

## **Repetition and Novelty in Emotion, Life, and Art** [published (in German translation) in

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*Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?  
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du n o u v e a u !*

(Baudelaire, *Le Voyage*)

*Ha! ha! keep time! How sour sweet music is  
When time is broke and no proportion kept!  
So is it in the music of men's lives....*

(Shakespeare: *Richard II*, II-5-5)

*Wie, wenn dir eines Tages oder Nachts ein Dämon in deine einsamste  
Einsamkeit nachschliche und dir sagte: »Dieses Leben, wie du es jetzt  
lebst und gelebt hast, wirst du noch einmal und noch unzählige Male leben  
müssen; und es wird nichts Neues daran sein, sondern jeder Schmerz und  
jede Lust und jeder Gedanke und Seufzer und alles unsäglich Kleine und  
Große deines Lebens muß dir wiederkommen, und alles in derselben Reihe  
und Folge - und ebenso diese Spinne und dieses Mondlicht zwischen den  
Bäumen, und ebenso dieser Augenblick und ich selber. Die ewige Sanduhr  
des Daseins wird immer wieder umgedreht - und du mit ihr, Stäubchen  
vom Staube!« - Würdest du dich nicht niederwerfen und mit den Zähnen  
knirschen und den Dämon verfluchen, der so redete; Oder hast du einmal  
einen ungeheuren Augenblick erlebt, wo du ihm antworten würdest: »du  
bist ein Gott und nie hörte ich Göttlicheres!«<sup>i</sup>*

[Nietzsche: 1994 Aphorism 342 ]

### 1. A platitude and a surprise

I start with a platitude, and a surprise.

The platitude is this: In art, what is shockingly new is never what is new absolutely. What is new absolutely, if something of the sort could be conceived, would lack the connections which are essential to meaningfulness. Behind this truism is an apparent paradox: *Nothing can change unless it stays the same*. In order to identify change, we must identify some subject of change. What is new, then, is new always with reference to something old. Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* echoes classical representations of the Three Graces; *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* is a pastiche of Giorgione; Manet's *Olympia* reinvents Titian's *Venus d'Urbino*.

Fig 1 about here

<CAPTION: The shock of the new depends on its resemblance to the old.

Titian, *Venus*, and Manet, *Olympia*>

This much is obvious. What may be less so is the ubiquity of rhythm and repetition in art and nature. The Pythagoreans were long credited<sup>1</sup> with the discovery that the essence of music lies in rhythm and proportion, that is, repetition with variation. The Fibonacci series—

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1. Probably wrongly, as is now likely. See (Burnyeat 2007).

1,2,3,5,8,13,21,33,54,89....—underlies the Golden Ratio, and describes the growth of shoots, leaves, and shells. In nature, both animate and inanimate, chaotic fractal structures abound.<sup>2</sup>

The word ‘chaotic’ conveys that the size of a cause is unrelated to the size of its distant effects. ‘Fractal’ patterns are self-similar at different scales. When looking at a partly snow-covered patch of ground, it is difficult to tell whether one is viewing it from 10cm or from 50m.

[Fig 2 about here: ]

<CAPTION>: Snow covered ground at 10 cm and 50 m. (From Taylor et al. 2000)

A coastline's random meanderings look similar if you take in a few metres, a few kilometres, or a few hundred kilometres. At every scale, a larger resolution brings up new but similar shapes.

Here now is the surprise. Three Australian physicists found that fractal structure, the statistical self-similarity characteristic of natural scenery, is also found in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock. Patterns at different degrees of magnification, while not identical, “are described by identical statistics.” (Taylor, Micolich and Jonas 2000, p. 140). These authors even found that the paintings could be dated by their fractal dimension (a parameter very roughly

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2. (Mandelbrot 1983) For an accessible discussion the Golden ratio, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_ratio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_ratio). An impressive experience of zooming into an endless chaotic fractal structure called “Blue Oyster Fractal Zoom”, by David Kleman is available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1619313842463920970>.

related to the distance between the scales at which the recurrence is observed). Pollock's paintings involved his whole body as well as fine motion of fingers or wrist. One might think of them as the traces of a kind of dance. Since he died before the discovery of fractal geometry, it is safe to assume that he did not consciously aim to produce any effect under just that specific mathematical description. Nor are we, when we view the paintings, able to detect why we prefer—as it transpires that most of us do—a pattern exhibiting that statistical property to a random pattern which does not.

