we actually fall in love with them, our dopamine goes off the charts. Some people say that falling in love is the single most pleasurable experience human beings have in their lifetime. But love, passionate love, being in love, only lasts about nine to 12 months. And at that point it fades, and that's how it is with all dopamine-related things. You get very, very excited about buying a new TV, a new car, a new pair of sneakers, and that excitement fades very, very fast.

Mick Jagger and George Costanza didn't last nine to 12 months with each partner though, did they?

They did not. Because the more you do this, the less it lasts. It's sort of like a drug addict. They develop tolerance, their brain changes. And so what I think that we're not good at in modern society, because this is not something that is taught or encouraged, is how to make that transition from a dopamine love that is intense, but short-lived, to a longer-lasting love that's called companionate love and is mediated by different brain chemicals.

With the prevalence of social media and dating apps, it becomes very difficult for those who are growing up in an environment where nobody's really learned how to deal with this – they're now faced with an almost unlimited choice of partners. And also if things get tough after that nine to twelve months of dopaminergic love, and they don't have that same rush that they had in the beginning, well, it's very easy for them to just move on. They can swipe again and move on. I just wonder how people are going to learn to deal with this process, something older generations didn't have to deal with when they were growing up.

We've spoken a lot about the joy of novelty, but there's also a joy of familiarity. Sometimes we like to experiment, go to a new restaurant we've never been to before. Other times we want to go to our favourite place. And with normal human variation, there's variation across the spectrum: some people have more dopamine, and they want exciting things. Some people have more of these other neurotransmitters, they want things the same. The problem is that our society is always trying



Daniel Lieberman

to push us in the direction of the dopamine side, because that's what makes money in a capitalist economy.

If you kind of say, "I love the stuff I have, I don't want to buy anything else," that's not going to work. And so messages we get through media, which we consume more and more, are always trying to push us towards the dopamine side. Even people that might be congenitally predisposed to meet one person and be happy for the rest of their life, society's saying, no, no, no, no, no, don't do that. Swipe, swipe, swipe, swipe, swipe, new, new, new, new, new. So in terms of future generations, the first step is people reading books like *The Molecule of More* and getting an insight into what's going on inside of their brain. How are they being manipulated? And are these dopamine thrills really in the best interest of their long-term

happiness? So we see in culture these swinging pendulums, they go back and forth.

I happen to be an optimist by nature, and so I think it's very possible that future generations will kind of open up their eyes and say, "This is not working out. We need to revisit some of the older traditions that existed for centuries for a reason, because by and large, they worked pretty well. And this new novelty of sleeping with somebody new every week, it looked bright and shiny at first, but ultimately it turned out to be unsatisfying." So I'm hoping the pendulum will swing back and people will try to balance the joys of novelty with the joys of familiarity.

It's interesting you talk about capitalism, I have a quote here from you about consumption – you say, "We don't need a new cell phone. We don't need a bigger TV. We should just experience what we have and enjoy it." Now, many of us know this deep down, but we are still lured by 'the new', by novelty, partly because we're consuming so much media. But 'the shiny new' seems to grab people. How do we shift from

being future focused, from being novelty-seeking, with the unlimited potential outcomes on offer? How can we live more in the here and now?

The first thing we have to recognise, we have to have a little humility and recognise that we are animals; and that although it feels like we can control our thoughts, we have a lot less control over them than we think we do. We think that we can make choices, but we have a lot less control of our choices than we think we do.

Fill your kitchen with junk food and then see if you can eat healthy. You can't. If you want to eat healthy, you have to throw away all the junk food and fill your refrigerator with healthy things, because our ability to make choices is limited. There's a wonderful quote, and I can't remember who said this: "We don't determine our fate. We determine our habits, and our habits determine our fate." So what that means is that we've got to take a long-term view. And if we want to make good decisions about big things, we've got to make good decisions about little things. And we've got to be patient and understand that it takes a lot of time. We

have to understand there's going to be two steps forward, one step back, not beat ourselves up, but we've got to think about what kind of habits are going to promote being able to step away from being controlled by dopamine and by people who are trying to sell us things we don't need to just living in the present moment and having joy.

So maybe the first thing we might do is delete certain apps from our phone. We might limit the amount of time on social media. We get on social media, maybe set a timer and say, "OK, that's it." Establish some habits like daily meditation that brings us into the here and now. It gets our mind off of what might be in the future and trains our mind, just like an athlete would train their body, to be in the present moment. So instead of watching Netflix, taking a walk outside in nature, maybe with someone we care about, a partner or a good friend. In order to make the big change in our brain, we've got to make a thousand little changes.

You talk about being controlled by dopamine and the fact that we do have

If you want to eat healthy, you have to throw away all the junk food and fill your refrigerator with healthy things, because our ability to make choices is limited.

First of all, we have to acknowledge that we don't always do the thing that we deem to be the right thing. So for example, I may have the opportunity to make some money, but it's not entirely ethical.

to make these small changes, and in an earlier interview you also spoke about how dopamine can actually determine our ethical approach. In that interview, you referenced the infamous trolley problem when discussing this matter. How large a part does dopamine play in determining what we deem to be the right thing to do in a particular situation?

First of all, we have to acknowledge that we don't always do the thing that we deem to be the right thing. So, for example, I may have the opportunity to make some money, but it's not entirely ethical. I may choose to do it anyway, because of the desire aspects of dopamine saying, "Wow, it'd be really nice to have that money." And that would be the deep dopamine circuit. But if we turn to the more advanced dopamine circuit in the frontal lobes, it's going to help us make ethical decisions based on logic. And typically what that leads to is a utilitarian approach to ethics that is maximising the good for the most people. And that sounds like a wonderful ethical approach, and it is, in many ways.

But it also means that you can sacrifice some people for the greater good. And we see that in the trolley problem, sacrifice the one life in order to save the five lives. And that makes sense in some situations, but in other situations, it breaks down. As part of my career, I did research and sometimes we would have these wonderful medications that would have the potential to vastly benefit humanity, but nobody wanted to sign up for the clinical trials because of the risks. So a utilitarian approach would be to lie about the risks, because yes, these people might get hurt, but that's OK because thousands, maybe millions of people are going to be helped.

Now, obviously, that's not an ethical approach that anybody is going to accept. The alternative ethical approach is deontology or harm avoidance, and that says, you may not intentionally harm someone, even if other people will benefit. And that's what we follow in clinical research, we require informed consent. We can't deceive these people. So I think that dopamine pushes us towards this utilitarian approach to maximise the good for the most people. But it can be very, very scary because it can lead to very scary things in which individual rights become subservient to the greater good, and that can lead to things like totalitarianism.

It's a slippery slope. It can be dangerous territory there.

Yes, very dangerous.

Given that dopamine is all about the future, this will have an effect on our desire for new things, but it can also have an effect on how we feel about consumption after we've purchased something. Everyone has experienced this, where they've felt like they really needed something, they go and buy it, and within a day or two, they may feel buyer's remorse. Can you explain a little bit about what effect dopamine has on buyer's remorse?

When dopamine circuits are active, it gives us feelings of excitement and anticipation, of desire, all of these pleasurable things. There's a great quote in A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Christopher Robin asks him, "What do you like best in the world?" And Pooh's about to say eating honey, but then he remembers there's a moment just before he starts to eat honey that's even better, and that's the dopamine. Now here's the problem: our dopamine circuits only process information about the future. So if

a potential ‘good’ exists in the future, our dopamine circuits will be active. But as soon as the future becomes the present, it goes outside of the realm of dopamine processing and into the realm of other chemical processing in the brain. And so what happens when the future becomes the present, dopamine shuts down, and that feels kind of awful, having dopamine shut down.

Imagine standing in line. I really like lattes and so a lot of times I’ll go to the store and get a latte. You stand in line; you’re thinking about your latte. You get to the front of line, and they tell you the latte machine is broken. Boom, dopamine comes down and you feel resentful and deprived and pissed off. That’s the same thing that happens when you buy something that you really want, because what is possible becomes what is. Now, there can be great joy in what is, but it’s not dopamine, and as we talked about, we tend not to be very good with those other chemicals, and so you get dopamine down, the other one up, but we’re not good with that other one, so we don’t experience it. All we experience is boom, dopamine drops. Why did I spend all of this money on this jacket? It’s not transforming my life the way dopamine told me it would.

You talk about ‘the fall’ afterwards and the rush prior to consuming or experiencing something new. It reminds me a lot of addiction. What role does dopamine play in addiction to new things or new experiences? Are people addicted to the dopamine, the effect of the dopamine rush for experiences or things, or in the case of drugs, is it the drug itself?

All drugs of abuse, drugs of abuse affect us in different ways. Cocaine is different from alcohol, but they all have a final common pathway of boosting dopamine in the reward centre of the brain. Now, getting addicted

to drugs is a little bit different than getting addicted to things like shopping or sex or the internet. And that’s because the drugs have a direct chemical effect on the reward centre, and so they are not liable to the modification that other circuits bring in with more natural behaviours. And so drugs bypass all of that. They blast dopamine and it makes us feel like we’ve just hit a home run in the World Series, or we have just won the Nobel Prize. You get natural dopamine before, looking forward to doing that hit. You get artificial dopamine during, and then after you get a crash like nobody’s business.

Because you’ve had the double dose.

You’ve had the double dose, and the artificial stimulation takes it up so much higher than anything natural that it breaks the system. When you get that dopamine crash afterwards, you’re absolutely miserable and you are obsessed with getting more of the drug to get yourself back up there. To say you’re addicted to the drug, say you’re addicted to dopamine, it’s kind of the same thing because it’s the drug that’s blasting the dopamine.

Now with non-drug addictions, like we can say for example, social media addictions, it’s not exactly the same, because you are going through the natural pathways without distorting them chemically, but you are destroying them in a different way. It’s sort of like the food companies did an enormous amount of research so they could make ultra-processed foods that would maximally stimulate dopamine. We do get addicted to those things. By the same token, social media companies like Meta, they have neuroscience experts on their staff studying ways to maximally stimulate dopamine with their algorithms, with their interfaces, in order to make it as addictive as possible.

Drugs bypass all of that. They blast dopamine and it makes us feel like we’ve just hit a home run in the World Series, or we have just won the Nobel Prize.

I'm getting the sense that in contemporary society, dopamine is abundant. It's not something we really need to seek out anymore. It seems to be something that we need to try and decrease rather than increase; the ability to have that dopamine hit is everywhere. Do we need to be looking at ways to decrease the amount of dopamine that we have in our lives? To get enjoyment out of things that we already know, that we've already experienced, the commonplace or the known? Do we need to make that shift from high-level dopamine to a lower-level dopamine life?

I think absolutely that's right. With modern technology, it's become easier and easier to make dopamine abundant. But as we talked about earlier, you develop tolerance to dopamine. The first hit of cocaine is going to get you higher than anything else, and it's the same with things like social media and ultra-processed food and meaningless sex. It stops giving us pleasure after a while. You know about doomsscrolling. You're looking for that dopamine hit. It's not coming, but you can't stop because you're enslaved by it.

So I think that we need to be a little bit more deliberate in the choices that we make, and we need to ask ourselves why. Am I clicking on this link because I really think it's going to make me happy, or am I clicking on this link because somehow I'm chained

to the computer and I can't get up and go outside and go for a walk?

Dopamine is powerful. It's very hard to overcome addictions, but it's not impossible. And if we ask ourselves, well, is there anything more powerful than dopamine that we can pit against it to try and free ourselves from this enslavement? The answer is social interactions, when you're just enjoying being with somebody, you're not trying to seduce them. You're not

that's not going to work. They create a support system.

Social media, which has gotten so addictive with dopamine, with the likes and how many friends do you have? That originally started out based on the non-dopaminergic joy of connecting with people. It originally wasn't about meeting strangers. It was about a new way to share things with people that you were connected to in real life. That's why it took off. I think that that's where the salvation is going to come from.

Society as a whole saying: "This is no longer cool; you no longer fit in by having the most followers and the most likes; you no longer fit in by wearing the latest fast fashion; you fit in by being able to establish meaningful relationships with other people." I think we're seeing glimmers of that, and I think that as we get more and more insight into the fact that constant dopamine is a dead end that's not going to take us anywhere, it's not going to make us grow, it's not going to give us satisfaction, I hope we're going to gradually shift more into the direction of appreciating other people in our social contacts.

I really like that. It seems like you're advocating a shift from consumption to connection.

I think that's a wonderful way of saying it. Beautiful, the alliteration. ☐

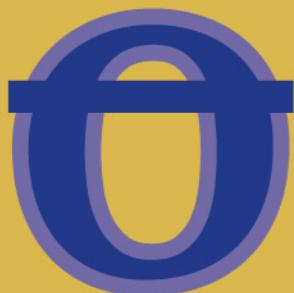


trying to sell them anything. You're not even planning a vacation with them in the future. You're just enjoying being with them, there's no dopamine there. Those are all here and now in the present chemicals, and that's also a pretty wonderful thing.

And it's no coincidence that when people are battling addictions, they don't try to do it on their own, because

“Everything’s a wheel, turning and turning, never stopping.”

– Natalie Babbitt



“There is nothing new under the sun.”

Ecclesiastes

“There are two kinds of fools: one says, ‘This is old, therefore it is good’; the other says, ‘This is new, therefore it is better.’”

Dean Inge



“To most men the new things came little by little and day by day, remarkably enough, but not so abruptly as to overwhelm.”

H.G. Wells

“There is nothing new except what is forgotten.”

Mademoiselle Bertin

"How shall we plan, that all be fresh
and new -
Important matter yet attractive too?"
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



"What is valuable is not new, and what is
new is not valuable."

Daniel Webster

"Human nature is fond of novelty."
Pliny the Elder

"Observe, the best of novelties palls when it
becomes town talk."
Friedrich Schiller

A large yellow letter 'E' with a thick purple outline, positioned to the left of the quote by Cicero.



"There is nothing better fitted to de-
light the reader than change of cir-
cumstances and varieties of fortune."
Cicero

A large blue graphic element shaped like a question mark, positioned between the quotes by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Daniel Webster.

A red graphic element shaped like a question mark, positioned to the right of the quote by Bertolt Brecht.

A blue graphic element shaped like a question mark, positioned to the right of the quote by Jean Baudrillard.

"Because things are the way they are,
things will not stay the way they are."
Bertolt Brecht



by Marianna Alessandri

Beginning again

If I could have my babies again, I would do it better. I wouldn't eat spoonfuls of peanut butter at 3 am after breastfeeding, only to find out two years later that my inconsolable son was allergic to peanuts. I would smell their hair more, and I'd abandon the sleep log that I kept as proof that I could be trusted. Regretful people like me fantasise about re-taking life's tests, and some of us have a nasty habit of living in years gone by.

Not everyone does this. Some people care nothing for the past; half the time, they don't even remember it. These individuals don't soak in shame the way I do, although they occasionally give into the "*Je ne regrette rien*" tattoo. For a person who has to remind herself to live in the present, it's mysterious that some people seem to do it naturally.

But the no-regrets type has its drawbacks. These individuals may not crave re-dos, but they do sometimes chase new experiences. This includes birders who get up before sunrise to catch a glimpse of a rare bird, and snorkellers who aren't happy until they spot a seahorse. This type sometimes gets bored when the high of 'new' wears off, and they can be guilty of living in the future more than in the present. These souls need novelty like I need a time machine.

"Novelty" comes from the Latin word *novus*, or "new". The problem with perpetually seeking it was recorded a long time ago in the book of Ecclesiastes:

*What has been, it is what will be,
And what has been done, it is what will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun.*

If novelty doesn't exist any more than time-machines do, how are any of us supposed to live today in a way we can be proud of?

The time-honoured answer for regretful people and novelty lovers alike is to remember that we are dust and unto dust we shall return. Throughout the history of philosophy, weak knees and overdeveloped brains have combined forces to obsess over human mortality. Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus relied heavily on confronting the inescapable fact of mortality to give life meaning. All of this will end soon, they reasoned, so live wisely. Martin Heidegger was among those who keyed in on death, but his student and sometime lover Hannah Arendt made the opposite move: since you have been born, live

well. The German-Jewish philosopher keyed into natality as one of life's most undervalued driving forces.

"Natality" comes from the Latin *natus*, meaning "to be born", and Arendt is rare in the history of philosophy for considering it as important a part of the human condition as mortality. For Arendt, babies symbolise the best that natality has to offer: they are untouched, unspoiled creatures, capable of changing the world. Arendt believed that all people – with and without kids – are drawn to new life for this reason. In a baby's eyes, cheeks, or tiny flailing fists, we see possibility incarnated.

Birth also makes a good metaphor. New Year's Eve appeals to lovers of natality because it is then that so many of us feel ready and able to become otherwise. Growing up in New York City, as much as I didn't like going to school, I loved smelling pencils and Sharpie markers in early September. Like every new year, every new grade represented a chance to recreate myself. Now, when the semester begins, I tell my university students that they can adopt a new nickname if they choose, since no one knows them. In this class, I say, you are not tied to your past: no one knows you got left behind in first grade, and your classmates haven't heard about your scandalous social media post. "This is a chance for you to grow," I say. The shy students can peel the cobwebs off their mouths, and the loud ones can become better listeners. All of us can lean on natality to act differently.

Or to act at all, Arendt would say. She defined action as the articulation of natality. Acting flaunts our having been born, not created or built. If we were clones, wrote Arendt, "reproducible repetitions of the same model", then we'd

have reason to despair. But because each human is unique, we possess the power to do something unexpected. If we have become boring, it's by habit and expectation, not by design. The most predictable of us are wasting our wildest part; we might as well be clones, or robots, or mannequins. Thankfully, both teenagers and mid-life crises are destructive proof that we will not be tamed – not forever anyway. "The fact that humans are capable of action," wrote Arendt, "means that the unexpected can be expected from them, that they are able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each human is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world." When I start predicting my partner's moves – or even my own – I am short-changing natality.

