THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

• Simulated reality
• On being a non-being
• The popularity of law
• Words cut short
• The benefit of greed

Free with this issue! Selected text by Ayn Rand

£2.99
Public Philosophy

Philosophy is not the exclusive domain of professional academics. This has been the belief of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation from day one as much of this magazine. There are two main aspects to this conviction. First, philosophy needs to interact with other disciplines of thought and bridge out to points of view which have different methods of thinking procedures and ways of viewing reality. Second, it also needs to include thought routes embraced by people with experiential knowledge from all walks of life.

Last year, in May, the American Philosophical Association (APA) issued a statement precisely to highlight the claim of what it called ‘public philosophy’. Though not exactly new to the field of philosophy, the statement nevertheless brought to the fore, bearing the seal of such a prestigious organisation, how imperative it is for philosophy academics and enthusiasts to overcome their all too powerful propensity to be sectarian. Such an attitude only breeds rigidity of thought and narrow-mindedness. And we do not want that, do we?

The statement issued by the APA gives due value to Philosophy’s participation in the public arena through its professionals and enthusiasts. This participation is held to include such work that engages with contemporary issues as well as work that brings traditional philosophies to non-traditional settings.

In both Malta and Gozo our magazine is hitting the stands with ever more zest. Predictably, the initial slow start is steady on an upward curve, and we’re very pleased that the magazine is answering to the exacting demand of our readers. Lately we have made some adjustments in our administrative setup to improve our product, and we intend—no, we promise—to continue upgrading. As the official platform of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation, we are pleased to help readers of SHARE to question and think. The main aim of our magazine is to disseminate articles and information which contribute to philosophical discussion and debate. The magazine adheres to no single creed and ideology, and thus its policy is to published any type of article as long as it contains philosophical substance and argumentation. Philosophy Sharing Foundation may or may not agree with the opinions expressed in the published articles. The responsibility for the published material shall lie solely with its author.

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Anyone may submit an article for SHARE. However, it shall be the sole prerogative and responsibility of the Editor to determine which contributions to include or exclude from the magazine. Articles shall be in English, and not longer than a 1,000 words. Any subject matter may be dealt with (no censorship shall be applied). However, articles must be of a philosophical nature (with theses supported by logical proof). Critiques, commentaries, expositions or analyses (of a mere informative kind) would not be considered favourably. Thought-provoking, audacious and stimulating contributions are preferred. Technical jargon is to be avoided. References, if any, are to be placed within the text. The articles should not have been published elsewhere.

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Front image: Gambling (2017) by Inês Ferreira on Unsplash
Dear Editor, I recommend your sterling efforts as a Foundation. Nevertheless, more courses in Gozo, please!
— Nigel Farrugia (Sannat, Gozo).

Dear Editor, your last issue carried various articles on Marx (Issue 7). It made greatly interesting reading. For your readers’ interest, I would like to add to the themes touched upon by highlighting an amazing text of Marx in which he seems to predict artificial intelligence. ‘The Fragment on Machines’ is buried in the Grundrisse (a series of Marx’s notebooks that weren’t published in English until 1973, 125 years after they were written in 1848). It is this: “Once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the [...] automatic system of machinery [...] set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.” Food for thought. Thank you
— Milena Borilović (Serbian; St. Paul’s Bay).

Dear Editor, I would like to reply to Ms. Svoboda’s letter (in Issue 7) where she asked why most of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation’s courses are in Maltese. During the last academic year, out of a total of six courses, three where in Maltese while another three where in English. We try to maintain a fair balance between the two languages. Our aim as a Foundation is to make available philosophical topics to the general public, and most of people are not comfortable in engaging in a philosophical debate in a foreign language (despite English being an official language in Malta it is still a foreign language for many). However, when you take a look at what the Foundation produces you can notice that the balance tilts towards English rather than Maltese. SHARE magazine is produced wholly in English, and most of our monthly talks are also delivered in English. In fact we had more than one occasion when we had marketed a public talk as going to be delivered in Maltese, foreigners still turn up for the talk, and the lecturer had to switch to English, letting the Maltese public that had decided to turn up for the talk just because it was in Maltese, and rightly complaining for being deceived. I urge Ms. Svoboda to follow our Facebook page and our website which is constantly updated with all our upcoming activities including many in the English language.
— Henry-Franz Gauci, on behalf of the Philosophy

‘Public philosophy’, stated the APA, may also bring the discipline into dialogue with other humanities, the arts, natural sciences, social sciences, and interested people outside of academia. This can be done in a variety of traditional and non-traditional media.

One of the many benefits of systematically focusing more on ‘public philosophy’, the statement adds, can be that of having Philosophy reaching populations that tend not to have access to philosophy and philosophers. Further, the APA notes that ‘public philosophy’ raises the profile of the discipline, scholars, and home institutions.

In issuing its weighty statement, the APA, while recognising ‘public philosophy’ as a growing site of scholarly involvement, encouraged institutions to develop standards for evaluating and practices for rewarding ‘public philosophy’ in decisions regarding promotion, tenure, and salary, so that faculty members who are interested in this work may, if they choose, pursue it with appropriate recognition and without professional discouragement or penalty.

Although peer-reviewed scholarly publications remain central to the profession, the APA applauded philosophers’ contributions to public policy, to consultation with government, medical, business, and civil society institutions, and to public opinion in general.

“Public philosophy presented or published outside of standard academic venues,” concluded the statement, “has evident value as external service to the profession and/or community. But we also urge institutions to consider broadening their standards for evidence of excellence in research and teaching and to consider whether their faculty’s work in public philosophy is more properly counted as contributing to these latter categories of faculty evaluation.”

Evidently, the Philosophy Sharing Foundation endorses this statement, and encourages one and all, professionals and enthusiasts alike, to take it seriously and let it disturb us.
Words are like magic. They define the shapes around us by giving them a location in space and time, and define their function. Words give a body to the shadows inside us, bringing them to life for everyone to observe. Words are a medium between us and our senses, and the world around us. They are a powerful medicine which can cure us from our confusion, by providing a clear definition and an outline to our thoughts. We need words continuously. We are addicted to them. Without them we are lost in the void and in darkness.

It seems that each one of us is condemned to be alone living in his/her own bubble with his/her own dreams and fears; to see and perceive the outside world only as a reflection on the walls of our bubble. We create words and use them as a tool to reach out to each other. We give them a value. We use them as tags attaching them to our surroundings with their distinctive definition. By doing so, layer after layer, we create and define our limits and our borders. In other words, we are creating our distinctive human dimension; a structure within a structure that stretches across time and space like a web, a cathedral, defined by words because, by naming and defining our surroundings, we make them intelligible to us and, at the same time, less scary to live with.

All this may give us the impression that we possess and have control of our surroundings, by creating in us that sense of security and stability needed in order to make sense of our existence. But there are things beyond our experience that exist and will exist independently from us. They go beyond our experience and far beyond any knowledge that we may have. Anything that exists in this state exists independently from any definition we, as a human race, may give them. Take that mass that emits heat and light which we call the sun, or the third rock that orbits that burning mass which we call earth or home. With or without us they exist and will exist independently from us and from any meaning and definition we attach to them.

Apart from the need to define in order to understand, sometimes we presume that we have also that divine right to reduce everything to that size and to that shape just to make them fit in our restricted view of existence. Maybe we have also that presumption that everything that falls outside these parameters does not exist. By doing so we exclude a world of possibilities.