Fig. 3 about here.

< CAPTION: Most people prefer the fractal pattern to the merely random.

(From Taylor et al., 2000) >

Rhythm is everywhere in nature, at every scale from cosmic phenomena to the oscillations of atoms. Our every cell has its own clock, governing its own repetitive rhythms. Time itself, once measured by the motion of earth, sun and stars, is now defined, less memorably, as 9,192,631,770 oscillations of a single atom of an obscure metal. At the scale of the biosphere, the fidelity of replication in the genetic system is such that no more than about 200 errors are made in copying the 300 million bases strung into the chromosomes that hoard the design of our bodies. Without those errors, however—without that random element of novelty in the context of overwhelming conservation and repetition—there could be no change and so no evolution.

Among the arts, it is music and dance that most obviously embody the quintessence of our bodily sense of rhythm, based on repetition and variation. I shall say nothing about dance and

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little about music, where rhythm and ratios of vibrating frequencies are literally all that there is.<sup>3</sup> And emotional responses to music may be more than a metaphor for the sense of motion in and through space: it may be phylogenetically related to such a sense, insofar as the Organ of Corti, crucial to our perception of pitch, appears to be homologous to the vibration-sensitive lines of our aquatic ancestors (Nussbaum 2007, chapter 2). Further, music itself may predate humans. The evidence for this comes from the surprising similarities between human music and the “music” of humpback whales in preferred rhythms, duration, pitch, patterns, and even rhyming schemes, despite the fact that “our evolutionary paths have not intersected for 60 million years” . (Gray, Krause, Atema, et al. 2001, 52).

These and other examples of convergence may or may not support Gray et al.'s bold conclusion; but they certainly suggest that there is something deep and important about the ubiquity of music. The same doubtless holds, in the words of Shakespeare, in the “music of men's lives”. There, as I shall explain, it takes, in particular, two curiously parallel yet opposite forms. One concerns the quest and the attainment of the objects of desire; the other, the quest and the attainment of knowledge. Madame Bovary illustrates the first: she was not alone in her longing for the excitement of new love, and not alone in finding “in the experience of adultery only the platitudes of marriage.” The famous puzzle introduced in Plato's *Meno*, a puzzle that still worries cognitive scientists after two and half millennia, illustrates the second. Novelty in knowledge, Plato argues, is not rare: rather it is *impossible*. For if I didn't already know the object of my search, I could not even recognize it if it fell into my lap. And yet in both cases the object of my desire and the thing I come to know are also necessarily novel.

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3. One might adduce timbre as an exception. But timbre itself arises from a complex mix of tones and harmonics unrelated--or less closely related--to the specific pitch of any given note.

## 2. Eternal Return

I shall shortly come back to the problem of the old and the new in knowledge and desire. First, let me make a detour through Nietzsche's famous thought experiment about the prospect of eternal return. In the present context, what is most intriguing about it is its *incoherence*, and the lesson that its incoherence, coupled with its fascination, has to teach us about the nature of the imagination and art.

To see why the experiment is incoherent, note first that Nietzsche never mentions *habit*. We are apparently supposed to abstract from the knowledge that any experience changes as a result of repetition, even without conscious memory. (Otherwise repetition couldn't help us learn: you would either get it the first time or never learn it at all.) In Nietzsche's thought experiment, we must imagine that memory is completely erased. What we are asked to imagine is experientially indistinguishable from the once-around-and-then-you-die life that we assume to be ours now. So what is the sense of the experiment? In order for Nietzsche's challenge of the eternal return to raise its peculiar special *frisson*, we must envisage the huge accumulation of all those repeated events together, like one of those endlessly diminishing images in a pair of almost parallel mirrors. At the same time we must suppose that in that eternity we will never know that we are in that cycle. But of course we do *know* this, or rather we learn anew, at every turn of the *ewige Sanduhr*, when the Daemon tells us that it is *this very instant* that will recur, including his own appearance: "ebenso dieser Augenblick und ich selber". So it isn't any actual experience of recurrence that gives rise to the cursing or the ecstasy. What the experiment rests on is the *thought* that it will occur, but only on condition that its very impossibility is occluded from awareness. In the fantasy, every instant always happens *for the first time*.