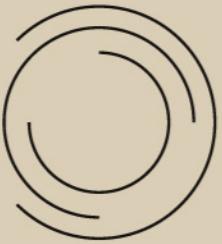
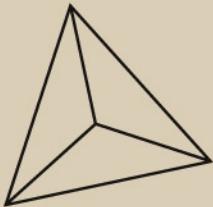
Without natality, which Arendt called "the miracle that saves the world", things simply go to ruin. Decay is as predictable as it gets: metals rust, roofs leak, and sinkholes swallow sidewalks. Without a constant influx of tiny human beings onto this planet, there would be no hope of revitalisation. 385,000 worldwide births per day gives us 385,000 reasons to begin mending the world.

When we embrace natality, however, we inherit a new mantra. To paraphrase Arendt, because we are a beginning, we can begin. In other words, we were born to act. To resist. To stand up. To create. To repair. Lovers of novelty can learn from Arendt that in seeking newness *ex nihilo* we have overlooked ourselves. And the regretful among us can keep in mind that, even though we can't go backwards, we can begin again every moment. We are, many of us, looking outside for a miracle that lives inside of us.

New Year's Eve appeals to lovers of natality because it is then that so many of us feel ready and able to become otherwise.

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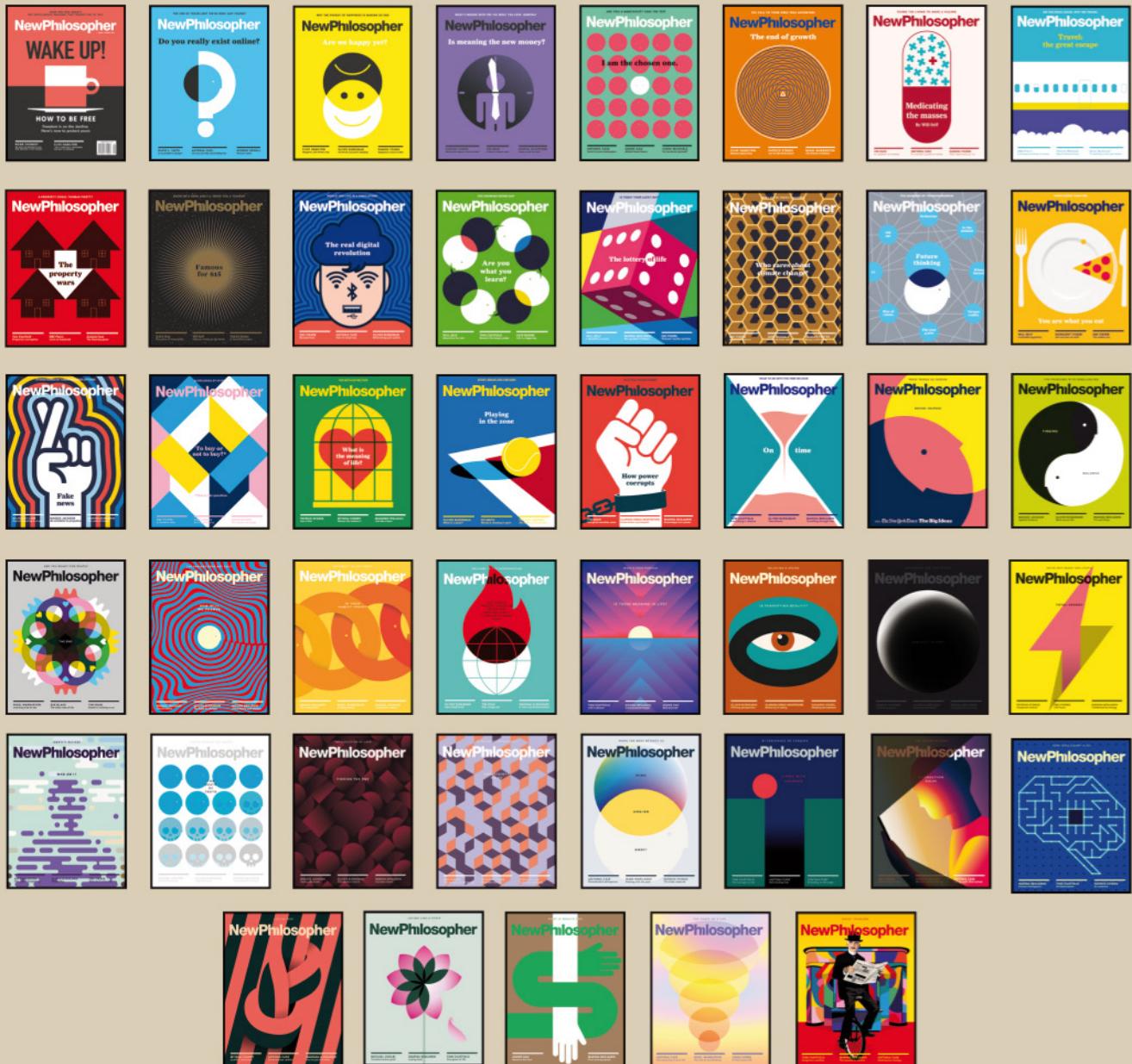
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NOVELTY

/ 'nɒvəlti/

noun:

1. the quality of being new, original, or unusual;
2. a new or unfamiliar thing or experience;
3. denoting an object intended to be amusing as a result of its unusual design;
4. a small and inexpensive toy or ornament.

Origin: late Middle English: from Old French *novelte*, from *novel*: 'new, fresh'.

Source: Oxford English Dictionary



The Circus, by Georges Seurat, 1890-1891

by Nigel Warburton

Novel thinking

In western philosophy, as in western art, originality is highly valued. Within the academic world, it is a stated prerequisite for a doctoral thesis in philosophy that it should make an original contribution, not simply reproduce what others have already said. Any philosophy PhD will build on what has gone before, but a thesis that contained nothing novel wouldn't pass the *viva voce*. The originality requirement here doesn't necessarily mean

startling innovation – it can be met by giving a new way of synthesising older thoughts, or a new interpretation of, or critical attack on, another philosopher's thought. To make a mark in the long history of western philosophy, though, more is required: you really do have to say something new.

According to Alfred North Whitehead, though, “the safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that

it consists in a series of footnotes to Plato”. This claim has become a cliché. It's usually repeated as a truism. But is it true? If it is, then the history of western philosophy can't involve radical innovation. It's more like what Thomas Kuhn described in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* as ‘normal science’, when fine distinctions and clarifications are made within a pre-existing paradigm rather than a series of revolutions in ideas.



Plato was a genius, but he didn't cover everything that's worth saying about philosophy. True, he had influential ideas about metaphysics (the nature of reality), epistemology (how we get to know anything), ethics (how we should live), politics (how we should live together), what kind of art there should be, the nature of the mind, and much else besides. So he did give us a map of key areas of the subject that has passed the test of time. He didn't, however, have the final word on any of these topics, and few people in recent times (Iris Murdoch may have been an exception) have embraced his conclusions wholeheartedly. Many more are happy to follow, for example, his pupil Aristotle's approach to ethics based on human flourishing and virtue, than are ready to embrace Plato's ideas about an abstract idea of The Good.

What's the best that can be said about Whitehead's claim? The great Platonic image of the cave in the *Republic* was designed to make you believe that what you take to be reality is nothing more than the equivalent of flickering shadows on the wall of the cave – mere appearance, not the real thing. Like the people chained facing the cave you take the shadows

for reality, when in fact they are cast by objects carried in front of a fire that is behind you. Reality, Plato thought, is not reached through perception; rather it is through thinking that we are able to abstract to the world of the Forms, perfect versions of every type of thing.

At a pinch, almost every philosophical discussion could be expressed in terms of appearance and reality, so in that very broad sense they are all footnotes to Plato (though Plato surely wasn't the first philosopher to question appearances). Are things as they seem to be or is there a deeper or non-obvious explanation? Here's a modern question that many are asking today about Large Language Models (LLMs). It might seem from the way that they respond to questions that some LLMs are genuinely conscious. But is that really so? Or do they just appear to be conscious?

Take another contemporary issue; lobsters don't appear to feel pain, but do they actually feel it? Some philosophers, notably Jonathan Birch, have argued that there is sufficient evidence already that lobsters can feel pain for us to adopt a precautionary attitude, and that we should avoid doing anything that might cause them excessive

pain; such as killing them by dropping them in boiling water which doesn't result in an instant death – they survive for several minutes.

In other words, it appears at first glance that lobsters can't feel pain, so we need not have qualms about dropping them into the saucepan alive, but now on reflection and given the empirical evidence, there are good grounds for questioning that assumption, and for giving them the benefit of the doubt, either by not killing them at all, or by stunning them with an electric shock before cooking them.

Both the question about LLMs and the one about lobsters, though they seem very much of our century, could be redescribed in terms of appearance and reality, and so could just about fit in with that picture of European philosophy has footnotes to Plato. When it comes down to specific philosophical questions discussed today, though, many would be very alien to Plato and were he to teleport into present philosophical discussions it's highly unlikely that he would have a sense of *déjà vu*.

If I'm right, it's time to stop citing Whitehead's bold claim because it's just not true. We should avoid the genetic fallacy of assuming that because

Reality, Plato thought, is not reached through perception; rather it is through thinking that we are able to abstract to the world of the Forms.

Ethical questions about privacy have been transformed by widespread surveillance unleashed by the internet, video and facial recognition technology.

the western tradition in philosophy derives from Ancient Greek thinking, and particularly from Plato's dialogues, that it must therefore still retain something of the character of that philosophy and be indebted to it in the detail. Things change and evolve over time and can be very different from their first instantiation. Although present day philosophy overlaps with Ancient Greek concerns, and the basic question that Socrates asked in the Platonic dialogues, "How should we live?" is ours too, we shouldn't fall into the trap of believing that the Ancient Greeks solved the problems of philosophy and their thoughts simply need a few footnotes.

The Greeks used many of the same methods of critical argument, counter-argument, counterexample, dialogue, and imaginative thought experiments

that philosophers use today, but there are numerous new areas of the subject triggered by societal and particularly technological developments.

Here are a few. The philosophy of war in the age of nuclear and chemical weapons and lethal autonomous devices is very different from what it was in Plato's day. Ethical questions about privacy have been transformed by widespread surveillance unleashed by the internet, video, and facial recognition technology. Questions about the possibility of uploading our minds to computers would not have made much sense to Plato and his contemporaries. I could go on; but the upshot is that Plato just wrote an early chapter in the history of philosophy. The best philosophers alive today are writing later ones, not footnotes. □



"Mais, c'est vieux."

NOVELTY ONLINE

100%

In every country surveyed, adults ages 18 to 39 are significantly more likely than those 40 and older to use the internet. 73% of adults in India who are younger than 40 say they use the internet, compared with 36% of Indians 40 and older. Similar gaps exist in Hungary, Indonesia, Mexico, and Poland. Differences by age in advanced economies are relatively small. In just over half of these countries, internet use among 18- to 39-year-olds is universal, at 100%.

9 in 10

A majority of adults in all countries surveyed use the internet. Internet users are defined as people who say they use the internet at least occasionally or have access to the internet via a smartphone. In most countries surveyed, around nine-in-ten or more adults are online. At the upper bound, 99% of South Koreans are online. Comparatively fewer adults are online in India (56%), Nigeria (57%), and Kenya (66%).

75%

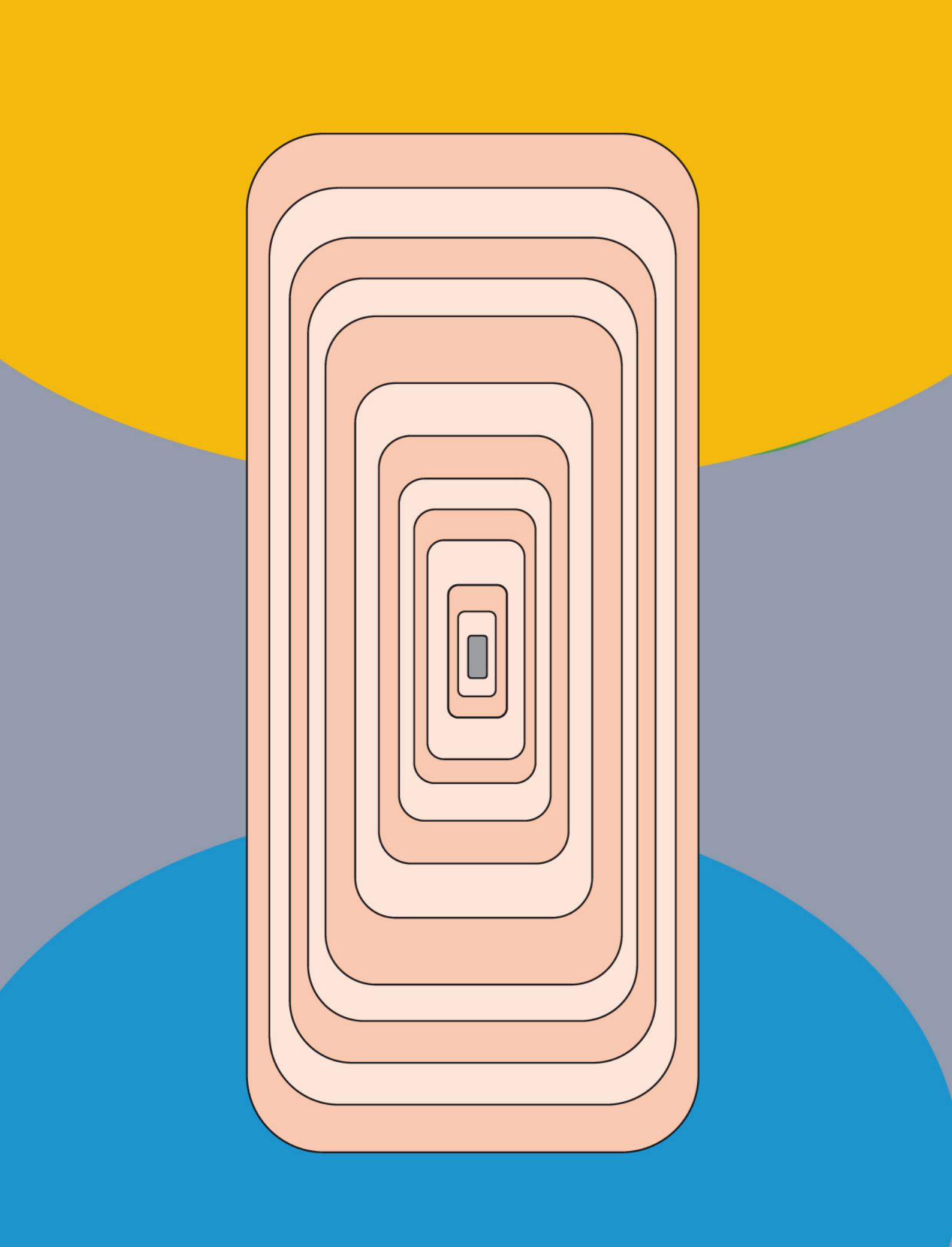
Majorities of adults in nearly every country surveyed say they own a smartphone. Rates of smartphone ownership are highest in South Korea, where 98% report owning a smartphone, and lowest in India and Nigeria, where fewer than 50% do. Around three-quarters or more of adults in advanced economies in North America, Europe and Asia say they have smartphones.

98%

In India, around three-quarters of those with at least a secondary school education own a smartphone, compared with around one-third of people with less education. Adults aged 18 to 39 are more likely than their elders to own smartphones in nearly every country surveyed. For example, 98% of younger adults in Hungary say they own a smartphone, compared with 65% of adults 40 and older.

2 X

The education gap with internet use is most pronounced among people in emerging economies, such as India and Nigeria. In these countries, those with more education are about twice as likely as those with less education to use the internet. Similarly, adults with higher incomes are much more likely than those with lower incomes to use the internet.





by André Dao

The cycle of novelty

In 1887, as construction began on an iron tower, taller than any human-made edifice yet built, a group of prominent architects and artists published an editorial to “protest with all our strength, with all our indignation in the name of slighted French taste, against the erection... of this useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower.” To drive their arguments home, the protestors drew on images of the still nascent Industrial Revolution, imploring the public to imagine “a giddy ridiculous tower dominating Paris like a gigantic black smokestack”, a tower of “bolted sheet metal”. In contrast to this dark picture, the protestors evoked the classic monuments of French culture: Notre Dame, the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe.

It was not, as we know now, a winning argument. Today, nothing is more evocative of Paris than the Tour

Eiffel – indeed, visitors can readily buy postcards on which the tower sits alongside those classic monuments. But it was not that the protestors were simply wrong about the aesthetic value of the tower. In fact, by running the Parisian icons together, it is we who tend to forget its unique qualities: the first public monument to be made of iron – hitherto an exclusively pragmatic material – it was also the first man-made object to exceed 200 – let alone 300 – metres in height. In construction, style and scale, there had simply never been anything like it in human history.

And that was precisely the point – and what the protestors’ arguments about smokestacks and bolted sheet metal failed to appreciate. The Eiffel Tower – designed by an engineer rather than an architect, another sore point for the naysayers – was new,

and in this it captured the mood of the times. It was, after all, designed to be the centrepiece of the 1889 World Exhibition, which was itself a celebration of that most nineteenth century idea: progress. And what is progress but the succession of novelty after novelty?

So to say that the tower marked a decisive break from the past was to make exactly the wrong argument at the wrong time. In 1913, the French writer Charles Péguy said that “the world has changed less since the time of Jesus Christ than it has in the last thirty years”. As art historian Robert Hughes explains, this sense of unprecedented change was the defining feature of a period stretching from 1880 to 1930, when European and American society’s “idea of itself, its sense of history, its beliefs, pieties, and modes of production – and its art” were “in

The tower's success was because, not despite, it was able to capture something of the changing world.

a state of utter convulsion." Today, we call that period in western art 'modernism' – a time when, as Hughes puts it, artists believed that art "could find the necessary metaphors by which a radically changing culture could be explained to its inhabitants".