There will be always something far beyond us which we will try to reduce to our human understanding and, by the use of words and their articulation, we dress this invisible world to fit within our imaginary. Whatever comes within our perception we have the tendency to attach a tag to it, to name it and to use other words to define it. By doing so we are acknowledging it. It will exist but only according to our limited understanding.

Metaphorically speaking, we may say that words are like cloths. With their articulations we dress our ideas to fit the so-called right paradigms. By phrasing them we try not only to express our personal thoughts to others but also attempt to voice our deepest feelings. We try to cage all this and much more in words in order to display them to the outside world with that hopeful expectation that the rest of the world will see what we see and feel what we feel. By so doing we secretly confirm and, at the same time, re-affirm, and also justify, our existence.

By Alfred Zammit

Trying a fit (2017), Sawyer Bengston, Chicago, United States.
Words are a multidimensional tool at our disposal which can be used not only to communicate meaning and values but also, consciously or not, they can evoke in us different memories, emotions and understanding, both as individuals as well as a collectivity. Words can be a powerful tool in the hands of those who know their value. They are powerful enough to create ‘individuals’ and, at the same time, to fulfil them when they are bound together as a community. But words have also the power to destroy what they helped to create if they are used wrongly, loosely or out of place.

We travelled along a long path across space and time. Our mother tongue changed, evolved and diversified with us, always creating and renewing our vocabulary in order to fit our new and unique understanding of the world; a vocabulary composed of words with their unique meaning and value peculiar to that particular and distinctive people in that particular time and space. If we compare spoken language to a garment people wear, to be alive a language needs to be able to dynamically change to fit the so-called couture of the people wearing it. At the same time individuals as well as communities are subject to the same rules and need to change or adapt in order to fit in their present world. If not they become aliens among their own people.

It is men/women that define themselves. Because we are creatures of reason, it is action dictated by reason, or the lack of it, that defines us. Reasoning is an art. Not only a capacity that we developed. It is an art that uses words as the main tool to define personal experiences of the world. Consciously or not, we are using this as a platform not only to define our reality but also to express ourselves in various forms. When seen from this perspective, words are not just tags or empty shells without any further meaning but actions, acts of creation at work, which can be either a source of creation or a tool of destruction.

If the human dimension is defined by words, and we are the creators of these words, than it follows that everything around us—the whole known universe as we see it and know it and understand it—is just an artificial assembled structure created by us to make sense of our surroundings.

Alfred Zammit engages with philosophy on a daily basis just for the fun of it. Educated in disciplines other than philosophy, his love of wisdom is a wisdom of love.
The medievalists used the terms *non ens* (no being) to refer to anything that does not exist in any way whatsoever. Of course, since one can only think about *ens* (being), nobody can even imagine a *non ens* (not even God, it was maintained).

The issue of being is held to have been originally introduced by Parmenides in the early 5th century BCE. He distinguished *ens* from *non ens* as part of an argument presenting the so-called law of noncontradiction. A thing, he proposed, cannot be and not be at the same time; either it is or it is not.

Plato elaborated this principle further, advancing the idea that, apart from *ens* and *non ens*, a thing could be thought of as separate from other *entia* (beings) but also from *non ens*. Later, following Aristotle, the medievalists called this third alternative *aliquid* (something). And with good reason. For, X and Y being two different things, X is a not-being-Y thing as much as it is something (a being). In other words, X is *non ens* and *ens* simultaneously.

The point might be useful when considering a being such as that of Zapata. Or rather his non-being. Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919; photograph on the right) was one of the leading figures of the 1910 Mexican revolution. Note: ‘one of the leading figures’. Not ‘one of the leaders’. For Zapata was not what one might call a leader in the ordinary sense of the word. That is, one who leads others. Or one who is simply followed by others. In his idiom, known historically as Aztec, he was called a ‘calpuleque’, pronounced *kaal-poo-lè-ke*.

A European would be tempted to translate *calpuleque* as ‘representative’ or ‘delegate’. These would be absolutely off the mark as much as ‘leader’ would. For a *calpuleque* was not exactly any of these in the strict sense of the words. Though the term ‘spokesperson’ might come very close (but not quite), it seems that the best way to translate *calpuleque* would be by saying that he (it was rarely a she) was a ‘foremost communal arbiter’.

Though these words seem loaded enough they might help to get us to the concept they express. Not without, it must be said, appreciating their cultural matrix.

Zapata was ethnically an Aztec from the State of Morelos in the south of Mexico (bordering the Federal City of Mexico City). Amongst the indigenous Aztec peoples of his time, and more so amid the Maya peoples further south (in the State
chapters 7
of Chiapas), communities had no leaders, representatives
or delegates in the European sense of the words. The one-
level, flat social structure was intact, and still is amongst the
Mayans. Decisions were taken by the whole community, and
no person acted autonomously on its behalf or took decisions
in its stead (as a leader, representative or delegate would in a
modern Western democracy).

As in Zapata’s case, the calpuleque was chosen by the
community elders whose authority came solely from the
respect in which the people kept them. He was chosen to
arbitrate between the community and the ‘outside world’
according to a precise assignment (that of defending the
indigenous’ lands and safeguard their livelihood). He was
not chosen to lead anyone; it was the community which led
(he was led by it). He was not chosen to represent anyone; it
was the community which represented itself. He was—yes,
it might be cautiously said—the community’s ‘spokesman’,
however not without sufficient leeway within the boundaries
of his remit, as when Zapata drew up the famous ‘Plan
of Ayala’ (1911). As calpuleque, Zapata was always and
everywhere fully and solely accountable to the community on a
day-to-day basis.

This made him very,
very different from other
Mexican revolutionary
leaders of his time, such as
Pancho Villa, or from
many other subsequent
leaders worldwide.
Zapata’s sway was only—
only—within the context of
community. He held it until,
and only until, the community
consented to it. Zapata himself
was perfectly conscious of
this. Being who he was, he had
been extremely and humbly
conscientious about it. Just like
the calpuleques which one can
still observe amongst the Mayans
unto this day in Mesoamerica.

To put it in other (more
sophisticated) words, Zapata was an
ens and a non ens concurrently. While
not being a non ens in the sense of a
nothing (he was something for sure),
he was nevertheless a leader without
being a leader; a representative and a
delegate without being neither. As seen,
he was not exactly a spokesman either.

It is this that makes him so interesting as a
public figure. For to comprehend his nonentity or non-being
one must grasp the ens of his aliquid, that is, the community
which made him possible and upheld his subsistence, and,
on a wider plan, the socio-political medium which moulded
him.

This ens finds its realisation and fulfilment in a deep-
rooted sense of brother/sisterhood while upholding the
sovereignty of each individual. The community does not
swallow up, so to say, the being of any individual as in a
fascist State. On the contrary, it is enriched by the involvement
and participation of individuals. The community, in turn,
supports its individual members in their survival and their
commitment towards each other.

The non-being of Zapata, for one, makes this the more
clear in all its beauty.

Miguel Ángel García Pérez, from Monterrey, Mexico, studied Social
Studies at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, with working experience
in Europe. He studied philosophy as a basic subject, and remained attached
to it ever since. He lives in Mexico.
Much has been said lately in Malta about the so-called ‘Rule of Law’. The terms have been used loosely—very loosely—with no clear meaning. Of course, properly speaking the terms ‘Rule of Law’ refer the principle that all people and institutions are subject and accountable to law that is fairly applied and enforced; the principle of government by law. This should mean that the Rule of Law, Fundamental Human Rights, the Separation of Powers, and such like matters, are, and must be, all part and parcel of the Philosophy of Law, which should guide and enhance these matters increasingly for all future time for the over-riding and supreme benefit of the one single Individual Sovereign Will.