In short, the thought experiment requires us to imagine reacting to a piece of information that it also tells us will be wholly concealed from us. The fact that the thought experiment is both fascinating *and* incoherent may be the very thing that is most significant about it. For it indicates

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that, as many an Escher drawing illustrates, that some impossible things can nevertheless be represented in imagination. It does so by cheating a little, just as a two dimensional drawing cheats when it represents an impossible three-dimensional object can be represented *as impossible* in two dimensions. (See Fig. 2)

[Fig 4 about here:

<CAPTION:> Impossible Objects (drawn by J. To)]

When imagination represents the impossible as *possible*, it is thereby exposed to be delusive. But the delusion says something about the split in us between emotional attachment to memory on one side and to anticipation of the future on the other. The future makes sense as a variation on repeated patterns from the past, just as *Olympia* made sense in relation to the *Venus d' Urbino*. When repetition ends, you die.

How should this thought affect our response to Nietzsche's challenge? The answer varies from one person to another. Happiness, said John Stuart Mill, depends on a balance between tranquillity and excitement. Repetition is tranquil; novelty triggers surprise, the simplest form of excitement. A modicum of novelty is required just to elicit attention, but the point of equilibrium between the two is not the same for all. Some, but not all, would prefer the dulllest life to nothing.

In art, the preoccupation with the new is a relatively recent phenomenon. Cave paintings remained indistinguishable in their style and content over some fifteen thousand years (McNeill 2006). Perhaps, at that stage of our incipient cultural evolution, the shocks of life were excitement enough, and art cherished for tranquillity. Only in the context of a preoccupation with novelty can the idea of an “avant-garde” make sense. And even then, according to some critics, “

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newness as such, in art, is never a value.” (Hughes 2006). (And what, nowadays, is more stale than the avant-garde?)

All this presupposes that we can tell what is new and what isn't. Whether to celebrate the one or to deplore the other, there must be standards of what counts as resemblance and difference. But what standards? At some level of abstraction, all fiction has but two plots: 1. Protagonist wants, protagonist gets. 2. Protagonist wants, protagonist fails.<sup>4</sup> At a slightly more detailed level, the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp claimed to have found, in a sample of a hundred Russian folk tales, just thirty-one “functions” or narrative atoms involving just eight character types (Propp 1968). Doubtless there is already somewhere a doctoral thesis on the relation between those “narratemes” and the stock of basic life situation of interest to evolutionary psychologists—those for which natural selection has equipped us with standard emotional responses. At some level, it is all laid down in the physiology of our sense organs—and indeed each of their cellular components. For all are subject to “habituation”, which means they switch off when presented with repetitive stimuli. How much control can we hope for, then, on whether our lives feel repetitious or exciting?

### 3. Do intellectuals have more fun?

Many have thought that the emotional life is doomed to repetition. The intellectual life, on the contrary, need never fail of its promise of novelty. Novelty seems more clearly to be an intrinsic value in matters of intellect and knowledge than in matters of feelings. So it used to seem obvious to me that intellectuals have more fun than romantics.

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4. The six word novel that Hemingway reputedly regarded as his best work was of the latter sort: “For sale: baby shoes. Never worn.”



On reflection, however, the contrast seems less plausible. One might first object that the comparison only makes sense if novelty of either kind *really matters*. But that it matters just means we find it *interesting*, and interest is itself an emotion (Silvia 2006). Many people prize novelty—mathematicians, scientists, explorers, mountain climbers, and old-fashioned seducers. They all want to *be the first to get there*. But not all of us are scientists, explorers, mountain-climbers or seducers. And there are considerations that may reduce the distance between the intellectual and the romantic from both ends.