Viewed in this light, the Eiffel Tower's significance becomes apparent. It was the perfect metaphor for the vast and rapid changes being wrought by industrial capitalism – even its very materials and manner of construction evoked the railways and factories that had remade the countryside and filled the cities with smoke. In other words, the tower's success was because, not despite, it was able to capture something of the changing world.

Indeed, we can think of this as the aim of modernist art more generally. Whether in the novel angles of Picasso's Cubism, or in the disjunction of Joyce's sentences, modernist art strove to produce in its audience what Hughes called the "shock of the new". That is not to say that modernist art was concerned with experimentation for its own sake (or novelty for novelty's sake). Recall that for Hughes, modernist art had an essentially explanatory character – to explain, through metaphor, a changing world to itself.

To understand what that might mean, we can go back to the literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, who had also theorised the modern through the motif of the "shock". For Benjamin, shock was fundamentally a psychoanalytic concept, used to describe the excessive energies of the world external to the self. The role of the consciousness is to register these shocks – that is, to make sense of them – so as to blunt their potentially traumatic effect. We dream and we recollect, and in doing so, we neutralise the shock of the aggressive parent, or the disappointing event.

Extending this Freudian idea, Benjamin suggested that art plays a similar role to the consciousness, but at a society-wide level. Take the new experience of being a pedestrian in one of the nineteenth century's great cities. Moving through the city traffic "involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through [the walker] in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery." Responding to this shock, and sublimating it into art, came the literary figure of the *flâneur*, the person who wanders the streets of the metropolis, observing and being observed.

In this way, art provided a kind of preparation for modern life. Film, wrote Benjamin, was a case in point: through this new technology, "the human sensorium [was subjected] to a complex kind of training", in which "perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle."

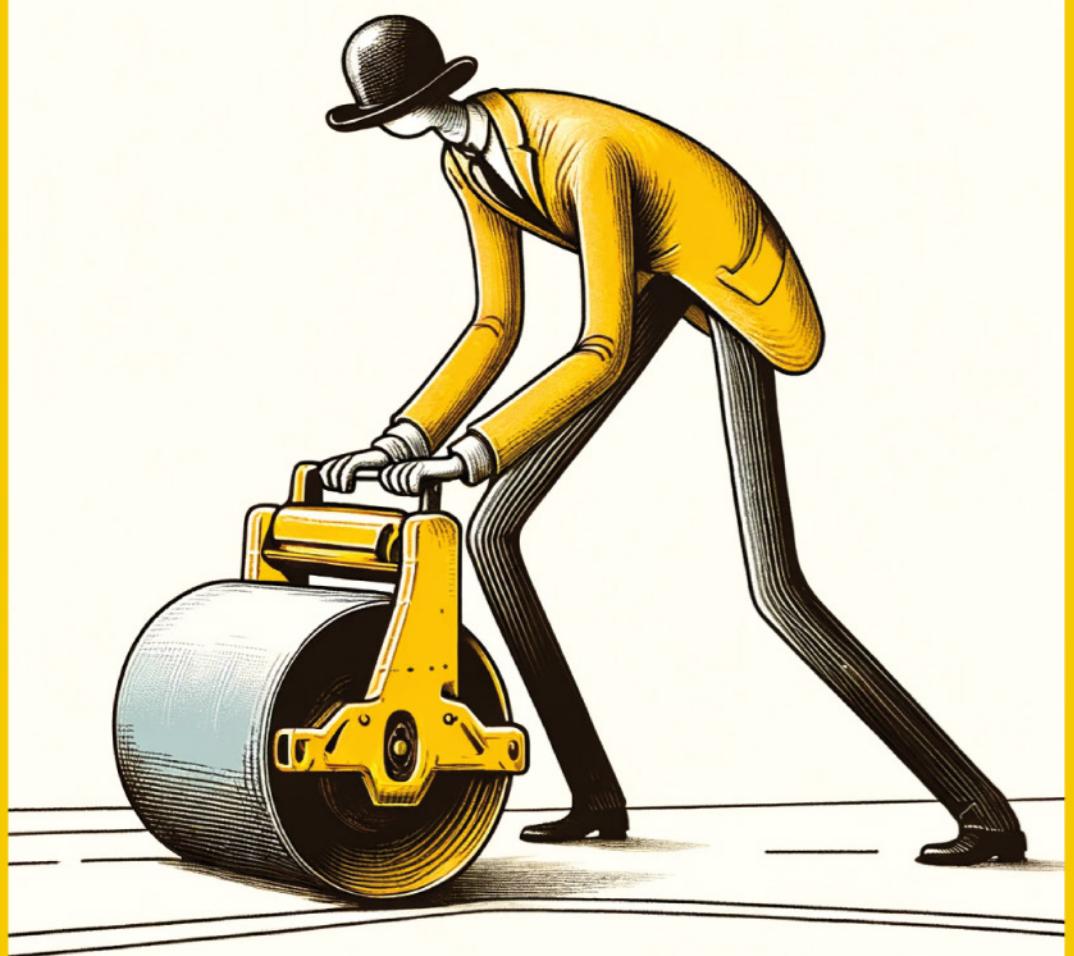
The tension in this description of the role of art is that to effectively manage the shock of the new, art necessarily has to have its own shock value. Contemporary responses to the Eiffel Tower, Picasso, and the invention of film are testament to that. But at the same time, for art to play the role of

protective consciousness, it can't be so shocking as to be traumatic – it must be assimilable by the audience.

That is one reason why modernist art was so often in conversation with tradition. Even as it purported to critique or even outright reject what had come before, it more often than not took up – or dismantled – the tropes and forms of more classical eras. In other words, modernism helped usher in the new by smuggling it in with the old.

There is an irony here. Modernist artists were evidently successful at shocking their audiences. But a condition of continued success was that they had to strive to find ever new ways to shock. Over time, they became all too successful, as the capacity of art to truly shock waned. As Hughes noted in 1980, modernism eventually became an "entropic, institutionalised parody of its old self... like a period room in a museum, a historical space that we can enter, look at, but no longer be part of". What was once shockingly new is now held up as the pinnacle of tradition. The Eiffel Tower is now a banal image promoting tourism.

Today, we live in modernism's museum. During modernism's heyday, the public could, like Péguy, marvel at the disorientating pace of change. But now, after modernism's end, change itself has become the constant. Far from being surprised by new inventions, we expect them – indeed, we fail to plan for catastrophic climate change in the expectation of some new discovery. Charles Baudelaire, the modernist poet who inspired Benjamin's thoughts on modernity, had the foresight to see the paradox of successful artistic experimentation: the goal of producing new combinations of words and images was not the novelty itself, but the "creation of a cliché".





Red Cottage With Pool, 2021, by Melissa Chandon

by Melissa Chandon

Ever-changing landscapes

There are so many novel ways to create art these days, from video to digital to installation to photography to performance art. However, you have opted for a more traditional method: paint on canvas. Why did you choose this method and how does it allow you to best express the ideas in your work?

I have experimented with other time-based media in graduate school, and photography has always been part of my practice. But, that said, I have a strong love of paint on canvas. I have been lucky and have been able to travel to see museums in various cities in Europe, New Zealand, and across the United States, including Hawaii.

What is magical about paint is when you look at the work from afar you see the image. But if you go near to the work, you see the individual brush strokes. I distinctly remember

the sensation of looking at my first in-person large Monet painting. I could imagine his steps towards the work. I could imagine him walking near and then backing up and looking at the individual brush stroke he made. It was like magic. I was literally walking in Monet's steps. Looking at images of paintings in art books is a totally different experience. The image is smooth, flattened out and you don't get that same feeling of the painting. You do not walk in the artist's footsteps, and it is impossible to comprehend the scale of the work. Scale changes an individual's response to the work. Think of Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, which has the dimensions 349.3 x 776.6 cm – 11.5 feet tall by 25.5 feet long.

Which other medium – and perhaps here we can focus on more contemporary

ways of producing art – appeals to you most and why?

I believe an artist must examine what they are trying to say. For me, using a time-based medium was an excellent way to express my thoughts on what it was like growing up in the United States. Through my family's many moves to various locations in the US, I was able to look at family structure and the ever-changing roadside vernacular. Road trips were a huge part of my education, and my parents saw this as an opportunity to expose their children to different ways of life, cultural identity, and economic diversity.

Photography has always been important as I reference photos in my paintings. Some I have taken, and some are from the public domain. I have looked to Richard Avedon, who changed our understanding of fashion



and beauty. Ansel Adams is another photographer who photographed the landscape and influenced so many by his view, camera format, and presentation. Annie Leibovitz, who brought celebrity and photography to the forefront of culture and has had a direct influence on current social media platforms. We can look at the French “photograffeur” JR who pastes huge photographs onto buildings. Let’s not forget Banksy the famous street artist and political activist. I could go on and on about photographers and artists who use identifiable imagery. The list is so long.

I feel it is important to look at the work of David Hockney. He is a painter, but he also used technology to produce his work. We can look at his

iPad renderings and his digital multi perspective time-based projections. He is an artist who I hold in high esteem, and he is not afraid to tackle technology and invention in his work. All his works are modern and inventive and impactful, while based in the tradition and foundation of painting.

Your artwork often seems to depict scenes that are familiar to many but tend to have been left behind in the modern world. Why do you paint the scenes in your artwork?

I feel this is a huge question. I have been influenced by advertising and visual communication. Bottom line is I paint what I love. I am attracted to mid-century iconic representations of pop

culture. Images of what could be considered as representations of the American Dream: the house, the car, the boat, and the swimming pool. I am drawn to compositions that have a strong geometric component. I feel while my imagery, the landscape, and objects in the landscape do have a modern twist by using colour and geometry, I do not see my work as longing for the past.

You travelled a lot with your family as a child – as a result you would have seen many new towns and sights along the way. Are you still drawn by movement and the new experiences that come with travelling?

Yes, I am still drawn to travel as I feel we or I can learn from other cultures.



Pink Floating Tube in Pool, 2017, by Melissa Chandon



Terra Cotta Barn with Pool and Spring Grass, 2024, by Melissa Chandon

A diverse education and understanding of beauty and pop culture is very important as it influences my work. I am currently a professor at the University of California, Davis. I teach a class called 'Form and Colour'. Form as in composition and Colour as in colour theory. This is a foundation course for the Design Department and is under the category of Visual Communication.

For me, this is the perfect complement to my art practice. Everything in our lives has been 'designed' and teaching is a perfect way to ask questions of my students as to how they see themselves in the future. With issues like climate change and overpopulation, future generations are facing questions that I did not have to think about as a youth.

What role do your personal experiences play in your art?

We are not standalone beings. We are influenced by life along with pop culture. I feel my work and the work of all artists is autobiographical. What other view can we draw from but our own experiences?

You say that "the value of my painting is its role as a kind of memory of the recent past, a past that I share with many others". Why do you think it is important to preserve the memory of the recent past?

I think we can learn from our past. Throughout history many good and bad choices have been made. Hopefully we can learn from both and make better choices for our future. I feel my work represents a shared experience and individuals



Oliver's Barn with Green Field, by Melissa Chandon



Country Escape, by Melissa Chandon

can put their memories into my pictures. I purposefully do not put people in my works. If you do, then the narrative becomes about the person in the painting.

Contemporary society is obsessed with ‘the new’ and your work, with its emphasis on traditional landscapes and objects, is a wonderful counterpoint to our obsession with novelty. What do you think are the dangers with too much of a focus on newness and change in our lives?

That is another huge question. I feel advertising and social media platforms feed into our quest for shiny new things and are driven by companies driven by sales and profit. One of my goals is to have individuals look to the past, perhaps relish the engineering and design from the past. That is why I ask my students to ask themselves what they see for their future self.

With the limited resources our planet has to offer, this is perhaps the most critical question on the horizon we face now. Personally, I use water-based (acrylic paint and recently watercolour paints on paper) materials. I use organic cotton canvas and I have a family-owned business stretch and build all my canvases.

“Everything in our lives has been ‘designed’ and teaching is a perfect way to ask questions of my students as to how they see themselves in the future.”



By Antonia Case

The descent into nothing

When Australian breakdancer Rachael Gunn, AKA ‘B-girl Raygun’, kangaroo-hopped across the stage at the Paris 2024 Olympics, never could she have foreseen that her performance would be viewed, and her name shared, by more people than almost any other athlete who competed at the 19-day event. Humans love novelty, and breakdancing – complete with its scissor-kick moves – had never been held at the Olympics before.

The human brain is a novelty detector – scanning its surroundings for what’s new and unexpected. We tune out the ordinary and focus on what’s extraordinary, a trait that has held evolutionary merits (there’s little gained in observing a vista of sunflowers when a grizzly bear is approaching).

This fixation on novelty is apparent in newborns who will stare intently at a new image but will eventually ignore it once the brain has adapted to the stimulus. What was once titillating becomes humdrum – very much like breakdancing. If B-girl Raygun were to perform her ground-swimming routine a second time, few would find it riveting. The expression “been there, done that” fairly well sums up the human brain.

Progress and growth in human society are underpinned by the novelty effect. When we continually seek out the new, we often find better ways of doing and making things. Take Scottish microbiologist Alexander Fleming as an example: when Fleming was investigating staphylococcus bacteria (a bacteria that causes infections in

humans) in his lab in London, Fleming was keyed into novelty. His brain was instinctively scanning for what was new or different and it readily picked up on something unusual in one of his petri dishes. A mould, later identified as *Penicillium notatum*, had contaminated the dish and the mould was destroying the bacteria. Voila! Here was a substance that was destroying bacteria, a substance Fleming initially named “mould juice” but later called penicillin, leading to one of the biggest breakthroughs in medical science.

Curiosity is the trait that not only inspires us to learn, but also aids focus and long-term memory formation. If you are curious about philosophy, for example, your curiosity will impel you to read many books,



underline ideas, pursue leads, and ultimately to arrive at new thought. Without curiosity, you will skim read at best. Descartes' curiosity about the nature of reality – *What is real? What is certain?* – led him down the rabbit hole of doubting everything, including the existence of the senses, the material world, even his own existence. But even as he doubted everything, he realised that he couldn't doubt the fact that he was doubting. Doubt, being a form of thought, required a thinker. Hence, the very act of doubting proved the existence of the self as a thinking being. This led to his famous statement: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“I think, therefore I am”).

People who are naturally curious (the neophiliacs) keenly move towards new experiences and, therefore, often have very expansive lives. We all know of someone who embraces novelty – they've climbed mountains, sailed seas, lived in exotic locations, and have no end of tales to tell. We also know of another whose penchant for novelty has led to disaster – infidelity, bankruptcy, fatal accidents, and so forth. Novelty is good for us, but not always – and that's where things get a little more complicated.

Fortunately, or not, we live in an information age that is fuelled by novelty. Today, if you like to read blogs, there are 600 million of them to choose from, which are producing a total of 7.5 million posts per day. There are blogs on politics, technology, parenting, extreme ironing, missing socks, and toilet tourism (finding ‘fascinating’ toilets on one’s travels). America alone houses 32 million bloggers. But then there's also the 95 million photos and videos uploaded to Instagram daily, detailing everything from photographs of

buttered toast and avocado to a simple photo of a plain egg (which garnered 56 million likes). And this isn't to mention the thousands of movies, television shows, podcasts, televised sport, gaming, and the 694,000 hours of video consumed by YouTube users every minute.

When Michelangelo, the most celebrated artist of the renaissance, sought inspiration, he studied classical sculpture, paintings, and texts, and to better understand human anatomy he dissected cadavers at a monastery hospital. When the great artist carved David out of marble, he was not distracted by pixelated images of B-girl Raygun radiating from his workstation. In short, he didn't have to contend with the novelty machine that is the internet.

It's interesting that early Christian thinkers distinguished between good and bad forms of knowledge seeking, labelling the good ‘studiousness’ and the bad ‘curiosity’. Curiosity was traditionally regarded as a form of sloth or *acedia*, the latter defined as a state of listlessness or boredom, an inert state without pain or care. “Curiosity stays on the surface of things,” writes John Webster in *The Domain of the Word*. “The moment the unknown becomes known, it is ready to move on. The curious are unable to linger and seek understanding, which means they have a tendency towards the superficial and the fleeting.” In its acute form, it “becomes a species of intellectual promiscuity, driven by addiction to novelty and a compulsion to repeat the experience of discovery”.

Many of us would have experienced the stupefying boredom that often accompanies scrolling through news online. Fuelled by disappointment and frustration, we keep scrolling,

It's interesting that early Christian thinkers distinguished between good and bad forms of knowledge seeking, labelling the good ‘studiousness’ and the bad ‘curiosity’.

searching for something, anything, that will engage our attention; but after an uncertain interval we come away from the screen with a sense that one could only describe as a vast grey nothingness for having scrolled for the sake of scrolling and nothing more. There are no material rewards to be had, and rarely little to be discovered or learned, yet we find ourselves caught up in a feedback loop. For want of sounding alarmist, there's a sense that one partly disintegrates in this scrambled mix; there's a numbing quality to being online for sure, checking emails, searching websites, scrolling, watching...

Of course, a neurotransmitter in our brain called dopamine has much to blame for why we feel compelled to keep seeking, but rarely finding, on the internet. Dopamine is that energy boost or 'rush' we get for seeking out something that will be potentially rewarding for us. If in the past we got hugely rewarded for getting an A on a math's test, for example, then dopamine would motivate us to study hard the next time so that the reward is repeated. The problem with many internet offerings is that it hacks this reward-based learning process by feeding us bite-sized rewards – a new follower on social media, an interesting email, a disaster news story – reinforcing the behaviour to check social media, our email accounts, or online news again and again. The issue is, as we all know, addiction occurs when we do something repeatedly; after a while, like drug or gambling addicts, we're checking our novelty machines with no expectation for receiving a reward at all.

Although dopamine drives these subconscious urges, sloth is riding piggyback. Sitting, scrolling, watching, and listening requires much less energy output than cleaning, repairing, or practicing, for example. As slothful creatures, the invention of the microprocessor has been a godsend.