By these last terms—‘Individual Sovereign Will’—I understand the substantive sum total of all the others, namely the Rule of Law, Fundamental Human Rights, the Separation of Powers, etc.

It is the business of the Philosophy of Law (as Jurisprudence is called in Continental countries) to supervise the continual development, reform and advancement of all of these. The main reason being that, since the Philosophy of Law—or, to be more precise, Jurisprudence—is bound to justify restrictions, even minimal, then it is its duty to create an environment, or parameters, in which the Individual Sovereign Will is constantly reformed in the single direction of its own continued enhancement.

Therefore, Law needs something to give it a rationale, a rational explanation and significance of why it is there; why it is so. It is for this reason that jurists and philosophers have discussed and fathered the Philosophy of Law (or Jurisprudence), which is the ‘genesis of motion’ of laws (including of the Constitution itself); the relative justification of Law.

We say that it is ‘relative’ because, like Law itself, the Philosophy of Law needs further aid to justify itself. There is also need, moreover, of a principle which links—and, indeed, subjects—both Law and the Philosophy of Law to Individual Sovereign Will.
This principle I term the ‘Principle of Popularity of Law’, which determines the proportion with which Law restraints Individual Sovereign Will.

‘Law’ here includes both the higher norm, namely the Constitution, and the lower norm, which includes all other laws. The higher norm needs the support of the Popularity Principle more than the lower norm in direct proportion to its standing. Therefore and accordingly, this marks the rate of propensity of the Popularity Principle in as much as, the higher the level of norms, the greater is the rate of occurrence, or necessity, of the Popularity Principle. The higher the norm, the more support it will need from the Popularity Principle. The Popularity Principle, however, should not be neglected in lower norms. This is because lower norms—apart from their being ‘lower’, and therefore in need of more ‘props’, or support—also require the Popularity Principle since they too restrain Individual Sovereign Will. Notwithstanding, the higher—or Constitutional—norm is in most need of the Popularity Principle.

Though democracy is the best environment for the occurrence of these proportions upheld by the Popularity Principle, even if no guarantees of permanency or durability can be ascertained, history shows that constitutions that infringe the Popularity Principle carry inside them the seed of their own destruction. Such constitutions—such as that of the French monarchy—might, however, reach out to the roots of the people, and, therefore, are not too much in conflict with Individual Sovereign Will, at least in principle. Nonetheless, history and circumstance will sooner or later reveal such constitutions for what they are worth.

Though I proposed here what I call ‘The Principle of Popularity of Law’, I do not suggest that this principle is equivalent to what is called the ‘Rule of Law’. Nevertheless, neither does it exclude it. Indeed, the Principle of Popularity of Law is additional to it. To be more clear, this principle can be enunciated thus: The Principle of Popularity of Law is the direct proportion between the rate of tenability of the law and the rate of its acceptance by the Individual (where, by individual, I mean ‘the majority’ as commonly understood in democracies, and beyond).

The set-up I suggest here, including that of laws, must be continually ‘on the go’ and ‘on its toes’. This echoes Rousseau’s saying that in the English system the citizen is ‘free’ on one day only, namely the day of voting, and that thereafter the citizen/voter is negligible. Rousseau may not have been hinting at every day elections but certainly that the set-up is indeed to be tested or, at least, testable in each and every day. To this I add that this testability should be accessible to every single individual and every single conscientious objector. This is essential of the Principle of the Popularity of Law and of its ‘sub-principle’, the Principle of Continual Testing.

That is why the Principle of Popularity must be added to the Rule of Law, and also why the Principle of Popularity of Law is to apply to all norms of law whether low or high.

Emmanuel George Cefai is a published philosopher; author of The Spirit of Metaphysics (Malta, 2014). Amongst other things, his work attempts to build a new system of philosophy especially in field of metaphysics.
I had become an anarchist before I knew it. It dawned on me nine summers ago while speaking with a friend from Brazil, Paulo Souza. Late one night, returning from an evening of animated discussion beside the sea down South, I was explaining to him my views on unequal power relations, why I thought they should be dismantled, and how I considered that social, political and economic processes should be reorganised on more egalitarian, voluntary, non-violent, altruistic and cooperative lines. “In a word,” Paulo had responded unexpectedly, “anarchism.”

I was utterly taken aback. Anarchism! I had never perceived anything I felt so convinced about in such a way. Nor had I ever thought of giving it that most infamous of tags. Unfalteringly, Paulo sent my mind reeling. That very night, and throughout the subsequent days, I embarked on reading anything I could put my eyes on about the subject. I sent for books which seemed able to proffer some help. I began revisiting my own thoughts to see whether they matched up to this astonishing revelation. At long last I had to admit to myself that, indeed, unbeknown to me, I was an anarchist.

Like most people, in my mind anarchism reeked of destructiveness. What instantly came to mind was disorder, chaos, terrorism, lawlessness. I quickly realised, however, that such connotations were conveniently and maliciously concocted by the powers to be to label and besmirch anyone who dared challenge their enforced status quo. The picture became clearer, and immeasurably constructive and encouraging, when I delved into the writings of anarchist masters such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), Michael Bakunin (1814-1876), Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), and many others. Furthermore, my Christian background was soothed when exploring the writings of an anarchist maestro such as Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910).

Bearing well in mind that the anarchism is a movement, and, as such, far from being an institution, and that its
many guises around the world are anything but cohesive or consistent, I venture to state in the bearest of terms its five foundational principles, to which I adhere.

First, all human beings are equally entitled to happiness (often called the Principle of Equality on which rests the entire philosophy of anarchism). Among other things, this implies that each human being is absolute master of his/her own means in the production of his/her own welfare and in fulfilling his/her potentialities.

Second, mutual aid is necessary to social well-being (Principle of Economy). This at least suggests that, either individually or collectively, each person possesses the means of material production.

Third, decisions concerning a person’s happiness are all and always taken by the person concerned by directly consenting to the deliberations made (Principle of Government and Law). This denotes a process of decision-making which is direct, inclusive, cooperative, egalitarian, and solution-oriented.

Fourth, no-one may have a determining control over another person’s means of producing his/her own happiness (Principle of Human Psychology). This infers that no-one is bound to obey orders or has the right to impart orders to others unless such orders are according to the will of the person/s whom they affect.

Fifth, any claim to private property is unfounded, unwarranted and unreasonable (Principle of Law). This points towards the fact that, as Proudhon famously stated, private property is theft.

It is frequently held that a person’s juvenile radical convictions thin out as one grows older, often to the point of being thoroughly forsaken or even substituted with opposite ones. In my case, the contrary occurred. The anarchist leanings of my youth were only emboldened by time.

I began my intellectual itinerary, if such it may be called, from a decidedly rightist position mainly due to my upbringing and initial academic formation. It was typically middle-class and conservative. This persisted unscratched up till my early twenties when, almost by accident, I found myself directly exposed to a non-European culture which sowed in my mind the first seeds of discontent and dissent. These germinated slowly while broadening my select circle of friends, and grew sturdier when I studied abroad. Later, back home, living and working in close contact with low social class people, in my thirties I finally underwent what I decided to call a ‘cultural transformation’ which inexorably drew me to a leftist position. Not only have I not abandoned it since, but it gradually became ever more radical, evolving into my present anarchism.