Consider, first, the notorious fact that mathematicians and physicists frequently do their ground-breaking work in early youth. Sometimes, goes the cliché, mature scientists resist—indeed, perhaps resent—new models and paradigms. Here is an amateurish surmise to explain this. Assume, as is widely believed, that individual mathematicians and scientists differ in intellectual temperament or “cast of mind”. Some think geometrically, others algebraically, for example. Perhaps, then, mathematicians who score very early are not merely very clever, but also innately disposed to think in terms of a specific kind of model. Their luck is that just at that stage in science that kind of model is helpful. A decade or two later their intuitions, while sound, break no new ground. The models that now propel the subject forward have little intuitive appeal for the once lucky scientist. Both Einstein's general and special relativity, for example, are widely different from the later models of quantum theory of which he was skeptical. His reluctance to accept other discoveries and models may be related to that innate disposition to think in terms of one class of paradigms but not others, compounded with the tremendous reinforcement for those paradigms resulting from the success of his early work.

If such factors contribute to the explanation of the “early peaking” phenomenon in mathematicians and physicists, they may also lead us to expect what Thomas Kuhn claimed in his study of scientific revolutions: namely that the adoption of a new model seldom follows on rational persuasion alone. Instead, they have to wait for old scientists to die (Kuhn 1962). But

that would mitigate, to some extent, the expectation that intellectual life should yield endless prospects for novelty.

There are also reasons to expect a convergence between emotional and intellectual novelty from the side of emotions. The paradigm scenarios that constitute for each of us a mainly stable repertoire of emotions are mostly acquired very early. But the direction and intensity of those emotions are influenced by physiological factors that can change through life. Changes in levels of hormones naturally occurring at different times of life, in both men and women, may well result in wholly novel experiences. I recently heard someone compare the changes wrought in an adolescent's emotional mind and body to the experience of waking up one day to find one's computer equipped with brand new functions and an incomprehensibly reconfigured keyboard. Similar hormonal changes doubtless occur as we enter old age, bringing fresh options and responses. Cephalos, in Plato's *Republic*, reports favourably on the liberation entailed by the waning of sexual desire. Confucius too, in a more encompassing claim, boasts that at seventy he could do anything he desired without infringing the moral law.

In sum, while I am less sure now that the intellectual life is intrinsically more conducive to novelty than the emotional. Let me express my doubts in terms of a set of whimsical and at least half-serious comparative questions: What is the relation between

(a) *The number of possible articulable thoughts,*

(b) *The number of possible experiences, and*

(c) *The number of possible emotions?*

It's been calculated that the number of distinct meaningful sentences of 20 words or less is of the order  $10^{20}$ . (Pinker 1994, 86). Since any two sentences may be combined in more than two ways, the number of things one can say in 100 words or less will greatly exceed  $10^{100}$ . (To grasp this number, remember that the number of elementary particles in the universe is estimated

as being of the order of magnitude of  $10^{87}$ . Any number larger than that can be termed ‘superastronomical’.) If we suppose that for every meaningful sentence we are capable of uttering, there is at least one discriminable possible experience, then there are at least as many experiences as there are utterable sentences. If so, we may surmise that there are about as many experiences as articulable thoughts: in both cases, a superastronomical number. But how many experiences are emotions?

If we think only of the half-dozen “basic emotions” commonly thought to be universally recognized (Panksepp 1998), the advantage of the intellectual life over the emotional will seem to cheaply bought. While evolutionary psychologists are not committed to such a small number, they tend to view our emotional repertoire as determined by functional modules, elaborated over the course of evolution by natural selection, and comprising robust neural, behavioural and chemical clusters. According to that line of thinking, then, the space of our potential emotional experience is indeed relatively limited.