Back in 1942, C.S. Lewis wrote a satirical novel called *The Screwtape Letters*, consisting of a series of letters written by senior demon Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood on the subtle arts of corrupting the human soul. Screwtape advises Wormwood on how to exploit the weaknesses and habits of humans, referred to as 'the patient', to gradually lead him away from virtue and towards sin. Screwtape writes: "A few weeks ago you had to tempt him to unreality and inattention... but now you will find him opening his arms to you and almost begging you to distract his purpose." Over time, the patient will no longer need to be tempted with pleasures at all, since "you will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention." All healthy activities will be inhibited and "nothing given in return". While Screwtape urges Wormwood that he will be anxious to report spectacular gains, he urges that it's the cumulative effect that matters – a gradual, gentle slope "to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing".

Although dopamine drives these subconscious urges, sloth is riding piggyback. Sitting, scrolling, watching and listening requires much less energy output than cleaning, repairing, or practicing, for example. As slothful creatures, the invention of the microprocessor has been a godsend.



The ‘nothing’ of which Lewis speaks is a spiritual void, a state of non-being or insignificance – severely lacking in fulfilment, meaning, and purpose. In the ‘nothing’, one is neither happy nor miserable, but merely exists in a state of lukewarm indifference. However, the pull of ‘nothing’ is very strong, warns Wormwood, “strong enough to steal away a man’s best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them”.

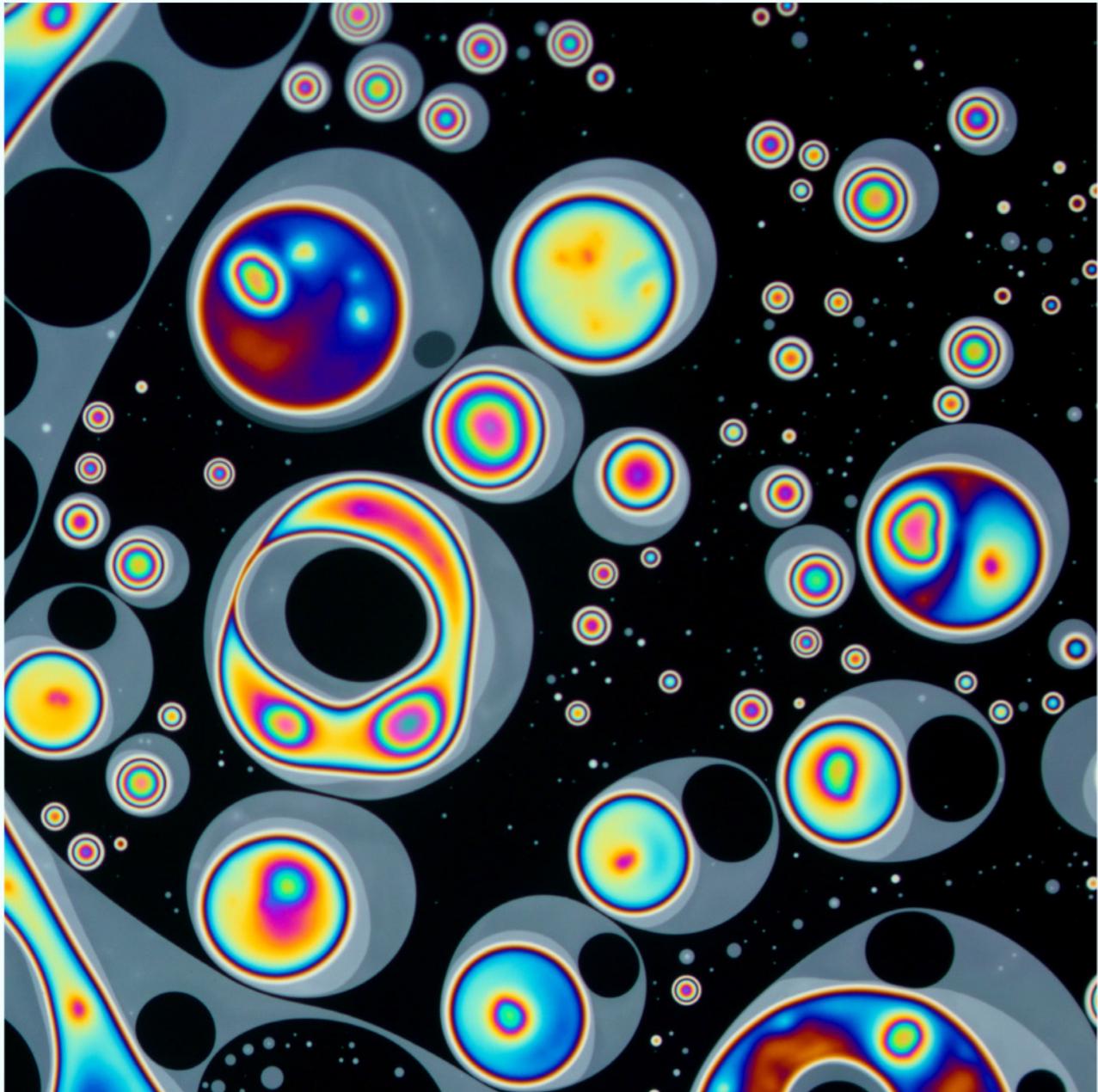
Although Lewis was writing well over half a century before the internet and smartphones became commonplace, he could well have been writing about addiction to these novelty machines.

Of course, novelty is a fine balancing act. Societies that embrace new ideas, innovation, and technological advancements typically have higher economic growth rates. Nations which are open to global trade and the exchange of new ideas and technologies tend to grow faster and have a competitive advantage in global markets. French geographer Fernand Braudel argues that novelty-seeking nations are the leaders of tomorrow: “Can it have been merely coincidence that the future was to belong to the societies fickle enough to care about changing the colours, materials, and shapes of costume, as well as the social order and the map of the world – societies, that is, which were ready to break with their traditions? There is a connection.”

Slower-growth nations, on the contrary, are more circumspect about the gains to be had from novelty. More concerned about social cohesion, cultural continuity, and stability, novelty can be perceived as a threat to the social order or as a force that could disrupt established ways of life. In such societies, social harmony and collective well-being are prioritised over innovation and technological change.

Of course, the challenge is finding that perfect balance between preserving valuable aspects of the status quo and being open to new ideas and innovation. One could visualise it as a tightrope stretched across a chasm – a sheer drop thousands of feet below. A tightrope walker steps out onto the rope carrying a long balancing pole horizontally across their body. The walker feels their body tipping to one side – and the great chasm opening before them – so they quickly move the pole in the opposite direction to counter the movement. As they tip to the other side, they reposition the pole again to keep them centred over the rope. Below, they acknowledge, is a yawning abyss into nothing. The task at hand is to ensure that they don’t tip over the edge. □





Lipid Islands on Soap Bubble, by Karl Gaff

“Dopamine, the neurotransmitter whose purpose is to maximise future rewards... revs our desires, illuminates our imagination... dopamine is a place to begin, not to finish. It can never be satisfied. Dopamine can only say, ‘More’.”

Daniel Z. Lieberman, *The Molecule of More*

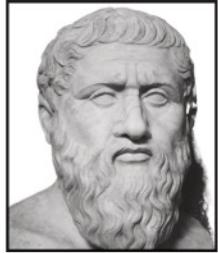


Novelty

The Philosopher

Plato
427–348 BCE

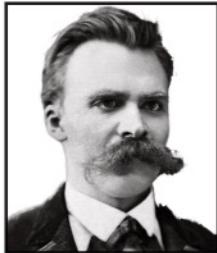
Disorderly tastes



The Scholar

Friedrich Nietzsche
1844–1900

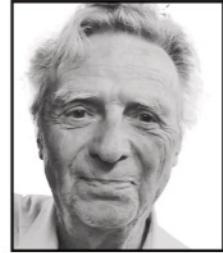
Eternal return



The Rationalist

Joseph Agassiz
1927–2023

Two obstacles



In Heaven's name, Stranger, do you believe that that is the way poetry is composed nowadays in other States? So far as my own observation goes, I know of no practices such as you describe except in my own country and in Lacedaemon; but I do know that novelties are always being introduced in dancing and all other forms of music, which changes due not to the laws, but to disorderly tastes and these are so far from being constantly uniform and stable – like the Egyptian ones you describe – that they are never for a moment uniform.

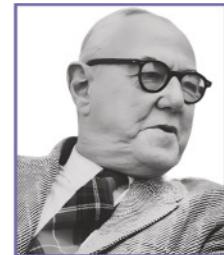
What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness, and say to you, "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence" ... Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine."

There is a saying that was attributed to Louis Agassiz (no relation of mine) to the effect that every new idea is first declared contrary to reason, and then contrary to religion, and when it overcomes these two obstacles it is declared to be old hat. Popper's philosophy is just now passing from the second to the third stage – the stage of being old hat. Be that as it may, allow me to record, as an observation, that a number of distinguished philosophers, particularly of science, now seem to be preparing the grounds for this transition: they are playing amongst themselves a game that I both witnessed and heard reported in private conversations any number of times – the game of showing that every new idea that you can quote from Popper has been previously published by others. Various writings of various thinkers, whether scientists or philosophers, of the last three centuries, avail themselves of this game.

What is novelty? What part does it play in our lives? Here are six eminent thinkers' views on novelty and what it means to us.

The Civil Servant

W. T. Stace
1886-1967

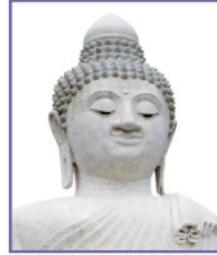


Old elements

The concept of novelty in contemporary philosophy (except perhaps in Alexander) is part and parcel of a philosophical revolt against the overweening pretensions of science. Science finds, or used to find, the world completely governed by law. All events are reduced to cases of causal or functional determination. This means, it is alleged, that there can be no genuine novelty in the world. We shall have a mechanical universe, an eternal repetition of unalterable sequences, the everlasting turning of wheels upon wheels. All change is mere rearrangement of old elements in new patterns. The end is foreseeable in the beginning, is contained in the beginning. The universe cannot produce anything which was not implicitly present from the very beginning, that is, it cannot produce any novelty. The concept of novelty in philosophy is a revolt against this mechanical view of the world which is the product of science.

The Buddha

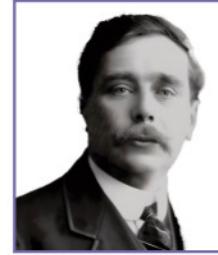
Siddhartha Gautama
563-483 BCE



Two extremes

The Writer

H.G. Wells
1866-1946



Without surprise

Monks, these two extremes ought not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the household life. (What are the two?) There is addiction to indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, coarse, the way of ordinary people... and there is addiction to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy, and unprofitable. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata (the Perfect One) has realised the Middle Path; it gives vision, gives knowledge, and leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment and to Nibbana.

The sort of thing that pleased the public mind was caricatures of eminent politicians after a course of Boom-feeding, uses of the idea on hoardings, and such edifying exhibitions as the dead wasps that had escaped the fire and the remaining hens. Beyond that the public did not care to look, until very strenuous efforts were made to turn its eyes to the remoter consequences, and even then for a while its enthusiasm for action was partial. "There's always somethin' New," said the public – a public so glutted with novelty that it would hear of the earth being split as one splits an apple without surprise, and, "I wonder what they'll do next."







THE BIG PINEAPPLE
SOMERSET PLANTATION

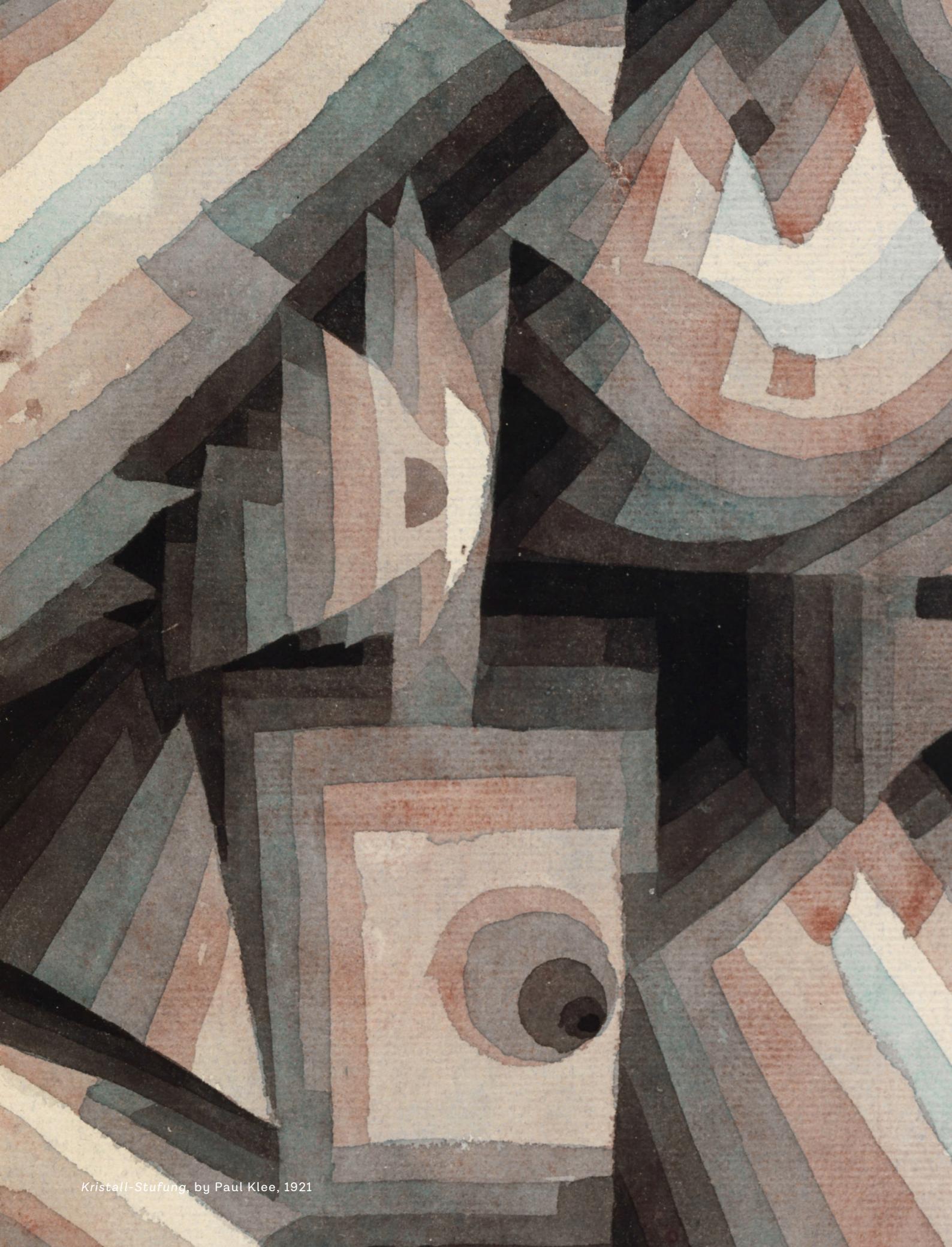




A large, weathered red barrel is positioned on the right side of the image, angled towards the center. It has prominent vertical ridges and some white paint chipping off, particularly at the top.

TEAROOMS





Kristall-Stufung, by Paul Klee, 1921



The road not taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

By Robert Frost

Interview with:
Michael North

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

New combinations



Michael North is Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the Department of English at UCLA. North is the author of many books, including *What Is the Present? and Novelty: A History of the New*. He has received a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, a UC President's Research Fellowship, the Modernist Studies Association Book Prize, and the Robert Motherwell Book Award. In 2012 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. North has published articles on modern art, literature, and politics in journals including *Critical Inquiry*, *American Literary History*, *American Literature*, *PMLA* and *Contemporary Literature*. He received the Norman Foerster Prize for the best article to appear in American Literature in 1983.

Zan Boag: How did you start investigating this topic in the first place? Why novelty?

Michael North: One of my specialisations as a scholar of English literature was Ezra Pound. Like most Pound scholars, I'd always been annoyed by the use that was made of "Make It New" as a slogan. Not just because it's tremendously simplifying, but because people lifted it out of its original context, they lifted it out of its original time. People like Peter Gay, for example, can say, "Pound gave this as a slogan in 1914." And all of that, including the date, is completely wrong. So I started what was going to be a diatribe, this elaborate footnote to this Pound phrase. But then it occurred to me that the real issue is the status of novelty. What actually does it mean for something to be new? That changed my whole orientation towards the project. So instead of making it something about modernism, I just opened it all up. The other thing is, for a long time I'd been interested in doing interdisciplinary scholarship. I'd gotten out of literature, and I had done all sorts of work on photography, and sculpture, and comic books, and just all sorts of other things.

Novelty appealed to me as a concept that was inherently interdisciplinary. It was something that you had to take an interdisciplinary approach to in order to reasonably do a good job with it. And I've been attracted to concepts of that kind for some time

– they necessitated a certain interdisciplinary work. That was the added bonus, in addition to wanting to extrapolate the whole meaning of this term that I'd been using.

Well, you certainly did take an interdisciplinary approach – through philosophy, science, art, literature. In Novelty: A History of the New, you go all the way back to Plato – you say that novelty links back to him. All ideas seem to link back to Plato – as Whitehead quipped, western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. What did Plato have to say about novelty?

Well, it goes past Plato. I mean, Plato, of course, was a traditionalist and a conservative. Is it in *The Laws* where he commends Egyptian music because it hasn't changed in 2,000 years? And that's, of course, what he wanted socially and politically: a situation that would be completely static. And then, of course, if you believe in 'the essences' – the essences are eternal and unchangeable. And so what that means is that things that change are wrong. I mean, they're just deviations. So Plato himself actually didn't have that much to offer except just plain opposition.