Throughout the latter part of this trajectory, my main irritation had been with the inherent nature of institutions, and with the consequent intellectual, affective and psychological apparata they accumulate to justify their imposition and dominion. By being wholeheartedly on their side of the wall, there was a time in my teens when I could gauge institutions’ full ascendency over the individual, and only thus could I be so certain of my repudiation of them later on. Steadily I became increasingly convinced of their unquestionable, though imperceptibly camouflaged, violence.

I have seen this time and time again in my constant dealings with institutions of whatever kind, including the political state, on my behalf or that of many powerless people. As Freud suggested in Civilization and its Discontents (1930), institutions are obsessed with beauty, cleanliness and order. In other words, they are consistently intent on somehow destroying anyone who, actively or potentially, disturbs their harmony and formal perfection, soils or blemishes their reputation and status, and/or harbours personal autonomy and independence. Institutions seek only one thing: private and social conformity. They brand anyone unwilling to toe the line as ugly, dirty and/or unruly.

Jesus was likewise stigmatised, and not undeservedly. I believe he was truly an anarchist. Being one who completely trusts him, I am not ashamed—indeed I am proud—to call myself a Christian anarchist.

A professional philosopher, Mark Montebello is very much interested in the sociopolitical dimension of organised living. He is a Catholic priest, and a visiting lecturer at the University of Malta.
Personal identity is one of the first and foremost fundamental questions of Philosophy. Who am I? What makes me me? These questions are inherently compelling. They are bound up with practical matters that each of us must decide for ourselves.

Nevertheless, when philosophers turn to these questions their answers are often disappointingly abstract. They typically approach personal identity as a special case of a more general topic in metaphysics by asking what are the conditions on the preservation and annihilation of this identity. And they answer the question using the standard method of far-fetched thought experiments.

Let us image a woman. Thelma. She was born in Timbuktu, works at a pharmaceutical company, likes spicy foods and kick-boxes for fun. If her body had to be annihilated and a molecule-for-molecule replica simultaneously created on Mars, would it still be her or just someone fitting the same description?

Let’s imagine that all of Thelma’s memories and desires were switched with the Queen of England’s. Which would be her? What if the two hemispheres of her brain were transplanted into the skulls of two cadavers, who would she be?

Though these are interesting questions, the leading views of personal identity that I am a body and that I am a thread of overlapping psychological states have a hard time coming up with consistent explanations of all these cases.

More distressingly, though, they do not even address the questions that lead many of us to care about the self in the first place. The kind of features they propose for what makes me me are basically the same as what makes Thelma Thelma, and what makes you you.

Although they explain why each of us are individuals—in the sense of being numerically distinct because we are located at different spatio-temporal locations and we possess other different properties—the same point goes for billiard balls or, even, rabbits. The responses do not even begin to explain why the differences between us are interesting and important.
This is where the narrative views of personal identity comes in. It starts from the idea that we are fundamentally sense-making creatures – ‘homo narrans’, as John Niles puts it; ‘tellers’ instead of ‘homo sapiens’ or ‘knowers’.

According to a narrative view, who I am is given by the story I tell about myself or maybe to guard against rampant self-deceptions by the story that an especially reflective version of myself would tell. Think about the sorts of things we tell each other on first dates, at parties or in our memoirs. We speak of where we come from, what’s happened to us so far, where we are heading.

When I ask ‘Who am I?’ I enquire how to shape the story of my life so that it hangs together into a meaningful, well-rounded whole. Because the narrative view treats selves as constructed out of a multitude of remembered details and plans, it explains our sense that some actions and features are deeply part of us while others are accidents. Say, that Thelma’s love of science is central to her identity, while working at BigPharma is just a way to pay rent.

It also explains the profound intuition that making a ‘self’ is an active ongoing process. So, perhaps, as a teenager or at college Thelma might describe herself as ‘from the Barrio’, but later she might decide that she just happened to be born there, that it does not define her or even matter much.

From kindergarten up to university level, the human person is bomarded with academia affording little time to develop human life skills that are so important to living the full human experience.

Our educational system is heavily based on a structured and formal pedagogy where pupils and students study in large numbers at a highly competitive environment that gives little or no attention to the holistic development of the human persona. It is especially at the adolescence stage that young people ask fundamental questions about themselves, each other, the world, and one’s past, present and future life as they seek unity of purpose and coherence.

Not much thought is given to inculcating the collaborative dimension of education in the curriculum. This is taking place within the background of the wider Maltese society that increasingly embraces individualism, relativism and its slavery to cyber-space and virtual reality. Children seem to be become captive of virtual reality and the social media as face-to-face communication is increasingly becoming a rare commodity.

The full human experience is based on past and present experiences, and how these come together to form a coherent whole to grow and mature. We all need to stop and take stock of the events that shaped us and defined us. We have at our disposition the most natural and logical methods to do so.

Our mental processes are amazingly well-equipped in chosing memories that are pleasant and others which are not so pleasant. We juggle with our memories and try to put a sequence to life events and draw meaning through reflection, interpretation and re-interpretation. We do this frequently on our own, and often fail to see the whole picture.

Media Literacy Education, through the digital technologies it utilizes for story-telling, especially photography and film-making, has the potential to engage the process of interpretation and meaning-making, imagination and critical reflection.

Using video-editing tools and group dynamics, it is possible for students to individually use a selection of life experiences (through photo selection and the sequencing of such photos). Each individual student is then allotted time to articulate what these photos mean within the context of his/her whole life experience and how this experience helped mature the person to his/her present state.

Hearing oneself and speaking about oneself in a social construct is group therapy in itself. Reflection is indeed a potentiality that needs to be developed and actualised within the school curriculum. We need facilitators to help students discuss not only about academic subjects but also, and more importantly, about the ‘university of life’, and street smartness.

Indeed, our educational system yearns for such an approach. Not only does it allow for the individual to grow and mature and re-interpret his/her life but it also helps in the development of group cohesion within the dynamics of a social construct.

It is high time that our educators implement such an approach in an otherwise pedantic and heavily theoretical, memory-based and competitive educational system.

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Gambling is a form of entertainment which very often becomes addictive. Why do people gamble, as they rarely can win anything, mostly never? Gambling is a form of game which promotes the ‘illusion of control’. The gambler believes that she/he can exert skill over an outcome that is actually defined by chance. Most of them know already that they will never win the game, but they play anyway.

Gambling has been popular as an entertainment activity for many centuries across many cultures. All around the globe casinos, Internet gambling and electronic gaming machines are created continuously. Governments benefit from taxable revenues at gamblers’ health cost. Pathological gambling is a recognised psychiatric diagnosis.

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) has been used at the University of Cambridge to measure patterns of brain activity while volunteers perform a gambling game. It has shown a reliable pattern of brain activity when humans receive monetary wins. In particular, a region called the striatum, towards the centre of the brain, is a crucial component in a reward circuit that also responds to natural reinforcers like food and sexual stimuli.

Activity has been measured in this reward circuit as volunteers experience near-misses and choice effects during a gambling task. Near-misses and personal choice often spur gamblers to play longer and to augment their bets. The statistically most relevant behaviour observable is ‘loss chasing’, when gamblers continue to play in an effort to recoup accumulating debts, amassed by continuous losses. Loss chasing is one of the hallmarks of problem gambling, which actually bears much resemblance to drug addiction. Problem gamblers also experience cravings and symptoms of withdrawal when denied the opportunity to gamble.