But this is not the only way to count emotions. Another approach, which offers the theoretical possibility of a much vaster space of possible emotions, is offered by Klaus Scherer's school of “appraisal theory”. According to this scheme, specific emotions pinpoint certain patches in a multidimensional space of component evaluative appraisals. On one version of this theory, there are some sixteen dimensions of appraisals that are implicated in specifying a given emotion. Of those sixteen dimensions, 10, such as *suddenness*, *urgency*, *concern*, and *relevance*, are potential continua; the other 6, such as *familiarity*, *agent causation*, *intention* are at least bivalent. (Scherer et al. 1993, p. 332) Assuming, conservatively, 10 degrees of discriminability for the first type, this allows us to estimate the order of magnitude of the space of emotions. On this basis, the answer is that there are  $2^6 \times 10^{10}$  or 640,000,000,000 discriminable emotions.

On this view, the space of possible emotions, like that of possible sensations, may have many more points than can be mapped onto words or concepts. Needless to say, we needn't sup-

pose that all points in that space will be equally salient. There will be “hot spots”, particularly clustering around the stock situations crucial to survival that are of interest to evolutionary psychologists, and particularly conducive to action tendencies (Frijda 1986). But insofar as we attend not to potential actions but only to feelings, this will still leave a vast space of potential experiences. When you listen to music or roam in a picture gallery, your aim is “uninteressiert,” in Kantian terminology: it is experience detached from the need to act. Similarly, if we can be secure enough to detach ourselves from urgent life needs, we can take an aesthetic view, detached from immediate practical concerns, but permeated with the sense of the subtleties in the possible values to which our emotions constitute responses. Thus can we hope to glimpse emotional novelties where before there were only repetitive emotional habits (de Sousa 2004). But we shall be able to do so only if we are able to detach ourselves from the attractors constituted by practical concerns. How is this to be achieved? There are two possible avenues of escape from the tyranny of those “hot spots” of emotional life: one is art and the other is psychotherapy. Let us first look at one approach to therapy. In a moment, after one more detour, we shall return to art.

#### 4. Transference

Our current responses are necessarily enriched by what we have learned in the past. Some of those patterns were conditioned by early experience, but others are hard wired. The existence of the latter is attested by the large number of stubborn perceptual illusions to which our perceptual system gives rise: the Müller-Lyer illusion, the Poggendorff illusion. (Solso 2003, 193). Some equally stubborn emotional illusions may limit our capacity for novel experience. But by

the same token the paradigm scenarios in terms of which we experience the present threaten to screen off present reality, to substitute repetition for novel experience and response.

Freud thought that the therapeutic situation afforded an instance of the problem as well as a possibility of its solution. He had noticed that patients typically experienced an unreal yet powerful feeling of love for the analyst. He labeled this 'transference'. But the phenomenon of transference is not confined to the therapist's office (Freud 1915). In ordinary life, it can appear as one form of repetition, making it look as if it were indeed a man's *fate* to marry a succession of women all of whom have just the defects he most resented in his mother. In that case the sense of fatality will be apparent to an observer, but it will often remain entirely hidden to the subject himself until it is brought to consciousness by analysis.

What poses the problem for the analytic experience is *transference desire*. But *transference knowledge*, that is to say, conscious recognition of the fact of transference desire, can provide the solution: that is, if it works as the theory says it should, allows the emotions stemming from the paradigm scenario to be examined in safety and in relative tranquillity, and may foster the gradual unlearning of inappropriate responses. This holds the key, I shall argue, to our understanding of both the centrality and the underachievements of art in the education and amendment of our emotional life. But before we get to that, we should look at a oft-vaunted shortcut to happiness.