Parmenides was pretty important for this project just because of his notion of a block universe, and the idea that if we truly believe, then that necessarily leads to a whole lot of other conclusions which give us a universe in which there's no room even for



motion, much less change or innovation. Somewhat later, the Epicureans and the atomists and the notions that they came up with for getting around the problem of the inexplicability of change – those were really attractive to me too. I did do a lot with ancient philosophy, though Plato himself turned out to be more or less of an antagonist. Not really an antagonist but at least not someone who himself had a lot of useful ideas in this area.

You mention the Epicureans – there's a quote here I have from you: "Virtually nothing new has happened in the history of novelty since Epicurus." Is newness just an illusion, with earlier ideas reconstructed and rearranged? Is that the way you view novelty and newness?

I have to say, I didn't start out to tell it this way. And, of course, I think it is true with any research that you start looking for things and then you find them; they're everywhere. There's a confirmation bias I think at work in any scholarship. But it didn't really turn out to be just that. There was an amazing consistency in people's ideas about novelty, but particularly

the notion of recombination. I guess this is where you could say some of it is a footnote to Plato because it's in the *Theaetetus* that he talks about the elements and the way in which the elements of a thought or the elements of an idea might be like the elements of, let's say, the letters that go into a word. That model there of language as offering a recombinant version of novelty, that has turned out to be extremely durable, and lots and lots of people have resorted to it. So that would be the Epicurean notion that I think keeps cropping up over and over and over again.

It is a way out of the problem. I mean, so the basic problem here, of course, is that we aren't capable of creating matter and we can't create energy. It is true to some extent as Ecclesiastes says, "There's nothing new under the sun." But things do seem different. The basic evidence of life seems to tell us that there are new things. If those basic physical restrictions are really true, then where does it come from? That it's not every single thing in the world that sustains itself unchanging forever, but maybe the basic elements

are the same. And elements then get recombined over time and it's the combinations that are new.

It's interesting that you've pursued quite a lot of art yourself. You're interested in sculpture and other art practices. And you wrote an article for Art Review back in 2015, in which you mention the recombination and rearrangement of things. I'll just read a quote I have here. "Contemporary art practices that de-emphasise image making in favour of manipulating, staging or reassembling prior materials did not abandon the notion of novelty but substitute a different definition of the new." What is this different definition of the new? Given the wealth of prior materials of other artists, is this form of novelty in art the new normal?

Part of what goes on in the book is the staging a contest that started in the 1960s between two different notions of what contemporary art was supposed to be like. And I decided that they corresponded to two different definitions of what 'the new' actually is. So the reigning definition, which I guess you'd say is the modernist definition, it

The basic evidence of life seems to tell us that there are new things. If those basic physical restrictions are really true, then where does it come from?

was basically promulgated by Clement Greenberg. What he tended to believe was that there were innovations in art but that they really reconfirmed some basic truth so that there was an odd recurrence in his theory: the farther modern art advanced the more it got back towards some primitive clarity, and consistency, and I guess beauty.

He had a tremendous amount of animosity, as everybody knows, towards pop, minimalism, conceptual art, the new movements that were coming along in the 60s. He stigmatised these as “novelty art”. So the idea there was that they just cared about novelty for its own sake, not because it was leading to some purification of a particular art form.

Of course, he disliked the fact that they weren't doing easel painting at all, they weren't doing works of freestanding sculpture at all. They were violating all of those basic sorts of conventions and strictures. Underneath this, I guess I'm contending in the book that in pop and minimalism, what they were more overtly doing was relying on a recombinant notion of novelty so that they were openly taking old elements from the past. You can see that in people like Rauschenberg, for example. They're doing collage, they're doing assembly art. They're just openly and, obviously, taking stuff that they get from the sort of grab bag of the world and putting it together and calling it a work of art.

And for Greenberg this was an anathema, because what they're supposed to be doing is taking something like easel painting and gradually... You would revolutionise easel painting by bringing it farther and farther back to its bases. So there's, on the one hand with Greenberg, a revolutionary notion of art in which

revolution is actually using its literal meaning, which is to go back; to make a circle to go back to something. And then on the other side a recombinant notion of novelty in which all the elements are old, to be sure, but what comes out of it that is something that's new.

For Greenberg and other traditionalists, they tend to see novelty as a mistake. However this idea that novelty is a mistake has been challenged at various times throughout history, such as in the Enlightenment. You used the example of Kant who wanted to reason his way out of... “bondage to the past” is the way you put it. How successful are thinkers such as Kant, and also contemporary thinkers, in doing this?

Kant did in fact, of course, think that you could reason your way out of bondage. And he did put tremendous emphasis on freedom and on autonomy. On the other hand, in *Critique of Judgment* Kant assumes that everyone will feel that their aesthetic judgments are shared by everyone else. It's just a natural assumption that he makes. And I don't make that assumption. I don't think that my aesthetic judgments are naturally going to be shared by everyone else.

There was a conservatism in Kant which we know all about, of course, from knowing about his life, which I think sets a fairly obvious limit to the extent that he might have fomented a Copernican revolution. To get away from Kant for a second, whether you can reason your way out of the old and into something new is something that, of course, lots of people from the Enlightenment have puzzled over. The problem is an old one.

This is another Plato reference. All the way back in the *Meno* there's the whole problem of, “How can I find



Michael North

something without knowing what I'm looking for?” That paradox that, if I know it, I don't need to look for it. But if I'm going to find it, I need to know what I'm looking for. So there's a whole paradox there that Plato tends to sort of exploit towards the notion that we already do know everything that's important, so we don't really need to look. I mean, it always turns out in the dialogues that we did know the answer all along and to get closer to it, we just need to be disabused of our obfuscating ideas.

But then more recently, there are other versions of this. There's one in the book by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. And Wittgenstein. There are some modern notions of what Kuhn calls paradigms, what Wittgenstein calls forms of life. We tend to assume that all thought takes place in a context. We tend to assume that those contexts are multiple and maybe incommensurable with one another, but also individually they're pretty hermetically closed.

The model in Kuhn, for example, is one of a sort of succession of paradigms. Each one is completely self-sufficient and closed until it collapses and then boom there's another one right after that. I mean, for him, there is no thought outside of a paradigm, there's no science outside of a paradigm. As for Wittgenstein, I think... there's probably no thought outside of a form of life. That sets up a pretty tall barrier against any absolute novelty. It's very difficult for someone like Kuhn, for example, to explain why a paradigm ought ever to change. If it is as self-sufficient and enclosed as it's supposed to be, why should it ever give way to something else?

One great change was Darwin and his ideas. And these feature heavily in your book: you say that he brings together two classic models of novelty: recurrence and recombination, and this makes up the processes of evolution. How important were Darwin's ideas to establishing novelty as a significant issue for science and philosophy to deal with?

Well, I don't think he establishes it as an important concept or important problem, but I think he offers an extremely influential answer. If you just look around at books that try to explain historical change, how many of them are called The Evolution of

X or The Evolution of Y? It's our go-to model.

And it's part of the deal in the book that I trace the Darwinian model. This was very convenient for me because the whole first part of the book is devoted to developing, on the one hand, the revolution model and on the other hand the recombination model. And then Darwin comes along in the middle of the 19th century and actually merges the two together. Without his having wanted to or knowing much or citing any of the philosophical background... I think he comes to it from a purely scientific context.

The scientific context that he comes from needed those two things to be brought together in that particular way so that there would be, in terms of reproduction, there would be this constant revolution, there would be a constant churning through in a circular motion as species reproduce themselves. But each time they do there's a set of elements that are recombined in slightly different ways. So every cycle then ends up shuffling the elements in a way that means that though it's a cycle, it's not exactly the same every single time. It's tremendously convenient, and so it was very attractive. It goes into information theory, for example. There's nothing about genetics, obviously, in Darwin because he didn't know anything about it. DNA. I mean, my whole notion, my word recombinant just comes out of DNA.

So Kuhn then, I think, was tremendously influenced by Darwin and wants, in a way, to work out the same balance of models though for a totally general model of science, not just for biology which is where Darwin is. And Kuhn, of course, comes from physics, that's what his background is in. And those are the problems he was

really interested in. Later on in the book there's a lot about the influence of Darwin then on Greenberg, just the model of evolution on Greenberg. Later Stanley Cavell and people like that who crop up in the controversies about art in the 60s.

We have been talking about revolutions in scientific thinking, and philosophical thinking, and in art. I'd like to look at how important these revolutionary movements are for the development of ideas in various fields. You say here that "Perhaps revolutionary movements always look repressive in retrospect as their promises of total change fizzles out." Now, why is it that a lot of these revolutions rarely fulfil their promises of significant change?

Well, of course, there are a lot of practical answers to that question. I mean, in any instance you can look at a revolution and say, "Well, why didn't it work out? I mean, why The Terror? Or why the Stalinist purges?" You've got practical answers to that question. The problem for revolution in the abstract is that its claims are usually very large. I mean, the revolutionary model tends to claim that everything will change all at once. See, in the recombinant model, change can be gradual and piecemeal. But for the revolutionary model, it's very punctual, it's total, it all has to happen at once. There are several different problems with that. I mean, it all happens at once. And then, of course, nothing can be new for very long.

That's one of the problems with novelty just as a psychological thing, or even as a logical thing I guess you might say. I mean, how long can something be new? I guess really, it's infinitesimal, right? You show it to me, and it's not new anymore. That is what you might call epistemological or psychological novelty, it's very

tenuous because it just means I didn't know about it before. It doesn't mean it's totally unprecedented or came out of nothing.

Which children often experience.

I mean, everybody experiences it. As in the old slogan, "be wary of what you wish, for you will get it". When you get it, then you go, "That's it?" It's a psychological thing. So there's a temporal problem with the revolutionary promise. But then also the notion that everything is going to change completely, that raises a very high barrier. Everything very rarely does change, there's always a problem. What I was trying to talk about in terms of the revolutionary model in the book is that quite a few revolutions, it turns out, have actually been revolutions in a sort of basic geometrical sense. In other words, they were meant to return back to something.

So the American Revolution is a good example. The American colonists thought they were really suing for rights that they should have had as British citizens. That's part of the original idea of the revolution. And the French Revolution where we're

suing for rights of men that we should have had from the beginning; we're going back to something that the *ancien régime* took away from us.

The English, they're going back to Magna Carta. Really the revolving geometry of a revolution turns out often to be made explicit. Which then means, of course, that once you get there then it's where you were before. And so it's like oh, all this rhetoric about change and drama, and what we got out of it was the reinstatement of something that we had before.

And, of course, that's modernism. I mean, that's the model for literary modernism. Pound is a great example, or Eliot. It's a Protestant reformation only in literature. I mean, the idea is to go back to a time before all sorts of Victorian pollutions had gotten in and literature had become rhetorical and false. We want to go back to the pure state. So we look at the Greeks or we're looking at Chinese literature. The Italian Renaissance. And we want to go back to those.

So this is one of the problems, of course, it was easy to show, for literary and aesthetic modernism, that to a very great extent, they were working

on conservative models. And so then when that became clear then everybody said, "Well, what is this 'make it new'? You're not trying to make it new, you're just giving me the Italian Renaissance, you're just giving me ancient China. What's with that?"

Newness is not necessarily seen in a good light. In an interview you said that the main noun we have for the new – 'novelty' – has all sorts of pejorative connotations. Why is it that the English language has little regard for the new, despite the fact that we seem, in the modern world, enamoured with novelty and change?

Well, etymologically, I think it turns out that that invidious sense is relatively recent. I mean, novelty, of course, comes into English from French with the Normans, it's been an English word for a long, long time. But it turns out that in the 19th century there was a new meaning that came into English by way of the French department stores. The French department stores were called the *magasin de nouveautés*. They were novelties, they were sundries, right, they were knickknacks. They were collections

Really the revolving geometry of a revolution turns out often to be made explicit. Which then means, of course, that once you get there then it's where you were before.

of small, unimportant, cheap items whose only really appeal was that they were distinct from one another. They were various, they were miscellaneous collections.

And you can see in the middle 19th century, then that sense from the French. And it comes into English in an invidious context, of course, because the English don't like the French to start with. It's easy to think of the French as... The English have always done this, and think of the French as the purveyors of vapid and shallow fashion. So the *nouveauté* just came in. And so novelty then from, I'd say, the middle of the 19th century meant a certain sort of cheap toy you'd find in the back of a comic book. A woopie cushion. 3D glasses. Those are junk – jokes of various different kinds.

And for reasons that I can't really figure out – there isn't any other really terribly good noun. It's easy for us to take an adjective and then turn it into a noun. We can say, "the new". But that's cumbersome and indirect. It's an odd fact about English that's hard for me to explain, except in that more recent sense. It's easy to see why, from the middle-19th century, novelty should have meant a very low amusement. Then a part of the book is about

how Greenberg then attaches that to the newer art movements of the '60s and calls them novelty art. And what he means by that is that they're purveying a cheap newness just for effect. It's cheap, and machine-produced, and manufactured, and popular. Everything that would attach to the notion of novelties as a commercial product that he tries to attach to minimalism and pop art, and things like that in the '60s.

People seem quite keen to take on newness, to embrace change. But how novel are our lives in reality? Is the world changing so much or is the amount of change overstated?

Certainly some of the current terribly nasty mood, in most places that I know anything about, must come from the sense that a lot of that hope for change has been disappointed. Until recently in the US, we were looking at an election between... That was going to be the rerun of the last election. It hurt more that it was two really old guys. There's a tremendous sense of disappointment, I mean, among most people. Most movies that are big and popular in the US are made out of old comic books. It's very difficult to get a movie to work

now that's not a sequel of some kind, or maybe a prequel. Everybody is trying to find a sort of continuing series that they can exploit over and over again.

There are also a lot of books and articles about what's called retro, about the popularity of it. I mean, it's really odd, of course, because retro, and the sort of sense of retro, has consumed so many decades one by one that, at least for someone my age, it seems to have caught up. If they were going to try to glamorise the '50s, that's fine, that seems like a long time away to me. Now people are starting to glamorise the '80s and the '90s. Wait a minute, wasn't that just yesterday?

I think there is a sense that culture, in a lot of places, has become self-consuming, and redundant, retroactive. And some of this is quite conscious. I can't say contemporary artists anymore, but artists who were contemporary years ago, people like Smithson, for example, purposely disavowed the new. And, of course, this is a hangover from modernism. This is a hangover from conventionalised notions of modernism. So the postmodern, of course, was all against that new stuff. It was all about purposely, self-consciously, and somewhat sort of ironically and

I think there is a sense that culture, in a lot of places, has become self-consuming, and redundant, retroactive. And some of this is quite conscious.

satirically regurgitating old plots, and old pieces of architecture, and all kinds of music.

I just wonder if we're stuck with 'regurgitation' now because of the amount of information that's available to everyone all the way through their lives. It's impossible for anyone to live in a vacuum of any sort – we are all influenced by similar bits of information throughout the course of our lives. Is it possible to be novel at all rather than simply rehashing and remixing old ideas?

I mean, let's face it, the coming of recording in the middle 19th century changed everything. It took a while to get from photography to phonography and from photography to movies, and then from all of that to the internet. It started in the 1850s with photography, with the very beginning of recording. In part what that meant is nothing ever goes away anymore.

Music goers in the 19th century, if they wanted to hear a symphony they had to go someplace where it was being performed. Not that long ago, you actually had to put a CD into a player if you wanted to listen to music – there was a certain amount of physical impediment there. I used to have a CD changer that had 300 CDs. What that meant was if you wanted to hear a song, it would rotate around and then it would drop the CD. There

was a certain amount of physical impediment there. All of that's gone.

The problem is not so much access to stuff as can we get it to go away. Does anything ever cease to sort of reverberate? I think the problem is that with our ability to preserve, transmit, and share, it seems the burden of old stuff is just getting almost intolerable. And it is the case if you look at music services, for example. The back catalogue accounts for, I think, 60 to 80 per cent of the revenue at places like Spotify. The back catalogue is tremendously valuable, especially music by dead people: if you're not paying anybody, you're not paying production costs, you don't have to do anything, you just put it out there again. It's tremendously advantageous. And I think the whole structure of music now, particularly, makes it pretty difficult for new people to break in.

How do you think this translates into new ideas? Is it possible for us to have new ideas about the society in which we live?

Well, it will just have to be. I was actually a little perturbed when I saw the cover that Chicago came up with for my book because the cover... it has the word 'novelty' in a whole bunch of different typefaces and they're all crossed out. The implication then is that the book is a debunking of the

concept of novelty, and I want to get rid of it. But what I said in the book, actually, is I wanted to give some actual content to a term that often doesn't have any. I think my notion, in the end, was not that I was going to show that novelty was impossible, but that if you get rid of the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, if you get rid of the notion that the new is absolute, if you accept the idea that it can be incremental and social then it should be possible for there to be new things, maybe even new ideas about things. If we allow those things to be new which are extrapolations from what already exists.

There's a great thing that Wittgenstein has to say. He says in any social practice, any linguistic habit has an implicit "and so on" added to it. So it always has, "this is the way we do it, and so on," right? And it's that "and so on" that gives you some hope for the future because it means there are possible extenuations, extrapolations, changes, augmentations.

Yes, there can be all sorts of new things. It's easier for us to accept those if we don't have in the back of our minds some impossible notion of novelty as creation from nothing – drastic, evolutionary, total complete sweeping of the decks.