Pathological gambling may also have some important biological determinants. The brain chemical dopamine is abnormally regulated in problem gambling. The orbitofrontal cortex is a critical point. Following damage to the orbitofrontal region, neurosurgical patients often show changes in their judgment and risk-taking. More subtle chemical imbalances in this brain region may accompany the transition from regular gambling to pathological gambling.

The idea of the ‘magic circle’ is that games are formal structures wholly and completely separate from ordinary life. The magic circle naively champions the preexisting rules of a game and ignores the fact that games are lived experiences, that games are actually played by human beings in some kind of real social and cultural context.

The magic circle has also been referred to as “the artificial context of a game ... the shared space of play created by its rules.” Originally coined by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens (1938), the term ‘magic circle’ only reached full fruition in Eric Zimmermann and Katie Salen’s Rules of Play (2003). “All play,” states Huizinga, “moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual,
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Playing with life (2017), Farhan Siddicq (Sukabumi, Indonesia)

so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground.’

The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the courts of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, that is, forbidden spots, isolated, hedged around, hallowed, within which special rules exist. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

Here the magic circle appears in a list of phenomena that includes game spaces (card table, tennis court), spaces for art and entertainment (stage, screen), and even ‘real-world’ spaces (temple, courts of justice). The magic circle is yet another example of a ritual space that creates, according to Huizinga, a “temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”

Huizinga closes his seminal book with a passionate argument against a strict separation between life and games. “Gambling games are a curious subject of cultural research, unproductive in cultural terms. They add nothing to life or the mind.”

According to Dr Luke Clark of the University of Cambridge, the illusion of control is precisely what gambling promotes. Gamblers often interpret a moderate frequency of near-misses as evidence that they are mastering the game and that a win is on the way. Illusory control further determines personal choice since a gambler acquires some responsibility in arranging their gamble. Choice appears to encourage a belief that the game involves skill when in fact the outcome is entirely random.

As games of chance, gambling games should offer the gamer the possibility of a reward out of combinatorics. But they are not unlike literature, which are, as Italo Calvino mentioned in Motte, “a combinatorial game”. As a case in point he takes Cent mille milliards de poèmes (1961) by Raymond Queneau. This is a collection of ten sonnets of fourteen lines each printed on pages cut into so many strips so that, by flipping the strips and combining the lines, the reader can obtain ten different texts.

As narratives, together with simple play reward, games might be considered as a subset of ilinx (temporary disruption of perception), coupled to a vast choice of possibilities affording wireless games, chaotic structures, and creative anarchy. Linear narratives of the unconscious self, on the other hand, might be perceived as unlimited action where the boundaries of the magic circle are broken due to pathological patterns of gambling addiction.
According to Jean Baudrillard, author of *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) all values have been magnetized by codes. He says: “This is the characteristic effect of the code, which is based everywhere on the principle of neutralization and indifference.”

What does this mean? Which code is he talking about? In order to understand this, prior to anything else, we must ask ourselves: what hides behind those computer screens we are so often faced with? What hides behind these mirrors which have the power to show us what we need or like to see? Nothing else than numerical sequences. Codes, indeed; and, though many would hardly believe it, such sequences are mostly made by zeros and ones streaming by.

Leibniz is the most famous mathematician and philosopher who deeply inquired into such sequences and into the theory on their combinations commonly known as the binary system. In works like *Dissertation on the Art of Combinations* (1666) and particularly in the very concise *Explanation of Binary Arithmetic* (1703), the German philosopher did not confine himself to outlining all applications of such system, but also claimed that he had found the key to one of the most ancient and mysterious books in history, the Chinese *I-Ching*, with its sixty-four hexagrams.

In both works, Leibniz tried to define his theoretical principles in order to found all of his explanations on an indisputable certainty. Unfortunately, his reasoning sometimes sounds unsteady and unable to fully clarify the symbolical meaning implied in the relation between zero and one, as his contradictory conception of infinite numbers shows. Leibniz focused on the arithmetic aspect of the binary numerical sequences, partly disregarding the metaphysical value of the two most basic figures and, unfortunately, depicting the *I-Ching* itself as if it only were something similar to a timetable.

However, for better or for worse, Leibniz’s timetable turned out to be a ground-shaking development during our times. Although it may sound like science fiction, it is a matter of fact that out of such limited knowledge contemporary technology has created a whole universe by connecting binary sequences to all that data which gave rise to contemporary virtual reality as we know it. Evidently, in such conditions the symbolic meaning of numbers seems to be completely lost and forgotten as figures are only needed for the creation of a *substratum*.
language meant to reproduce, and sometimes manipulate, images and messages.

This is the ground on which the simulation of our times has been built: numbers deprived of their symbolic meaning, and considered only from a quantitative and practical point of view.

Baudrillard, whose perspective is less mathematical than Leibniz’s, and more focused on semiotics and philosophy of language, has apparently detected all of the dangers connected to a simulated and manipulated reality to the point that he says: “All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this gamble on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange – God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not real, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an interrupted circuit without reference or circumference”.

As we can see, according to Baudrillard, there seems to be no way out of such simulated reality: it is a simulation which aims at invading our way of thinking, at depriving us of any true contemplative purpose. If “God himself can be simulated” and if “the whole system becomes weightless”, then what are we other than puppets, lost and confused, in a meaningless show? Fortunately the power of simulation is less strong than what the French philosopher believes. God cannot be simulated for the simple reason that mystery itself cannot be simulated. The mystery of divine and angelical intelligence can be hinted at by a sign, of course, but it cannot be confined to whatsoever number or code.

Why did not Baudrillard realise that a simulated reality is trapped within the same limits of its own virtuality? Because he detected the dangers related to simulation but did not find the main trick behind such simulation.

Step by step, this point will be made as clear as possible. Simulation can be complete only when it leaves no blank spaces, no doubts, no aspirations unsatisfied, but as long as we commit ourselves in the effort of giving reality an interpretation, and our souls call for purification and a deeper vision of life, it means that simulation is not enough; it means that we are still walking towards a higher ground, trying to ascend and listen to the purest among the intelligences.

Such relation between the sign, our own understanding and the divine intellect which has been debated for so long

Leibniz’s monument in Hannover, Germany, by Stefan Schwerdtfeger (2016).
throughout the history of Western culture is incisively described in the Divine Comedy, where Beatrice says to Dante (Paradise, 4, 40–45): “To speak thus is adapted to your mind, / Since only through the sense it apprehendeth / What then it worthy makes of intellect. / On this account the Scripture condescends / Unto your faculties, and feet and hands / To God attributes, and means something else ....”

In this sense the gradual transfiguration of souls we find in Dante’s Paradise would be of great help in order to understand what we are dealing with here. Actually Dante opens his Paradise with these words: “The glory of Him who moveth everything / Doth penetrate the universe, and shine / In one part more and in another less. / Within that heaven which most his light receives / Was I ...” This means that reality cannot be reduced to a standard reality, to a universal simulacrum: things cannot be reduced to mere quantities as all beings reveal their nature by moving closer, if they do so, to the Principle of all enlightenment.