## 5. Living in the present

Perhaps the problems I have been worrying about would vanish if we could only *live in the present*. It wouldn't matter then if we repeated the past: we would be liberated from regret, and everything would have the fresh savour of the new. We might be helped in this by giving up

our view of the self as a continuous, enduring entity, in which our future is inexorably bound to our future and our past. Such a view is recommended by Hume, and more recently by the philosopher Derek Parfit, who suggests that we should regard ourselves as a succession of momentary selves. On this view, my present self is bound to my past or future selves only by relations of continuity and connectedness that, unlike identity, admit of degrees (Parfit 1971). At the limit, “my” death will always seem no closer that of another, and we might perhaps find mitigated that dread in the face of death so eloquently evoked by Rilke in his 8<sup>th</sup> Duino Elegie as the unique fate of humans:

*I h n sehen wir allein; das freie Tier  
hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich  
und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts  
in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen.*

But actually living in the present is a hopeless prescription. No one has really tried it on purpose, but there is a record of an unfortunate man who has been forced to live it. As a result of encephalitis which destroyed the hippocampus and other regions of the left temporal and frontal lobes, Clive Wearing, a musician and musicologist, lost his ability to store any new memories. He lives in the present, and that experience is torment: not *continuous* torment, to be sure, but as torment perpetually *re-newed*, like a nightmare parody of Nietzsche's eternal return. “Clive's life,” his wife comments, “consists of a ... blinkered moment: with no past and no future.... an ever repeating first moment.” Every few minutes, he records in his diary that he has *just* come to consciousness after a long coma. He recognizes his wife, but greets her as if he had not seen her

for ten years even when she left him just ten minutes before. Clive Weaver lives in the present, but his life is not bliss, but Hell.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6. Novelty in Desire, Knowledge, and Desire for Knowledge

The Meno problem, you will recall, is that you can't ever learn anything new. What's the point of seeking new knowledge? Meno asks. Either you already know the answer, so there's no point in looking. Or you don't, and so again there's no point because "you don't know what to look for" and you wouldn't recognize it even if you ran into it. (*Meno* 80d-e). On this view, novelty in knowledge is impossible. The claim is followed a demonstration of the existence, in even the most untutored mind, of innate knowledge. Meno's slave boy is led through a series of questions at the end of which he has "recollected" that the way to double a square is to construct another square on the diagonal or the original. (See Fig. 3)

[Fig 5 about here.

<CAPTION:> Meno's slave discovers the square on the hypotenuse (drawing by J. To).]

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5. Not surprisingly, that particular hell has its converse: not constant repetition banished from consciousness, making for anguished and factitious novelty, but false recognition, the delusion of familiarity (Moulin C.J., Conway, Thompson, et al. 2005; Thompson, Moulin C.J., Conway, et al. 2004) These patients provide another sort of parody of Nietzsche's thought experiment, in which the patient typically experiences the recurring feeling of familiarity as disturbing, and often confabulates an explanation of why the event is indeed familiar.

Readers of the *Meno* have frequently grumbled that Socrates leads the slave on, and that the slave agrees with pretty much everything that Socrates says. Is the experiment therefore bogus? To think so would be quite mistaken. It's true that the slave doesn't produce a correct solution by himself; but he does do precisely what the paradox excludes in the case of the genuinely unknown: he *recognizes* the solution when he sees it. That is the ground on which he is claimed to have innate knowledge of geometry. The conclusion drawn is that while no knowledge is new, knowledge can be *newly recollected*. It also shows that what is not really new can still be interesting. Mathematical knowledge, the subject of the slave boy experiment, is somehow contained in the axioms and principle on which it is based. In that sense there is “nothing new” in the conclusion of any valid deductive argument. But that doesn't stop such a conclusion from being surprising.

Meno's paradox has its analogue in human *desire*. The qualification, *human desire*, signals something that is indeed unique to creatures that are capable of language. We conceive of the future and the past as mapped onto an organized matrix of time that is conceived, with the help of language, on the model of space. Thus between any two times, as between any two points in space, there is a possible trajectory. As Wittgenstein observed, a dog can doubtless hope to see his master; but it can't plausibly be said to hope to see his master *on Tuesday week*. In this way, language produces an explosion in the number of thoughts we can have.

Yet language might be thought to *narrow* the range of possible experience, on the ground that language necessarily categorizes. To categorize is *to regiment sameness and difference*. In itself, anything resembles anything else, in some respects, and any two things are different in some ways. Sensory perception itself can be thought of as having categorization as its primary function (Matthen 2005). But our sensory organs are capable of discriminating between a great many different values along continua.