If you accept the sort of more incremental notion, then I think it'd be easier for us to be satisfied. ■



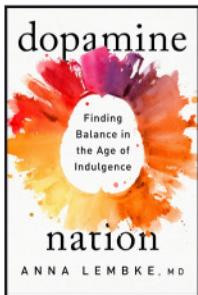


Opus 217, *Portrait de Félix Fénéon*, 1890, by Paul Signac



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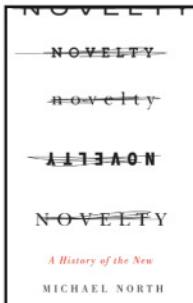
Dopamine Nation



Anna Lembke
Digital drugs

The world now offers a full complement of digital drugs that didn't exist before, or if they did exist, they now exist on digital platforms that have exponentially increased their potency and availability. These include online pornography, gambling, and video games, to name a few. Furthermore, the technology itself is addictive, with its flashing lights, musical fanfare, bottomless bowls, and the promise, with ongoing engagement, of ever-greater rewards... The act of consumption itself has become a drug. My patient Chi, a Vietnamese immigrant, got hooked on the cycle of searching for and buying products online. The high for him began with deciding what to buy, continued through anticipating delivery, and culminated in the moment he opened the package.

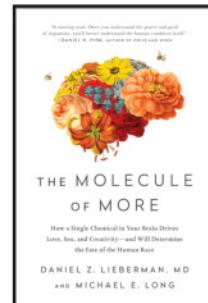
Novelty: A History of the New



Michael North
Definitions of the new

Novelty, in short, is a crucial and yet vague term in the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts, so that defining it is an inherently interdisciplinary task, beyond the interests and ambitions of any particular field. Perhaps it is not so odd, then, that so little is to be found in the scholarship on novelty as such. For the same reason, we are steadily less likely, every year, to get a general account of the concept, as the work of sociology, philosophy, biology, and aesthetics advances, becoming ever more daunting to the nonspecialist. To anyone foolish enough to approach the problem on so broad a front, however, it soon becomes apparent that there is a considerable consistency, not in definitions of the new, which are always very hard to come by, but in the models that have been applied to the problem.

The Molecule of More

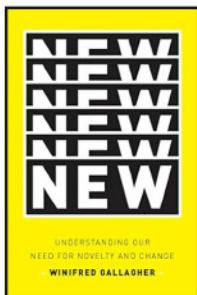


Daniel Lieberman/Michael Long
Here and Now molecules

Dopamine isn't the pleasure molecule, after all. It's the anticipation molecule. To enjoy the things we have, as opposed to the things that are only possible, our brains must transition from future-oriented dopamine to present-oriented chemicals, a collection of neurotransmitters we call the Here and Now molecules, or the H&Ns. Most people have heard of the H&Ns. They include serotonin, oxytocin, endorphins (your brain's version of morphine), and a class of chemicals called endocannabinoids (your brain's version of marijuana). As opposed to the pleasure of anticipation via dopamine, these chemicals give us pleasure from sensation and emotion. In fact, one of the endocannabinoid molecules is called anandamide, named after a Sanskrit word that means joy, bliss, and delight.

Food for thought from the *New Philosopher* library. We discover books that can change the way you view the world.

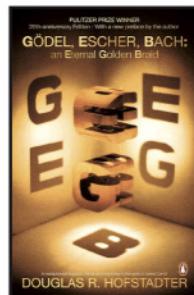
New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty



Winifred Gallagher
Cultural change

Like individuals, societies struggle to balance the need to survive, which prioritises safety and stability, with the desire to thrive, which requires stimulation and exploration. For most of history, this tug-of-war has inclined cultural change, like the biological sort, to occur not in a smooth progression but in an uneven, unpredictable process, of fits and starts that scientists call punctuated equilibrium. Something new, whether climate change, an important tool such as the plough or computer, or a political upheaval, prompts a period of innovation that takes a society to the next level. Like the Pax Romana, this stable plateau can last for a great while until, perhaps following an era of decline like the Dark Ages, there's another leap forward, as in the Renaissance.

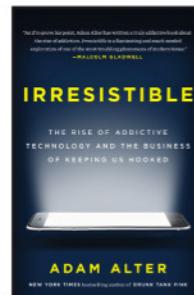
Gödel, Escher, Bach



Douglas Hofstadter
A neural net

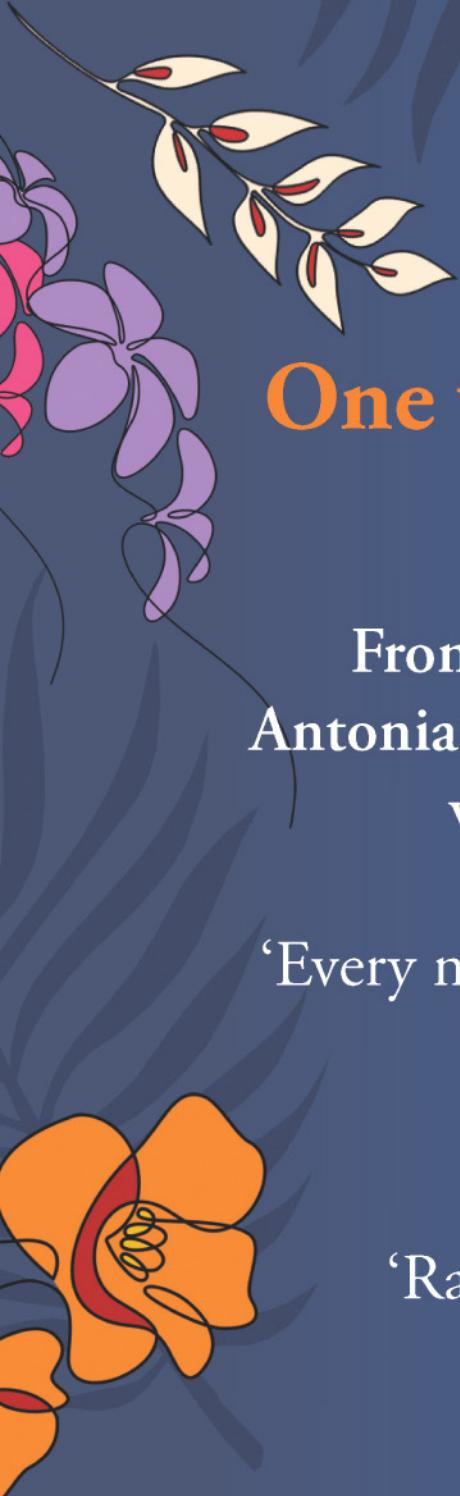
One way to think about the relation between higher and lower levels in the brain is this. One could assemble a neural net which, on a local (neuron-to-neuron) level, performed in a manner indistinguishable from a neural net in a brain, but which had no higher-level meaning at all. The fact that the lower level is composed of interacting neurons does not necessarily force any higher level of meaning to appear – no more than the fact that alphabet soup contains letters forces meaningful sentences to be found, swimming about in the bowl. High-level meaning is an optional feature of a neural network – one which may emerge as a consequence of evolutionary environmental pressures.

Irresistible



Adam Alter
Quarter of their waking lives

Most people spend between one and four hours on their phones each day – and many far longer. This isn't a minority issue. If, as guidelines suggest, we should spend less than an hour on our phones each day, 88 per cent of Holesh's users were overusing. They were spending an average of a quarter of their waking lives on their phones – more time than any other daily activity, except sleeping. Each month almost one hundred hours was lost to checking email, texting, playing games, surfing the web, reading articles, checking bank balances, and so on. Over the average lifetime, that amounts to a staggering eleven years. On average they were also picking up their phones about three times an hour.



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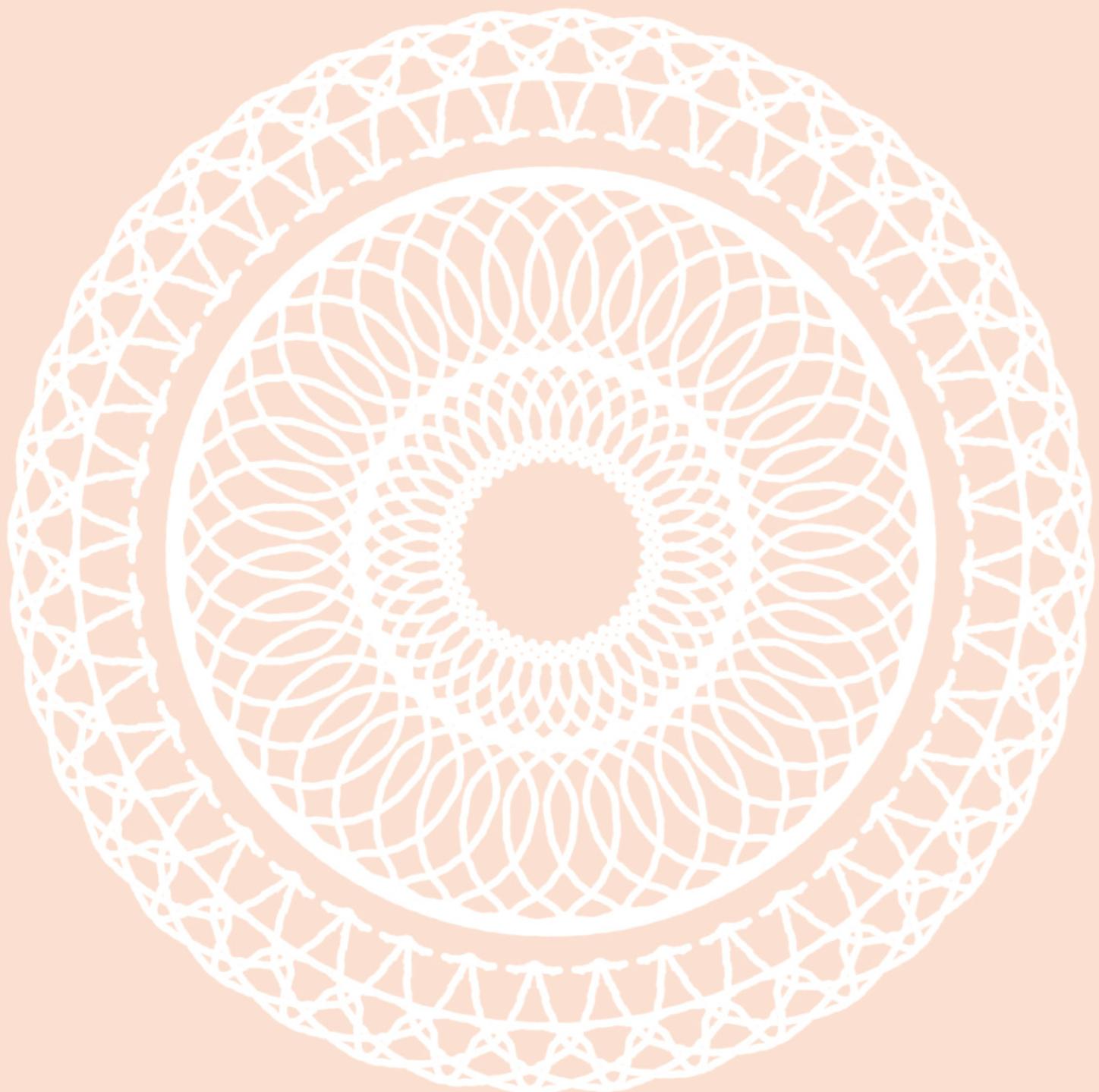
Antonia Case

Flourish

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into Finding Your Best Self

BLOOMSBURY

BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM



by Michael North

A history of the new

Novelty has a very shady reputation, redolent of dime stores, corny songs, and practical jokes. What does it mean, that the most common terms for the new are so hard to use? How does the quality that makes a new shirt or a new friend such a positive experience turn into something almost sinister in the abstract? That quality, of being different from what has gone before, is clearly of great importance to us, though we find it difficult and even embarrassing to give it a name. But the linguistic awkwardness in finding a good descriptive term for the new is almost certainly the effect of a deeper difficulty in coming up with a definition of it. Perhaps there would be a better noun than novelty, one above suspicion, if English speakers were more certain about what they mean when they call something new. Right now, at a time when most first-run movies seem to be either remakes or sequels, when the popular new singers are all expert mimics of some vocal style of the past, when

period nostalgia progresses through the decades faster than time itself and threatens to catch up with the present, the status of novelty as a value would not seem to be particularly high. Indeed, a consumer marketing firm determined as long ago as 1991 that “newness used to have a cachet all by itself. It doesn’t anymore.” In the art world, indifference to the new has been a popular pose at least since the 1960s, when Robert Smithson decreed, “Nothing is new, neither is anything old.” In fact, the whole distinction between modernist art and that which followed in the 1960s, a distinction that once seemed so epochal, was based on an apparent disagreement about the very possibility of the new and about the desirability of associated qualities such as originality and autonomy. All of these were blown away like so much dust, it seemed, when Andy Warhol promoted some Campbell’s Soup cans from the supermarket to the art gallery.

Desire for the new, however, seems to be a fairly durable human

quality, and interest in it persists even now, after its role in the worlds of art and fashion has been exposed and debunked. The computer and consumer electronics industries, before all others, keep the topic of innovation current and popular, even as the movie industry tears through its old comic books looking for heroes, and a considerable amount of academic research is aimed at defining innovative business strategies so that they can be imitated.

Innovation is also a concern in the sciences, especially biology, where the nature of evolutionary novelty is one of the main points of contention between developmentalists and traditional molecular biologists. Emergent evolution, briefly fashionable a century ago, has been revived by such disputes and is now seriously considered an explanation for the new not just in biology but also in physics, in systems theory, and in the work of contemporary theorists such as Manuel De Landa. Certain strains

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of continental philosophy, especially those following from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, get much of their polemical punch from the claim that these thinkers can adequately explain how the world generates genuine novelty.* Of course, very little obvious overlap exists between this sort of philosophy and the study of commercial innovation, though Deleuze was concerned enough about the apparent similarities between his work and the “disciplines of communication” to ward them off with a blast of sarcasm. Such antipathies aside, the problems and possibilities of novelty now receive a considerable amount of attention from a number of different disciplines. Despite this interest, however, there is considerable diffidence about defining the nature of the new as such. For example, contemporary study of innovation in business begins with an article of faith laid down by the

economist Joseph Schumpeter: “The fundamental impulse that sets and keeps the capitalist engine in motion comes from the consumer’s goods, the new methods of production or transportation, the new markets, the new forms of industrial organisation that capitalist enterprise creates.” Though Schumpeter seems quite insistent about the necessity of the new, and though innovation studies in sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and communications have such an ingrained bias in favour of novelty that it threatens to become a shibboleth, “similar to ‘motherhood’ and ‘patriotism,’ the basic term in the field still seems to have been left more or less alone, untouched by close examination. The standard text on the diffusion of innovation defines an innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” And it declares forthrightly that “it matters little, so far as human behaviour is concerned, whether or not an idea is ‘objectively’ new as measured by the lapse of time since its first use or discovery.” Novelty is supposed to be an ontological possibility, since there is a “first use or discovery,” but its objective status is mysterious enough to be protected by scare quotes.

To innovate is, in Latin at any rate, to renew or to reform, not to start over afresh, though it has acquired in English usage the implication of introducing something new to a particular environment. In this sense, however, “diffusion of innovation” is something of a redundancy, since an innovation is by definition something that has become new by being moved to a place unfamiliar with it. Diffusion, that is to say, is itself tantamount to innovation. But one problem with this definition is that diffusion also assumes acceptance and thus the dissipation of novelty. Even in its reduced form as

innovation, then, actual novelty only exists at the very crest of the wave, in the time, however short, between introduction and acceptance. Since the novelty in question is purely subjective in nature, dependent on its relative unfamiliarity to a new audience, it tends to evaporate almost at the very instant it is recognised.

Innovation is therefore a term that compacts within itself the whole hopeless treadmill of capitalist advance that had been decried even before Marx, powered by a double bind in which novelty is both necessary and impossible at the same time.’ In such a system, oddly enough, the novel can persist only insofar as it meets with resistance and doesn’t diffuse. This is one reason why the avant-garde is often considered a necessary adjunct to the settled order it supposedly opposes, why sociologies of innovation in the arts strongly resemble sociologies of commercial innovation. The economist David Galenson’s intriguing project, for example, attempts to quantify and compare the relative importance of major modern artists, using novelty as the definitive characteristic of accomplishment. As he shows with abundant quotations, this was the standard often applied by the artists themselves. To take just one example from many, Joris-Karl Huysmans praises Edgar Degas as “a painter who derived from and resembled no other, who brought with him a totally new artistic flavour, as well as totally new skills.”^{1°} However, whatever Huysmans may have had in mind, the “totally new” is a quality that proves very hard to capture.

In fact, Galenson passes over the new itself, restricting the term novelty to obvious, startling developments with little staying power, to concentrate on innovation, which he defines as “a change in existing



practice that becomes widely adopted by other artists.” An innovation is a novelty that sticks – a difference, as the anthropologist Gregory Bateson would have it, that makes a difference. This, then, is Galenson’s version of the paradox visible in the sociology of diffusion, since it seems to make innovation almost the opposite of novelty, insofar as the importance of an innovation comes to depend on its acceptance and durability and not on its difference. As Galenson’s own evidence shows, artists resisted this double bind with just as much commitment as they proclaimed the new.

Like a member of a medieval craft guild jealous of its secrets, Georges Seurat tried to prevent others from appropriating his techniques: “The more of us there are, the less originality we will have, and the day when everyone practices this technique, it will no longer have any value and people will look for something new as is already happening.” Innovation, defined as a widely accepted change, thus turns out to be the enemy of the new, even as it stands for the necessity of the new.

The trouble in such cases seems to come from the paradoxical relation between relative and absolute novelty, since the relative is not actually a modest version of the absolute but rather the antithesis of it. To say

that everything is new to someone somewhere is to make novelty a routine fact of existence, part of the steady state of the universe. A genuine novelty, in the sciences at any rate, is a major disturbance in the universe, a development like consciousness or life itself. Novelty of this kind is the stock-in-trade of evolutionary biology, and evolution itself is the most widely accepted account of novelty in the absolute sense. And yet, there is still considerable controversy among biologists about what should count as an evolutionary novelty, and there is a great deal of troubled introspection in the field about its standards and methods of defining the new. Popular accounts such as the biochemist Nick Lane’s *Life Ascending* dramatise evolution as a series of splendid “inventions” such as eyesight or sex, but practicing biologists have warned for some time that such developments are far too general to be considered discrete evolutionary novelties. They are, as the paleornithologist Joel Cracraft puts it, “typological constructs... and as such are limited in what they can tell us about the processes actually responsible for the origin and maintenance of evolutionary novelties.” That is to say, something like eyesight is not a single “invention” at all but a bundle of genetic changes and developmental adaptations, one that can differ as

dramatically from species to species as the eye of the octopus differs from that of the chimpanzee. But the problem left by Cracraft’s scepticism is how to find an evolutionary innovation that is not a “typological construct,” and where, in the complex relation between discrete genetic change and gross phenotypic appearance, to find the defining hallmarks of the new.