Sadly, nowadays’ predominant rationality and sentimentalism prevents many people from thinking in a spiritual way therefore, lacking any trustworthy principles, they tend to believe that the simulated reality is the only reality. For the same reason it is widely doubted that any transcendental solution can ever solve such problems as the ones we are facing here.

All we can do, then, is to ask ourselves if there can ever be something that cannot be codified. Which means: is there something that can save us from being turned into empty creatures, exploited by a virtual system?

In regard to this, Baudrillard answers: “Perhaps only death, the reversibility of death, is of a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can breach the code” (Symbolic Exchange and Death). Perhaps death could be of a higher order as the codified system lives on visible and apparently living simulacra. But who can guarantee this? There can be a code for death also if the system decides to find one. Actually here Baudrillard reaches the height of confusion by saying: “Only symbolic disorder can breach the code”. How can this be true? Codes literally feed on ‘symbolic disorder’! The language of codes has been created on an exclusively practical use of numbers. Numbers seen as quantities, not as symbols: here it is the ‘symbolic disorder’! Therefore, no, ‘symbolic disorder’ will never breach any code; more likely it will maintain it ...

What can really breach the code, then?

As suggested in Dante’s Paradise, an all-inclusive simulation cannot be something feasible. Everything and everyone comes near to its own full realization by purifying himself and by ascending to a higher degree of spirituality: this is the reason why we can surely say that there cannot be any simulation in spiritual life.

Spiritual heart’s enlightenment, the so-called state of grace, does not depend on any virtual reality. In the Gospels we read: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). Well, such an ‘abundance’ cannot be pretended: no code, no numerical sequence, no simulation, can mime it. Such ‘abundance’, if truly inspired, breaches
the code; eternal life breaches the code as it links us to an absolute and boundless Infinity which, as such, cannot be reduced to any codified simulation.

As we above, taking our cue from Leibniz, unfortunately the modern western mentality ended by mistaking the idea of the undetermined for the idea of the infinite, forgetting in the meantime spiritual Infinity. From Leibniz to Baudrillard we can clearly see how all metaphysical principles have been forgotten in favour of a materialistic and simulated conception of reality.

Now that the point of no return has been reached, it seems that the main clash concerning contemporary culture is the one between quantity and quality, between the obsession for an increasing quantity—whatever quantity: money, data, news, pictures, thoughts, etc.—and the quality of a unique and irreplaceable spiritual life. What we call progress came to be nothing else than the collective and spread-out idolatry of quantity to the detriment of our full spiritual realisation.

Someone might ask why we should ever worry about this. Well, the question is quite easy to answer: because now more than ever we risk becoming bland souls: simulated characters with no destiny to fulfil. Who considers him/herself of some real value should not accept this.

It is of the highest importance then to notice how such a war between quantity and spiritual life had been largely forecast in the Gospels. Not by chance all of Jesus’ parables speak of such a clash: the ninety-nine sheep left in favour of the lost and joyously found one (Mt 18:12-14), all the goods sold in order to buy the field in which the pearl of the Heavenly Kingdom is hidden (Mt 13: 45-46), and so on.

Nowadays such teachings are revealing all their depth.

We are not saying that numbers cannot be used in a symbolical sense—the Gospels themselves do this—but symbolical and quantitative meaning are quite different things: the first leads us to a deeper comprehension of heavenly mysteries while the second one, in the best of cases, leads to simulation. Hence all parables which are found in the Gospels seem to illustrate how obsession for quantity stands in the way of the soul’s purification and of a deeper insight into the most mysterious aspects of life and existence.

We can now clearly see how only quantity can be codified, sold and automatically replaced while it cannot be so as to the inner spiritual spark whose power to enlighten men is unique and irreplaceable. This is the reason why all contemporary materialistic and anti-spiritual philosophic trends, today largely predominant even where one would least expect it, cannot be reconciled with any real transcendental purpose. How shall we recognise these trends? By the fact that they always deny the centrality of a spiritual aspiration and of a faithful destiny: that aspiration and that destiny which are often symbolised by a radiant heart.

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S
ometime ago I tried to dab my fingers at making energy bars. Sitting nicely in front of me I had prepared a bowl of popcorn, a bowl of nuts, three bowls of roasted oats, a bowl of warm honey and some cashew nut butter. Having placed this mixture in a dish, I pressed as hard as I could, left them in the fridge for twenty minutes.

Voila! There was this mess of ingredients that didn’t gel. So what would a rational person do? Well, fetch a spoon and eat it all. After all, I had only eaten my main dinner less than an hour earlier.

This brings me to the topic for this article. Sins. Yet it is not gluttony that I will write about, but greed. As Oliver Stone has Gordon Gekko tell us in Wall Street (2010): “Greed is good.”

Indeed, greed may at times be viewed as the underpinning of capitalism. The want for more has greatly improved our society since the industrial revolution. Or has it?

Where the best inventions due to greed? Einstein’s work was mainly derived by sheer curiosity. Definitely not by greed. Similarly, Tesla was not motivated by greed or income but by the joy of pure human advancement. One may argue that the profit motive, which here I loosely attribute to greed, was at the basis of inventions, and the reason for accessing them. Possibly. Yet it is also possible that greed led to their abuse.

Money is a beautiful invention, possibly one of the best inventions mankind has ever made. While bartering might work, I might not really be interested in exchanging your goat for my potatoes. Indeed I fancy more potato curry which I can only get from the other part of the world because there is a fee for it. However the nature of money is very weird. What is money after all? Before consulting your economic textbook or Googling it, this question is not meant to have an answer. Despite my researches, I still struggle to answer this question.

Money is a medium of exchange. Should it be a commodity? Why do some anarchists hate the word ‘money’ so much? Would they have a whole new mantra on for acquiring happiness? (Which is as foolish as the psychedelics or a general lowering of standards that promise fast happiness.)

While most of us moan the whole debacle of high-rise buildings, the ruining of Malta’s skyline, and so on ... we have forgotten that we are a part of this. Your own grandma could have
purchased the bonds that financed these monstrous buildings. Someone could have talked her out of it. I didn’t manage with mine. Money does make the world go round, and it is mostly due to greed. In such a low interest rate scenario everyone is looking elsewhere to make money or make their wealth work for them. As Maltese, we always tried to find a safe investment.

Leverage, that is the process of maximising one’s investment through loans, makes us all winners. The little fish who financed the deals are getting a good return (better than leaving money at the bank) while the big guys are helping the economy. An outdated communist (or a new one with a beard) would raise her/his walking stick (or iphone) and state that it also pushes out the small worker. Yes, that’s globalisation for you! Easy debt financing creates these soulless centres with the same stores.

In any case, this is an immediate win-win-win as even the government gets more taxes paid in. Immediacy is a great thing. After all, isn’t it better to have money now rather than in future? Isn’t it better to have buildings now rather than later? Isn’t it better that I ate a whole tray of a muesli (that could feed a family for a couple of days) immediately rather than spread it over the month?

No.

There is a limitation with discounting. Discounting is the process of evaluating today’s value to future income or revenue. For example, a hundred euro in a year’s time might be worth ninety euro today. Similarly a hundred euro in two years’ time might be worth eighty today, and so on. (For the knowledgeable reader, don’t be too poncey about the interest rate used; assume it is non-linear.) Using the same process, ten payments each at the end of each year are worth

\[
90 + 80 + 70 + \ldots + 10 = 450 \text{ Euro.}
\]

Say the value of one energy bar is one euro, and I could have created ten energy bars to be eaten over the next ten days, and the present value of this is 4.50 euro. Having them all right now would be valued at 10 euro. This is perfectly logical even if irrational. (Again, the pedantic reader might point out that I should have discounted perceived utility. If you thought that, let’s have a chat.)