Consider the space of colours, as represented in the traditional colour cone. From the point of view of psychology, its dimensions are not mathematically continuous, because our powers of discrimination are not infinite. Our colour words are relatively few. Yet between any two colours for which we have common names or descriptions, there are indefinitely many discriminable intermediate points. Similarly, the complexity of aesthetic emotions may lead us to accept that their potential number vastly exceeds those for which we have names.<sup>6</sup>

These basic facts about perceptions affect how we regard the two problems of the Meno problem and its analogue about desire.

I suggested, in connection with Nietzsche's thought experiment, that the imagination is able to encompass even the impossible. As if to balance this, however, the imagination also suffers from a notable limitation: it is *impossible to imagine the concretely real*. The reason is that the concretely real has an infinity of properties. Even though there is, of course, not literally an infinity of discriminations and new experiences that can be had by any one person, it is still true that in the dense space of those objective characteristics we cannot tell ahead of time how two persons might differ in the discriminations available to them in that space. My desire can never match the precise contours of the actual object it envisages. Imagination, and so desire, can only specify a *type* of thing, never a fully individual thing. In a sense, then, you never really get what you want: what satisfies your desire never *merely* matches your desire's specifications of its object. This yields a parallel yet opposite counterpart to the paradox of knowledge: *You never know anything new, but You always get something new*.

When desire and knowledge are intertwined, in the *desire for knowledge*, we get an interesting transitional case. For it is essential to the desire for knowledge that we don't know

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<sup>6</sup> A good explanation of the colour cone is found at <http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/~mer/colour/hsv.html>.

what we want. For if we knew it already, it would not be the novel knowledge that we want. Similarly, when we contemplate a new love affair, we may well know how heavily weighs above us, waiting to fall, the Damoclean sword of repetition; but what we want, what we feel, is just the unknown quality, as well as the quality of unknownness in what lies ahead. That erotic quality of unknownness was, we can surmise, what Diaghilev had in mind when he sensed in Cocteau a unique capacity to rise to his famous challenge: “étonne-nous!”

## 7. Art and life

We can perhaps hope (but often we fail), first at the level of purely aesthetic appreciation, and then at the level of practical lived life, to *experience* the richness characteristic of attention paid in a contemplative mode. But there are notorious—indeed clichéd—examples of the failure of artistic appreciation to transfer to real life emotions needs to be explained: the sensitive music-loving Nazis, the Russian lady whose coachman freezes while she weeps at the fate of the play’s unfortunate protagonist. (Feinberg 1982, 30). How to explain these failures of art to improve life?

A tentative explanation might be this. The aesthetic attitude is indeed, as is often suggested, one which is freed from the preoccupations of practical life. But classical learning theory tells us that habits are not extinguished when we are not presented with the stimulus that triggers them.<sup>7</sup> Thus when we emerge from the cocoon of the theatre, whence the real-life events

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7. John Aubrey wrote in *Brief Lives*: “This Earl of Oxford, making of his low obeisance to Queen Elizabeth, happened to let a fart, at which he was so abashed and ashamed that he went travel, 7 years. On his return the Queen welcomed him home, and said ‘My Lord, I had forgot the fart!’” (Dick, Wilson, and Aubrey 1962, 305).

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that trigger our emotions are absent, and where only the freedom of detached imagination is in play, the old habits ineluctably re-engage with undiminished power. The enlargement of our emotional experience, with its possibility of genuine novelty, works only when we are sufficiently detached from the possibility of real action<sup>8</sup> (Feinberg 1982). We can't simply switch frames at will, particularly where the frames in question are governed by innate frames which may be not much less robust than those that force on us familiar visual illusions such as the Müller-Lyer or Poggendorff illusions. The possibility of genuine emotional novelty therefore requires that we gradually bring into concrete life the lessons carefully noted while in a more cognitive mode. The hope of psychoanalysis was that working with the transference would nurture new habits in the safety of the therapist's office, which might then be sufficiently robust to subsist in the real world outside it. What I am suggesting is more ambitious, though it is adduced with the full skeptical awareness of how seldom, if ever, that promise of psychoanalysis was kept. It is that we should both knowingly cultivate new experience in an aesthetic mode, in the relative safety of our bourgeois comfort, and that we should also knowingly try to transfer the sensibility thus acquired into the perception of our daily lives and the relationships in which we are engaged.