Novelty, in short, is at once an indispensable concept and a serious problem, not just in one but in a number of different disciplines. Given this situation, it makes sense to assume a fairly well-developed tradition of commentary on the concept, a continuing discussion of it in the abstract, apart from the practical definitions applied in particular fields. But it doesn’t take much looking to discover that there isn’t any such tradition, no standard text, no omnibus history. Though novelty is not itself by any means new, being one of the very first ideas to trouble the consciousness of humankind, it seems almost to have no past, as if it arose from nothing every time it occurred. Of course, novelty as such has been discussed any number of times between Parmenides and Whitehead, and some of these discussions look back over past attempts before beginning their own. Philosophical accounts of the new became especially self-conscious, not

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oddly, around the beginning of the twentieth century, when William James and Henri Bergson added their considerable efforts to those of Whitehead. But these are really additions to the history of the new and not accounts of it, except insofar as all three philosophers identify novelty as one of the great unsolved problems in modern thought.

Clearly, novelty subtends modernity itself, and so the lack of any solid notion of what the new might mean threatens the validity of common concepts of the modern. Here, the chief symptom is the prevalence of Ezra Pound's famous slogan, 'Make It New', the ubiquity of which signifies both the centrality of the concept and the absence of any real attention to it. A good recent example is offered by the scholar and critic Jed Rasula's very capable survey of modernist demands for the new, a survey he calls simply "Make It New." Like many of those who have reused Pound's perennially useful slogan, Rasula puzzles briefly over the "it," which seems to be such a pointed reference and yet remains so vague. Surprisingly, though, he does not wonder at all about the real gist of the slogan, the "new," which to him "seems concrete and unambiguous." Then, since the most important part of the slogan does not require definition, writer after writer can be brought forward to say his or her piece about

the immediate necessity of novelty without anyone pausing to wonder what is meant by that term.

Rasula can hardly be blamed for not defining what is taken so wholly for granted by his sources. As the literary theorist and critic Terry Eagleton comments in a review of a recent collection of artists' manifestos, "Nothing is more typical of these activists than a mindless celebration of novelty – a brash conviction that an absolutely new epoch is breaking around them. ... How one would set about identifying absolute novelty is a logical problem that did not detain them." Of a group of avant-garde composers working later in the century, the philosopher Stanley Cavell once observed, "There is, first, an obsession with new-ness itself.... None, that I recall, raises the issue as a problem to be investigated, but as the cause of hope or despair or fury or elation." In these first-hand accounts of the work of modernism, what is perhaps the most important distinguishing quality of that movement is left unexamined and undefined.

Novelty, in short, is a crucial and yet vague term in the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts, so that defining it is an inherently interdisciplinary task, beyond the interests and ambitions of any particular field. Perhaps it is not so odd, then, that so little is to be found in the scholarship on novelty as such.

For the same reason, we are steadily less likely, every year, to get a general account of the concept, as the work of sociology, philosophy, biology, and aesthetics advances, becoming ever more daunting to the nonspecialist. To anyone foolish enough to approach the problem on so broad a front, however, it soon becomes apparent that there is a considerable consistency, not in definitions of the new, which are always very hard to come by, but in the models that have been applied to the problem. The simple fact that very few of these exist, that serious workers in every field have come back to the same few methods of conceptualising the new, makes it possible to attempt its history.

What follows, then, is not a comprehensive account of everything said on the subject of novelty, or even of the best that was said, but rather a basic history of the conceptual models that have made it possible to think about what seems an unthinkable problem. That there is something necessary about these models is suggested by the fact that their basic shapes were established before Plato and have not varied much since. [There are] but two ways around philosophy's foundational scepticism about the very possibility of novelty. One of these, recurrence, has the advantage of seeming to have the sanction of nature but the disadvantage of not seeming

to offer any real novelty. The other, recombination, seems to offer unlimited novelty, but only if unprecedented relations between existing elements can be considered truly new entities. Despite the equivocal nature of these models, between them they can account for virtually every one of the major ways in which novelty has been conceptualised in European history-reformation, renaissance, revolution, invention.

Modern experimental science originally based its account of the universe on a revived version of ancient atomism, and thus, by its lights, recombination explained the creativity of nature as it also described the nature of scientific investigation itself. Later, in the twentieth century, Thomas Kuhn demoted this sort of science, suggesting that significant advances and discoveries arrive as total revolutions in the way science is done. But science itself, in the form of evolutionary biology, had already worked out a highly sophisticated symbiosis between recurrence and recombination. It seems very telling that the most influential modern model of creative change should itself have been invented as a subtle combination of two ancient precursors. Evolution, imagined even by Darwin as a revolution in human thought, advanced beyond such models from the past mainly by consuming them, producing a new hybrid with significant advantages derived from all its antecedents.

Evolution made novelty fundamental to nature and thus sparked renewed interest in it as a scientific and philosophical issue, without definitively settling any of the basic controversies that had dogged discussions since the pre-Socratics. Later biologists called on a wide range of other disciplines in order to address what turned out to

be one of the main open questions left behind by Darwin –the actual nature of evolutionary novelty. ... Probability, statistical mechanics, and information theory came together not just to inform late twentieth-century biology but also to offer a model of the new that would become influential all across the information age. Cybernetics, systems theory, and information processing seemed like such new disciplines when they arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, in part because they appropriated the new as their raw material and because they promised, somewhat paradoxically, to make the production of the new automatic and certain.

The issue in all these cases is the nature of ontological novelty, which is surely the most daunting version of the problem, since the very laws of physics seemed for so many years to rule the truly new out of the question. Turning to epistemological novelty would seem to make things a good deal easier, since it must be true that everyone has new ideas and new experiences every day. Relative and subjective novelty of this kind must be common and thus easy to define.

As far back as Plato's *Meno*, in fact, philosophers have been troubled by a homely paradox: how can I find out what I want to know unless already know it well enough to identify it? In the *Meno*, the argument is openly eristic, and it is meant to be swept aside by the resolution that we already know what is important, so that learning is really recollection. Plato resolves the issue, in other words, by showing that there is no such thing as a new idea. Modern scientific inquiry would be neither necessary nor possible if such were really the case, but some modern philosophers of science have also believed that preconceptions have an inevitably primary role in scientific

research. According to the most influential account of modern scientific discovery, in fact, "particular laboratory manipulations presuppose a world already perceptually and conceptually divided in a certain way." If so, then it would seem that a new idea would be just as hard to come by as a brand-new lump of matter.

It is not surprising, then, that influential modern explanations of new ideas in the sciences should follow very closely ancient models of novelty in the physical world. ... The influential work of Thomas Kuhn, which is, despite its overt reliance on the trope of revolution, a virtual anthology of old models of the new. Kuhn's particular way of arranging recombination and recurrence into a self-sustaining cycle owes an obvious debt to Darwin, but it also bears a strong resemblance to the project of cybernetics, which reached the height of its fame at about the time Kuhn published his masterwork. [There are] a number of intriguing similarities between Kuhn and Norbert Wiener, particularly the ways they attempt to account for scientific discovery and advance within a system of knowledge that is self-sustaining and thus to some extent impervious to change.

In their different ways, Kuhn and Wiener try to explain how a system might arrive at a point where the new is both routine and revolutionary. At this same time, critics of modernist art and literature were facing a similar puzzle: how to handle the transformation of modernism into a settled fact of contemporary life. Could there be, they wondered, a tradition of the new? The first step toward answering this question is to determine what modernists meant by the new, and this is not by any means a simple task. Writers and artists of the early part of the twentieth century held a wild variety of positions

on the subject of novelty, some of them strongly negative. Even those in favour of the new as such had a great many different ways of describing their ideal. In fact, it seems that the only reason there is any order at all to the cacophony of modernist statements in this respect is that the range of available models of novelty had already been circumscribed by history. Modernism, in other words, does not have its own theory of the new, in part because there is no one theory of the new universally subscribed to by modern artists and writers. Even the apparent simplicity of Make It New can be opened up to reveal a series of layers, telling the history of novelty back to its beginnings.

One of the most interesting things to be discovered by a serious examination of Pound's slogan is that it was not a slogan until the late 1950s and early 1960s. The phrase that is now universally taken to summarise the ambitions of modernist artists and writers was quite obscure until the literary scholar and critic Hugh Kenner gave it some prominence in the Hudson Review. It became so notorious, not because it summarised the ambitions of the modernists themselves, but rather because it helped critics and scholars to talk about a quality that was then under serious debate. The contest joined in the 1960s between the essayist and visual art critic Clement Greenberg and the artists responsible for Pop, minimalism, and conceptual art was very largely fought out over the issue of novelty. A great deal of the struggle within Greenberg's criticism itself is over the difference between the necessary novelty of modernist art and the apparently spurious novelty of the art that followed.

Partly by coincidence, the tradition of the new established and defended

by Greenberg and Cavell very strongly resembles the circular pattern of upheaval and reintegration discovered in the sciences by Kuhn and Wiener. Some of this similarity might also be explained by the example of evolution, discernible in the distance behind both models, and some more of it may be due to the friendship between Kuhn and Cavell. The intellectual part of that friendship was based on a mutual interest in the problems and possibilities presented by the later Wittgenstein, especially by the tacit forms of life that Kuhn came to call paradigms. On one hand, the shared linguistic conventions that Wittgenstein explored are flexible and open-ended, and thus they seem to present the possibility of infinite novelty. On the other hand, there is no such thing as thought outside a paradigm, and no way to check the authority of a paradigm from a vantage point beyond it. The result is a newness that always remains circumscribed within the limits of the old.

...

Is it the passage of time that makes a radical thinker like Kuhn seem an apologist for the status quo? Were the great modernists secretly conservative all the time, even when they were making their innovations? Perhaps there is something in the structure of novelty itself that might account for the fact that change and continuity lie so close together in twentieth-century art and thought. Or perhaps there is a tension within our ideas about the new that results in a pattern of constantly frustrated expectations. If so, then it may be possible to untangle our expectations by investigating their history and thus to come to a better estimation of the possibilities and impossibilities of the new. □

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From Michael North's book Novelty: A History of the New, 2013, reprinted with permission from the University of Chicago Press.





King of the frogs

THE FROGS, grieved at having no established Ruler, sent ambassadors to Jupiter entreating for a King.

He, perceiving their simplicity, cast down a huge log into the lake. The Frogs, terrified at the splash occasioned by its fall, hid themselves in the depth of the pool. But no sooner did they see that the huge log continued motionless, than they swam again to the top of the water, dismissed their fears, and came so to despise it as to climb up, and to squat upon it.

After some time they began to think themselves ill-treated in the appointment of so inert a Ruler, and sent a second deputation to Jupiter to pray that he would set over them another sovereign.

He then gave them an Eel to govern them. When the Frogs discovered his easy good nature, they yet a third time sent to Jupiter to beg that he would once more choose for them another King.

Jupiter, displeased with all their complaints, sent a Heron, who preyed upon the Frogs day by day, till there were none left to complain. □

From Aesop's Fables, by
Samuel Croxall







Starry Night, by Vincent van Gogh, 1889

Creative
evolution

By Henri Bergson

To what date is it agreed to ascribe the appearance of man on the earth? To the period when the first weapons, the first tools, were made. The memorable quarrel over the discovery of Boucher de Perthes in the quarry of Moulin-Quignon is not forgotten. The question was whether real hatchets had been found or merely bits of flint accidentally broken. But that, supposing they were hatchets, we were indeed in the presence of intelligence, and more particularly of human intelligence, no one doubted for an instant. Now let us open a collection of anecdotes on the intelligence of animals: we shall see that besides many acts explicable by imitation or by the automatic association of images, there are some that we do not hesitate to call intelligent: foremost

among them are those that bear witness to some idea of manufacture, whether the animal life succeeds in fashioning a crude instrument or uses for its profit an object made by man. The animals that rank immediately after man in the matter of intelligence, the apes and elephants, are those that can use an artificial instrument occasionally. Below, but not very far from them, come those that recognise a constructed object: for example, the fox, which knows quite well that a trap is a trap. No doubt, there is intelligence wherever there is inference; but inference, which consists in an inflection of past experience in the direction of present experience, is already a beginning of invention. Invention becomes complete when it is materialised in a manufactured in-

strument. Towards that achievement the intelligence of animals tends as towards an ideal. And though, ordinarily, it does not yet succeed in fashioning artificial objects and in making use of them, it is preparing for this by the very variations which it performs on the instincts furnished by nature. As regards human intelligence, it has not been sufficiently noted that mechanical invention has been from the first its essential feature, that even to-day our social life gravitates around the manufacture and use of artificial instruments, that the inventions which strew the road of progress have also traced its direction. This we hardly realise, because it takes us longer to change ourselves than to change our tools. Our individual and even social habits survive a good while the



circumstances for which they were made, so that the ultimate effects of an invention are not observed until its novelty is already out of sight. A century has elapsed since the invention of the steam-engine, and we are only just beginning to feel the depths of the shock it gave us. But the revolution it has effected in industry has nevertheless upset human relations altogether. New ideas are arising, new feelings are on the way to flower. In thousands of years, when, seen from the distance, only the broad lines of the present age will still be visible, our wars and our revolutions will count for little, even supposing they are remembered at all; but the steam-engine, and the procession of inventions of every kind that accompanied it, will perhaps be spoken of as we speak of the bronze or of the chipped stone of prehistoric times: it will serve to define an age. If we could rid ourselves of all pride, if, to define our species, we kept strictly to what the historic and the prehistoric periods show us to be the constant characteristic of man and of intelligence, we should say not *Homo sapiens*, but *Homo faber*. In short,

intelligence, considered in what seems to be its original feature, is the faculty of manufacturing artificial objects, especially tools to make tools, and of indefinitely varying the manufacture.

Now, does an unintelligent animal also possess tools or machines? Yes, certainly, but here the instrument forms a part of the body that uses it; and, corresponding to this instrument, there is an instinct that knows how to use it. True, it cannot be maintained that all instincts consist in a natural ability to use an inborn mechanism. Such a definition would not apply to the instincts which Romanes called "secondary"; and more than one "primary" instinct would not come under it. But this definition, like that which we have provisionally given of intelligence, determines at least the ideal limit toward which the very numerous forms of instinct are travelling. Indeed, it has often been pointed out that most instincts are only the continuance, or rather the consummation, of the work of organisation itself. Where does the activity of instinct begin, and where does

that of nature end? We cannot tell. In the metamorphoses of the larva into the nymph and into the perfect insect, metamorphoses that often require appropriate action and a kind of initiative on the part of the larva, there is no sharp line of demarcation between the instinct of the animal and the organising work of living matter. We may say, as we will, either that instinct organises the instruments it is about to use, or that the process of organisation is continued in the instinct that has to use the organ. The most marvellous instincts of the insect do nothing but develop its special structure into movements: indeed, where social life divides the labour among different individuals, and thus allots them different instincts, a corresponding difference of structure is observed: the polymorphism of ants, bees, wasps and certain pseudoneuroptera is well known. Thus, if we consider only those typical cases in which the complete triumph of intelligence and of instinct is seen, we find this essential difference between them: instinct perfected is a faculty of using and even of constructing organised instruments; intelligence

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perfected is the faculty of making and using unorganised instruments.

The advantages and drawbacks of these two modes of activity are obvious. Instinct finds the appropriate instrument at hand: this instrument, which makes and repairs itself, which presents, like all the works of nature, an infinite complexity of detail combined with a marvellous simplicity of function, does at once, when required, what it is called upon to do, without difficulty and with a perfection that is often wonderful. In return, it retains an almost invariable structure, since a modification of it involves a modification of the species. Instinct is therefore necessarily specialised, being nothing but the utilisation of a specific instrument for a specific object. The instrument constructed intelligently, on the contrary, is an imperfect instrument. It costs an effort. It is generally troublesome to handle. But, as it is made of unorganised matter, it can take any form whatsoever, serve any purpose, free the living being from every new difficulty that arises and bestow on it an unlimited number of powers. Whilst it is inferior to the natural instrument for the satisfaction of immediate wants, its advantage over it is the greater, the less urgent the need. Above all, it reacts on the nature of the being that constructs it; for in calling on him to exercise a new function, it confers on him, so to speak, a richer organisation, being an artificial organ by which the natural organism is extended. For every need that it satisfies, it creates a new need; and so, instead of closing, like instinct, the round of action within which the animal tends to move automatically, it lays open to activity an unlimited field into which it is driven further and further, and made more and more free. But this advantage of intelligence over instinct only appears at a late stage,

when intelligence, having raised construction to a higher degree, proceeds to construct constructive machinery. At the outset, the advantages and drawbacks of the artificial instrument and of the natural instrument balance so well that it is hard to foretell which of the two will secure to the living being the greater empire over nature.