This is one problem with money. Another is that it assumes that its value is both ways. Consider if ten 500-year old trees cost a thousand dollars. Assume also that 400kg of paper cost a thousand dollars. Then we can safely assume that it takes about ten of these trees to produce more than 400kg of paper (there are production costs after all). However, a thousand dollars, 400kg of paper and ten 500-year old trees are equally exchangeable. But are they? The thing is that you can change trees into paper but not vice-versa (unless you have 500 years to wait). So we need to add some additional feature to money.

The second law of thermodynamics might be a source of inspiration here. While the first law states that energy cannot be created nor destroyed, the second states that entropy will increase in irreversible natural processes. Indeed we may wish to start considering entropy and exergy in measuring monetary transactions, which is another story.

What might be the conclusion of this short philosophical exercise then?

Though I don’t know what is money, it helps to see what good money is doing. Discussions of boycotting certain firms are superfluous if they weren’t over-funded from the start.

To conclude: all values are fictional.

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Philosophers frequently consider or voice possibilities which they do not ascribe to. Such possibilities very often rest on premises which are not wholly proven or even are totally fanciful. Philosophers do this while proceeding with an argument which assumes that its premise is accepted or correct. This is done just for the sake of argument, to test how a discussion would or could possibly progress if the premise were true or correct.

Such arguments form part of ‘What if?’ discussions. They use a technique—the ‘What if?’ approach—to induce the exploration of options or views which otherwise would appear entirely absurd, pointless or futile, but which may lead on to useful insights. The procedure is also convenient to unblock clogged discussions.

Very often one has to imagine new pathways to free one’s feet. A simple question—What if ...?—even if completely implausible or apparently ridiculous in itself, might open new vistas and hit upon answers or solutions even in areas unrelated to the original question under discussion. Otherwise, following the conventional line of thought, such new vistas might never transpire. The question is made for argument’s sake, that is, just for the purpose of conjuring up an imaginary scenario which defies the customary rules of logic and benefits a shift in perspective or a fresh way of understanding things.

Thales of Miletus, the Greek 6th-century naturalist who initiated philosophy, asked the strange question, ‘What if the moon was not a divine being?’, and came out with a thoroughly new way of reasoning things out. Copernicus in the 16th century asked the suspect question, ‘What if the earth went round the sun and not vice versa?’, and got to a new archetype for the solar system. Einstein, the great scientist, asked the ludicrous question, ‘What if I travelled at the speed of light?’, and a new model for the universe materialised before his mind. These are just three of the innumerable examples that can be given to illustrate the point.

In most of his many publications the Maltese philosopher Edward de Bono proposes that ‘What if?’ arguments can be mastered through specific techniques just for the sake of exploring new and original avenues of thought. Originally, he suggests, the ‘What if?’ technique began as an error of judgment or a misguided question. However, learning how to deliberately come up with such questions, especially in a structured group exercise, even with children, can bring forth very interesting results. De Bono recommends that ‘What if?’ questions should

be encouraged for they function as a catalyst for further thought, exploration and unlikely solutions to apparently insoluble problems.

One must bear in mind two important facts. First, that there is never only one solution, however plausible, to any given problem, and not only in philosophy. A solution might seem logical and sensible. It almost suggests itself most naturally. However, it is very likely—no, it is certain—that it is not the only one which can be proposed to solve a problem or answer a given question.

Secondly, known and tested solutions tend to solidify. This means that, once a workable solution has been discovered, it tends to be seen as the only one possible. By time and practice, other possible solutions, perhaps even better ones, gradually retreat into oblivion and begin to appear quite unrealistic. The likely reason is that a feasible resolution of a quandary is a welcome relief. So welcome, in fact, as to become exclusive of other solutions. As a result, the mind grows idle, and relinquishes the effort of any further search for other solutions, whether fitter or not.

This propensity succumbs to what Karl Popper called the ‘rule of verifiability’, wherewith the appropriateness of the indicated solution is confirmed over and over again by each and every new related situation which crops up. Popper considered this wholly unscientific and wrong. For situations which contradict the elected solution are taken to be mere exceptions to it, and thus are considered to confirm its suitability even further. Popper’s alternative is the ‘rule of falsifiability’, wherewith, being more in line with good scientific practice, every contradicting situation is taken to demonstrate the inaptness of the preferred solution, thus continuing the search for a better one.

Bearing in mind that there is always more than one single solution to any given problem, and that it is imprudent to consider any solution as absolute, throwing up experimental discussions for argument’s sake can steer one away from the pitfall of verifiability and adapt one’s mind to a healthier falsifying attitude. In such manner, ‘What if?’ scenarios facilitate a wide and broad scan on one’s intellectual radar for solutions which better fit problematic situations and answer perplexing questions.

This is particularly relevant to philosophy. While proposing a thesis, sound philosophical discourses always take into consideration positions which seem to contradict the thesis they propose. Answering potential objections is part and parcel of any comprehensive philosophical exercise. Here discussions for argument’s sake are part of standard methodological practice, as, for instance, we may observe in Aquinas’ famous *Summa Theologæ*. Here, as in other standard philosophical texts old and new, concerns are assumed to be correct and valid in themselves. Only then can they be answered appropriately and exhaustively.

‘For argument’s sake’ is a valuable technique which philosophers must take to heart. It keeps them on the alert and open-minded. By asking the hard questions, and benefitting from the full use of their imagination, they succeed in breaching the barrier of conventionality and delve into the uncharted seas of invention.

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Pre-war philosophy in Malta

With the rise of Mussolini in 1922, most of the Maltese conservative bourgeoisie were enthralled. The ‘Man of Providence’ they called him. Amongst his admirers were the greater part of the legal, medical and clerical professions. These adored anything Italian, and actually spoke Italian as a matter of course. Following Mussolini’s Concordat with the Vatican in 1929, much to the consternation of the British rulers in the Maltese Islands, their avowal to the Fascist Duce became more overt and pronounced.

Events in Italy, however, also brought over from the peninsula a number of anti-Fascist academics and intellectuals who feared for their lives back home. One of these was Giuseppe Donati (photographed). Having exposed Mussolini’s link with the assassination in 1924 of the socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti, Donati was forced to flee from Italy in 1925. He lived in Paris and ultimately in Malta, where he spent the last nine months of his life teaching Italian at St. Edward’s College in the Cottonera District. He died in Paris of tuberculosis in 1931.

Born in 1889 in Northern Italy, Donati was an outspoken journalist of a leftist to Socialist persuasion. He publicly opposed the Fascist regime tooth and nail. In Malta Donati was backed by the British government’s to teach Italian at St. Edwards College because of his strong anti-Fascist convictions. Nevertheless, while mingling freely with the Maltese who professed a great love for Italy, he was ever cautious of their Fascist leanings. Though he was fully aware of Mussolini’s spies roaming around, Donati could not do otherwise than work for his livelihood. One of his futile attempts at employment was with the Faculty of Philosophy of the then Royal University of Malta in the hope of delivering some lectures.