We may surmise that they began by being implied in each other, that the original psychical activity included both at once, and that, if we went far enough back into the past, we should find instincts more nearly approaching intelligence than those of our insects, intelligence nearer to instinct than that of our vertebrates, intelligence and instinct being, in this elementary condition, prisoners of a matter which they are not yet able to control. If the force immanent in life were an unlimited force, it might perhaps have developed instinct and intelligence together, and to any extent, in the same organisms. But everything seems to indicate that this force is limited, and that it soon exhausts itself in its very manifestation. It is hard for it to go far in several directions at once: it must choose. Now, it has the choice between two modes of acting on the material world: it can either effect this action directly by creating an organised instrument to work with; or else it can effect it indirectly through an organism which, instead of possessing the required instrument naturally, will itself construct it by fashioning inorganic matter. Hence intelligence and instinct, which diverge more and more as they develop, but which never entirely separate from each other. On the one hand, the most perfect instinct of the insect is accompanied by gleams of intelligence, if only in the choice of place, time and materials of construction: the bees, for example, when by exception they build

in the open air, invent new and really intelligent arrangements to adapt themselves to such new conditions. But, on the other hand, intelligence has even more need of instinct than instinct has of intelligence; for the power to give shape to crude matter involves already a superior degree of organization, a degree to which the animal could not have risen, save on the wings of instinct. So, while nature has frankly evolved in the direction of instinct in the arthropods, we observe in almost all the vertebrates the striving after rather than the expansion of intelligence. It is instinct still which forms the basis of their psychical activity; but intelligence is there, and would fain supersede it. Intelligence does not yet succeed in inventing instruments; but at least it tries to, by performing as many variations as possible on the instinct which it would like to dispense with. It gains complete self-possession only in man, and this triumph is attested by the very insufficiency of the natural means at man's disposal for defence against his enemies, against cold and hunger. This insufficiency, when we strive to fathom its significance, acquires the value of a prehistoric document; it is the final leave-taking between intelligence and instinct. But it is no less true that nature must have hesitated between two modes of psychical activity – one assured of immediate success, but limited in its effects; the other hazardous, but whose conquests, if it should reach independence, might be extended indefinitely. Here again, then, the greatest success was achieved on the side of the greatest risk. Instinct and intelligence therefore represent two divergent solutions, equally fitting, of one and the same problem.

There ensue, it is true, profound differences of internal structure between instinct and intelligence. We

shall dwell only on those that concern our present study. Let us say, then, that instinct and intelligence imply two radically different kinds of knowledge. But some explanations are first of all necessary on the subject of consciousness in general.

It has been asked how far instinct is conscious. Our reply is that there are a vast number of differences and degrees, that instinct is more or less conscious in certain cases, unconscious in others. The plant, as we shall see, has instincts; it is not likely that these are accompanied by feeling. Even in the animal there is hardly any complex instinct that is not unconscious in some part at least of its exercise. But here we must point out a difference, not often noticed, between two kinds of unconsciousness, viz., that in which consciousness is absent, and that in which consciousness is nullified. Both are equal to zero, but in one case the zero expresses the fact that there is nothing, in the other that we have two equal quantities of opposite sign which compensate and neutralise each other. The unconsciousness of a falling stone is of the former kind: the stone has no feeling of its fall. Is it the same with the unconsciousness of instinct, in the extreme cases in which instinct is unconscious? When we mechanically perform an habitual action, when the somnambulist automatically acts his dream, unconsciousness may be absolute; but this is merely due to the fact that the representation of the act is held in check by the performance of the act itself, which resembles the idea so perfectly, and fits it so exactly, that consciousness is unable to find room between them. Representation is stopped up by action. The proof of this is, that if the accomplishment of the act is arrested or thwarted by an obstacle, consciousness may reappear.

It was there, but neutralised by the action which fulfilled and thereby filled the representation. The obstacle creates nothing positive; it simply makes a void, removes a stopper. This inadequacy of act to representation is precisely what we here call consciousness.

If we examine this point more closely, we shall find that consciousness is the light that plays around the zone of possible actions or potential activity which surrounds the action really performed by the living being. It signifies hesitation or choice. Where many equally possible actions are indicated without there being any real action (as in a deliberation that has not come to an end), consciousness is intense. Where the action performed is the only action possible (as in activity of the somnambulistic or more generally automatic kind), consciousness is reduced to nothing. Representation and knowledge exist none the less in the case if we find a whole series of systematised movements the last of which is already pre-figured in the first, and if, besides, consciousness can flash out of them at the shock of an obstacle. From this point of view, the consciousness of a living being may be defined as an arithmetical difference between potential and real activity. It measures the interval between representation and action.

It may be inferred from this that intelligence is likely to point towards consciousness, and instinct towards unconsciousness. For, where the implement to be used is organised by nature, the material furnished by nature, and the result to be obtained willed by nature, there is little left to choice; the consciousness inherent in the representation is therefore counterbalanced, whenever it tends to disengage itself, by the performance of the act, identical with the representation, which

forms its counterweight. Where consciousness appears, it does not so much light up the instinct itself as the thwartings to which instinct is subject; it is the deficit of instinct, the distance, between the act and the idea, that becomes consciousness so that consciousness, here, is only an accident. Essentially, consciousness only emphasises the starting-point of instinct, the point at which the whole series of automatic movements is released. Deficit, on the contrary, is the normal state of intelligence. Labouring under difficulties is its very essence. Its original function being to construct unorganised instruments, it must, in spite of numberless difficulties, choose for this work the place and the time, the form and the matter. And it can never satisfy itself entirely, because every new satisfaction creates new needs. In short, while instinct and intelligence both involve knowledge, this knowledge is rather acted and unconscious in the case of instinct, thought and conscious in the case of intelligence. But it is a difference rather of degree than of kind. So long as consciousness is all we are concerned with, we close our eyes to what is, from the psychological point of view, the cardinal difference between instinct and intelligence.

In order to get at this essential difference we must, without stopping at the more or less brilliant light which illuminates these two modes of internal activity, go straight to the two objects, profoundly different from each other, upon which instinct and intelligence are directed.

When the horse-fly lays its eggs on the legs or shoulders of the horse, it acts as if it knew that its larva has to develop in the horse's stomach and that the horse, in licking itself, will convey the larva into its digestive tract. When a paralysing wasp stings

its victim on just those points where the nervous centres lie, so as to render it motionless without killing it, it acts like a learned entomologist and a skilful surgeon rolled into one. But what shall we say of the little beetle, the Sitaris, whose story is so often quoted? This insect lays its eggs at the entrance of the underground passages dug by a kind of bee, the Anthophora. Its larva, after long waiting, springs upon the male Anthophora as it goes out of the passage, clings to it, and remains attached until the "nuptial flight," when it seizes the opportunity to pass from the male to the female, and quietly waits until it lays its eggs. It then leaps on the egg, which serves as a support for it in the honey, devours the egg in a few days, and, resting on the shell, undergoes its first metamorphosis. Organised now to float on the honey, it consumes this provision of nourishment, and becomes a nymph, then a perfect insect. Everything happens as if the larva of the Sitaris, from the moment it was hatched, knew that the male Anthophora would first emerge from the passage; that the nuptial flight would give it the means of conveying itself to the female, who would take it to a store of honey sufficient to feed it after its transformation; that, until

this transformation, it could gradually eat the egg of the Anthophora, in such a way that it could at the same time feed itself, maintain itself at the surface of the honey, and also suppress the rival that otherwise would have come out of the egg. And equally all this happens as if the Sitaris itself knew that its larva would know all these things. The knowledge, if knowledge there be, is only implicit. It is reflected outwardly in exact movements instead of being reflected inwardly in consciousness. It is none the less true that the behaviour of the insect involves, or rather evolves, the idea of definite things existing or being produced in definite points of space and time, which the insect knows without having learned them.

Now, if we look at intelligence from the same point of view, we find that it also knows certain things without having learned them. But the knowledge in the two cases is of a very different order. We must be careful here not to revive again the old philosophical dispute on the subject of innate ideas. So we will confine ourselves to the point on which every one is agreed, to wit, that the young child understands immediately things that the animal will

never understand, and that in this sense intelligence, like instinct, is an inherited function, therefore an innate one. But this innate intelligence, although it is a faculty of knowing, knows no object in particular. When the new-born babe seeks for the first time its mother's breast, so showing that it has knowledge (unconscious, no doubt) of a thing it has never seen, we say, just because the innate knowledge is in this case of a definite object, that it belongs to instinct and not to intelligence. Intelligence does not then imply the innate knowledge of any object. And yet, if intelligence knows nothing by nature, it has nothing innate. What, then, if it be ignorant of all things, can it know? Besides things, there are relations. The new-born child, so far as intelligent, knows neither definite objects nor a definite property of any object; but when, a little later on, he will hear an epithet being applied to a substantive, he will immediately understand what it means. The relation of attribute to subject is therefore seized by him naturally, and the same might be said of the general relation expressed by the verb, a relation so immediately conceived by the mind that language can leave it to be understood, as is instanced in rudimentary languages

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which have no verb. Intelligence, therefore, naturally makes use of relations of like with like, of content to container, of cause to effect, etc., which are implied in every phrase in which there is a subject, an attribute and a verb, expressed or understood. May one say that it has innate knowledge of each of these relations in particular? It is for logicians to discover whether they are so many irreducible relations, or whether they can be resolved into relations still more general. But, in whatever way we make the analysis of thought, we always end with one or several general categories, of which the mind possesses innate knowledge since it makes a natural use of them. Let us say, therefore, that whatever, in instinct and intelligence, is innate knowledge, bears in the first case on things and in the second on relations.

Philosophers distinguish between the matter of our knowledge and its form. The matter is what is given by the perceptive faculties taken in the elementary state. The form is the totality of the relations set up between these materials in order to constitute a systematic knowledge. Can the form, without matter, be an object of knowledge? Yes, without doubt, provided that this knowledge is not like a thing we possess so much as like a habit we have contracted, — a direction rather than a state: it is, if we will, a certain natural bent of attention. The schoolboy, who knows that the master is going to dictate a fraction to him, draws a line before he knows what numerator and what denominator are to come; he therefore has present to his mind the general relation between the two terms although he does not know either of them; he knows the form

without the matter. So is it, prior to experience, with the categories into which our experience comes to be inserted. Let us adopt then words sanctioned by usage, and give the distinction between intelligence and instinct this more precise formula: Intelligence, in so far as it is innate, is the knowledge of a form; instinct implies the knowledge of a matter.

From this second point of view, which is that of knowledge instead of action, the force immanent in life in general appears to us again as a limited principle, in which originally two different and even divergent modes of knowing coexisted and intermingled. The first gets at definite objects immediately, in their materiality itself. It says, "This is what is." The second gets at no object in particular; it is only a natural power of relating an object to an object, or a part to a part, or an aspect to an aspect — in short, of drawing conclusions when in possession of the premisses, of proceeding from what has been learnt to what is still unknown. It does not say, "This is;" it says only that "if the conditions are such, such will be the conditioned." In short, the first kind of knowledge, the instinctive, would be formulated in what philosophers call categorical propositions, while the second kind, the intellectual, would always be expressed hypothetically. Of these two faculties, the former seems, at first, much preferable to the other. And it would be so, in truth, if it extended to an endless number of objects. But, in fact, it applies only to one special object, and indeed only to a restricted part of that object. Of this, at least, its knowledge is intimate and full; not explicit, but implied in the accomplished action. The intellectual faculty, on the contrary, possesses naturally only an

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external and empty knowledge; but it has thereby the advantage of supplying a frame in which an infinity of objects may find room in turn. It is as if the force evolving in living forms, being a limited force, had had to choose between two kinds of limitation in the field of natural or innate knowledge, one applying to the extension of knowledge, the other to its intension.

In the first case, the knowledge may be packed and full, but it will then be confined to one specific object; in the second, it is no longer limited by its object, but that is because it contains nothing, being only a form without matter. The two tendencies, at first implied in each other, had to separate in order to grow. They both went to seek their fortune in the

world, and turned out to be instinct and intelligence.

Such, then, are the two divergent modes of knowledge by which intelligence and instinct must be defined, from the standpoint of knowledge rather than that of action. But knowledge and action are here only two aspects of one and the same faculty. It is easy to see, indeed, that the second definition is only a new form of the first.

If instinct is, above all, the faculty of using an organised natural instrument, it must involve innate knowledge (potential or unconscious, it is true), both of this instrument and of the object to which it is applied. Instinct is therefore innate knowledge of a thing. But intelligence is the faculty of constructing unorganised – that is to say artificial – instruments. If, on its account, nature gives up endowing the living being with the instruments that may serve him, it is in order that the living being may be able to vary his

construction according to circumstances. The essential function of intelligence is therefore to see the way out of a difficulty in any circumstances whatever, to find what is most suitable, what answers best the question asked. Hence it bears essentially on the relations between a given situation and the means of utilising it. What is innate in intellect, therefore, is the tendency to establish relations, and this tendency implies the natural knowledge of certain very general relations, a kind of stuff that the activity of each particular intellect will cut up into more special relations. Where activity is directed toward manufacture, therefore, knowledge necessarily bears on relations. But this entirely formal knowledge of intelligence has an immense advantage over the material knowledge of instinct. A form, just because it is empty, may be filled at will with any number of things in turn, even with those that are of no use. So that a formal knowledge is not limited to what is practically useful, although it is in

view of practical utility that it has made its appearance in the world. An intelligent being bears within himself the means to transcend his own nature.

He transcends himself, however, less than he wishes, less also than he imagines himself to do. The purely formal character of intelligence deprives it of the ballast necessary to enable it to settle itself on the objects that are of the most powerful interest to speculation. Instinct, on the contrary, has the desired materiality, but it is incapable of going so far in quest of its object; it does not speculate. Here we reach the point that most concerns our present inquiry. The difference that we shall now proceed to denote between instinct and intelligence is what the whole of this analysis was meant to bring out. We formulate it thus: There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek, but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them. ▀



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Shopping addiction



Internet & our brains



Consumerism in the US has reached an all-time high. In 2017, consumers spent \$240 billion on goods such as jewellery, watches, luggage, books, and phones – twice as much as in 2002, even though the population grew by only 13 per cent during that time. This is not to mention the 81 pounds of clothes and tex-

tiles that each American throws away annually, or the 26 million tonnes of plastics collectively disposed of each year. In this animated video, writer Alana Semuels describes why shopping is so addictive and emphasises the urgency in finding an encompassing solution to the problem of wasteful consumerism.

When we look at the internet and where it came from, where it has arrived today, and where it is headed, it's quite clear the direction it is taking – but the engineers didn't really realise just how much the internet was going to change things. People incorrectly assumed that nothing was ever go-

ing to be as important as the telephone or the television. In this series we'll journey through the past, present, and future of that revolution we call the internet. We'll go inside the hidden places, practices, and people who make it hum and ask, *Why do we all love it so much?*



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Edgar Allan Moss

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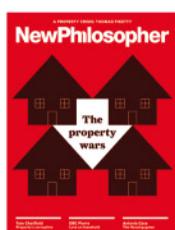
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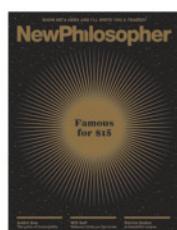
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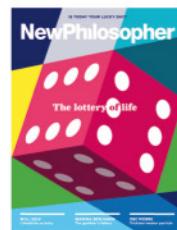
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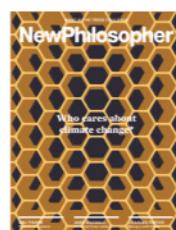
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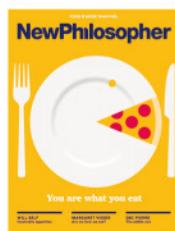
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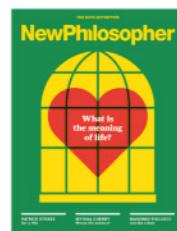
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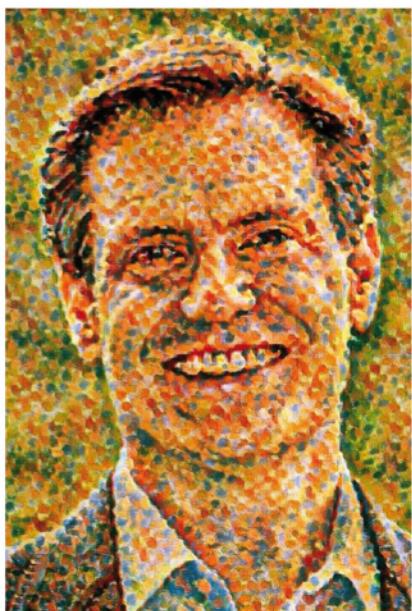


13 questions:

Kelly Truelove

In conversation
with Zan Boag

Kelly Truelove is a technology advisor who was trained as a physicist, and publishes projects at TrueSciPhi.org.



What is your demon?

Time. In one of his novels, Douglas Adams described a professorial “Chair of Chronology” with remit to determine if there is any particular reason why one thing happens after another and if there is any way of stopping it. That is a cause I could get behind.

What is the most important part of your education?

The works of popularisers who have introduced me to new worlds. Most of my online projects have aimed, in a modest way, to help them reach and connect with their audiences.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?

If only there were an algorithm for arriving at a ranked list of actual influence on each of us; I’m sure its output would be startling. However, in terms of conscious reflection, the ancient Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius long has lived rent-free in my mind with his Epicurean, mechanistic views.

What do you doubt most?

In science and philosophy: that every problem has a solution. In technology: that every solution has a problem.

What is a good death?

Is there such a thing? A “least bad” death might be one in which the circumstances yield minimum suffering for the loved ones left behind.

What is your motto?

I’m fond of several sundial mottos, including “I hope for light to follow darkness”, “I only tell of sunny hours”, and “It is later than you think”.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?

Bertrand Russell noted that one could be a melancholy optimist or a cheerful pessimist. We could use more of both sorts to temper the usual kinds.

What does it mean to be human?

To hope and strive with others to find meaning, answers, and solutions.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?

Warm chocolate brownies.

The question you’d most like to ask others?

In the broadest sense, “What are you hoping for?”

Your favourite word?

“Optimise”, from the root “*optimum*” meaning “best”, as in making the best of what we have – optimistically.

What do people accuse you of?

Thinking I can beat the clock.

What is the meaning of life?

To engage with each other in the search for meaning, answers, and solutions. □

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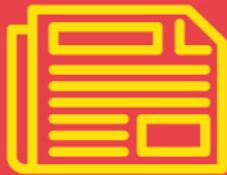


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