He was direly disappointed. Not only did he discover that the Faculty was thoroughly run by conservative priests, but also that they were Fascists through and through. Furthermore, Donati realised that their standards in philosophy were dismally mediocre. Attempting to introduce Don Mario Sturzo’s philosophy books to the academic staff, he failed dismally. This Sturzo was the brother of Don Luigi Sturzo, known as the ‘clerical socialist’, a staunch anti-Fascist, and one of the fathers of the Christian democratic platform in Italy.

Writing to Mario Sturzo, Donati gave him this news: “The climate in philosophical circles [in Malta] is also dominated by clerics who are very suspicious and jealous of their monopoly. Here the teaching of philosophy that is taught at the University is done exclusively through priests and monks. Having witnessed certain authorized exploits, they are extremely backwards.”

This precious first-hand snapshot of pre-war philosophy in Malta would have continued to be true at least up till the 1970s! Philosophical daring indeed!

* Reproduced by Giorgio Peresso in Giuseppe Donati and Umberto Calosso: Two Italian anti-fascist refugees in Malta, SKS, Malta 2015, p. 47
Have you ever heard of the ‘Chinese Room’? It is a thought experiment proposed by the philosopher John Searle to refute that thinking is just simple computing. That is to say, Strong Artificial Intelligence (computers that really do think) does not exist; only Weak Artificial intelligence (it’s just simulation) exists.

With the experiment of the Chinese Room, Searle intended to show that a machine can perform an action without understanding what it does or why. He does a parallelism between ‘mind’ and ‘computer’ to tackle the issue of consciousness. The computer only deals with symbols (syntax) but the mind has a semantic ability to realise or be conscious of the meanings of the symbols.

The experiment consists in imagining that we are within the computer as in an isolated room with only a small opening to pass papers through. We are provided with a manual to answer any question, say, in Maltese. The person outside—let’s say s/he is Maltese—asks questions, and we manage to answer everything in such a way that s/he is convinced that we understand the language. For Searle this proves only that simulated intelligence exits, since neither the machine nor I understand Maltese.

The experiment has been criticised as not conclusive. Yet this is beside my point. The Chinese Room made me think about the Maltese, Spanish or any other society as if they were this kind of room or box. The educational system is based upon this type of simulated intelligence. We go through the school period memorising things we don’t really understand. That’s how I learned to pass most of my exams. As if I was this empty box without semantic, or like a chicken without a head, if you prefer.

I also learned to pray in this way, reciting hollow words. I don’t know if you had a similar experience? When all follows a script, I start to think that we are inside this room, providing the expected answers for the predictable questions.

I just trust the crazy ones. The artists. I only enjoy conversations where I can avoid using the manual or, at least, not being restricted to it.

What is even more fascinating is that, once you have gone through the educational system, you can opt to change the ‘Maltese Room’ for the ‘Holy Room’. How? By becoming a doctor, a professor, a reverend, a bishop, or all in one. Then, suddenly, you can make yourself worthy of respect and of great dignity. Because now the Truth talks through you. And this is accepted at both ends, for the ‘intelligent’ as for the ‘ignorant’. Every time we just make bigger and bigger the ball of simulated intelligence. Thank heavens, sometimes a kid will shout, “The emperor is naked!”

Fortunately, I still see signs of life here in Gozo. This I call intelligence. What I mean is that people still seem to be full of their own semantic, and act accordingly. Unfortunately, I don’t think that semantic has much future on our planet. For example, in Sweden, a friend told me recently, everyone seems to be inside this box, and follows rules compliantly. It looks like they are already achieving Artificial Intelligence—the weak one—though in humans not computers.

At least here we still harbour some kind of hope!
They say that growing up is painful. You can say that again! We know. At least because during the last months our Foundation has been groaning with sweet pain as we worked together to give it sturdier legs and limbs. In Why Grow Up? Subversive thoughts for an infantile age (2014) the philosopher Susan Neiman reminds us that “Rousseau introduced the idea of false needs, and showed how the systems we live in work against our growing up.”

SHAKEUP: Well, we decided that the systems our Foundation began with in 2012 won’t withhold its growing up. Hence the pain of changing, adapting, reworking. Nevertheless, we are in for some exciting times, better adjusted—for a brighter future. You see, we love Philosophy. We think it’s worth the trouble of encouraging it, making it accessible, and putting it at the service of society. This is the main reason why we decided to restructure during the past months. Now that that process is over, with most of the tweaking and fine-tuning in place, we’re set to jog, if not sprint. The Force be with us!

HEART-TO-HEART: Of course we did not stop what our Foundation is really good at doing. Would you believe it! We’re in our 66th public talk (still counting since 2012). Socrates put in our heads that philosophy is dialogue. We live up to this. And everyone’s invited to chirp in. Since the last issue of this magazine we had great discussions around talks delivered by Evarist Bartolo, the Minister for Education, on the open society (January), and Dr Max Cassar on emotions and feelings (February/April), and Prof. Godfrey Baldacchino on going beyond State and market (May). All our talks are held on the first Wednesday of the each month at Valletta. For the forthcoming ones check on www.philosophysharing.org.

PEP TALK: You might have noticed that March was skipped in the list just given. That’s because the Foundation held its 2018 Annual Philosophy Lecture, a most special activity during which a key-note speech is delivered. This year’s edition hosted Prof. John Baldacchino from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States of America. His chosen theme was ‘Beatified Lying’, and the large audience was regaled with a scathing analysis of contemporary neoliberal politics. The event was held at the Phoenicia Hotel, Floriana, on 16 March.

IN-DEPTH: Throughout the same period the Foundation continued to offer specialised courses in Philosophy tailor-made for an intermediate class. The 2017/18 season, from mid-September to end-April, consisted of six 5-day courses delivered by professionals. Dr Max Cassar kicked off the season with an introduction to Philosophy. Then, successively, we had Dr Clive Zammit lecturing on images of transgression, Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici and Michael Grech on the Philosophy of peace, Dr Michael Briguglio on environmental politics, Dr François Mifsud on post-Holocaust Philosophy, and finally Dr Mark Montebello on the Philosophy of Jesus. All courses were well attended and very engaging. To check on our next season of courses, visit our website: www.philosophysharing.org.

Join the fun!

Last March, England’s Oxford University hit the world news when it made public its unexpected decision to ‘feminise’ its philosophy curriculum. Oxford University (est. 1231) is renowned for its conservative traditions and its eccentric claim to immutability.

Nonetheless, this decision was bravely taken in order that the university’s philosophy curriculum appeals to more female students and boost writers’ profiles.

Though women have engaged in philosophy since ancient times, an almost negligible number of them were accepted as philosophers. Almost no woman philosophers have entered the male-dominated philosophical Western canon.

The Maltese Islands are no exception to this bias. Women were excluded from the university, and particularly the philosophy course, up till 1970s. They were systematically pushed to occupy themselves elsewhere, well away from any philosophical endeavour.

The Oxford University’s Faculty of Philosophy requested that 40% of the recommended authors on its reading lists be women.

Academic staff has also been asked to use writers’ first names when compiling reading lists instead of their initials, in order to highlight those that were written by women.

The university aims to increase the appeal of philosophy to female students, according to the Daily Telegraph.

As part of the changes, the university is also introducing an undergraduate paper on feminist philosophy and has appointed new academics to teach it.

Furthermore, the Oxford University Press has embarked upon a concrete scheme to increase its publishing lists with women philosophers, and highlighting female philosophers throughout history, insightful feminist philosophy, and the writings of many female philosophers. A special section of its ventures will henceforth be dedicated to a female philosopher each month.