Every new work, like every new piece of knowledge, once assimilated and understood, forms a pattern, which we can then zoom into with a quest for more detail. As we construct that detail, we return, perhaps, like Pollock's pictures, to the very same pattern at a higher level of resolution. So at least it has been argued by Carol Magai and Jeannette Haviland-Jones (2002),

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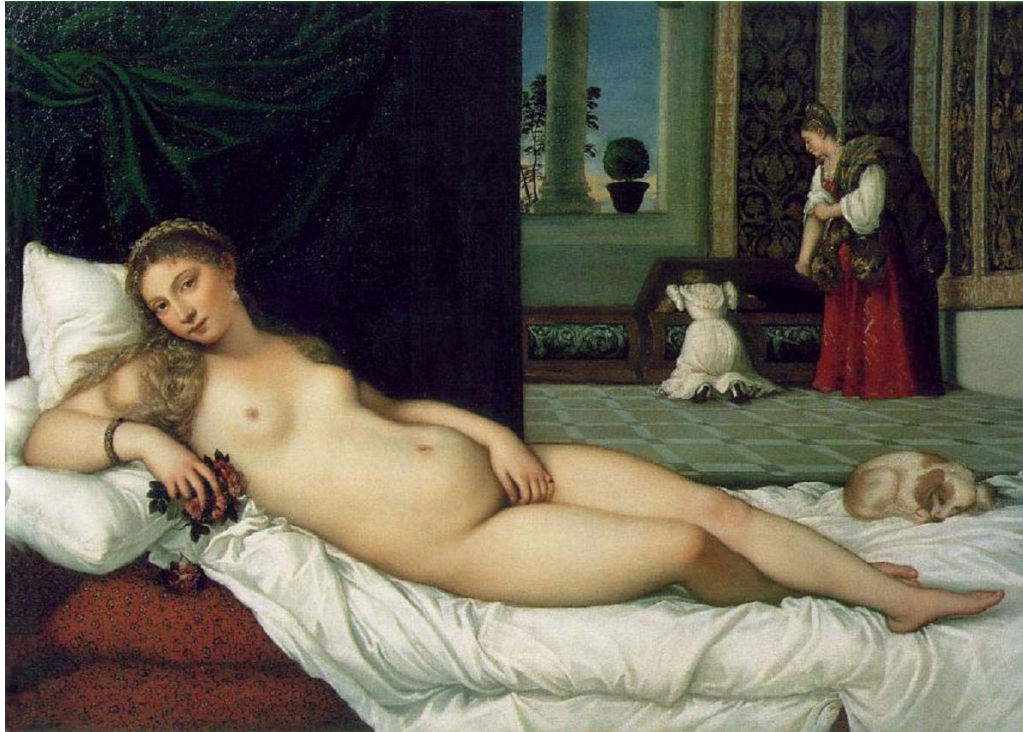
8. This is not to deny that the faculties that are engaged in the process may still be linked at a deep level with our capacity for bodily action. But if that gear has been disengaged, as it were, our own likely responses—sacrificing a pleasant evening at the theatre for the sake of the coachman, say, or paying for him to wait in a warm tavern—will not risk provoking a backlash.

who looked at the lives, work, and behavioural styles of three well known therapists. They found in the life, the work, the body language and the micro-expressions revealed on a tape of each therapist's therapeutic sessions a consistent “emotional signature”, recognizable at each of those different levels of resolution. When the essential pattern of our life recurs as our attention zooms in to a finer level of detail, it is both old and new, like a fresh splash of Pollock's paint.

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**Fig. 1.** The shock of the new depends on its resemblance to the old.

**Titian, *Venus*, and Manet, *Olympia*.**

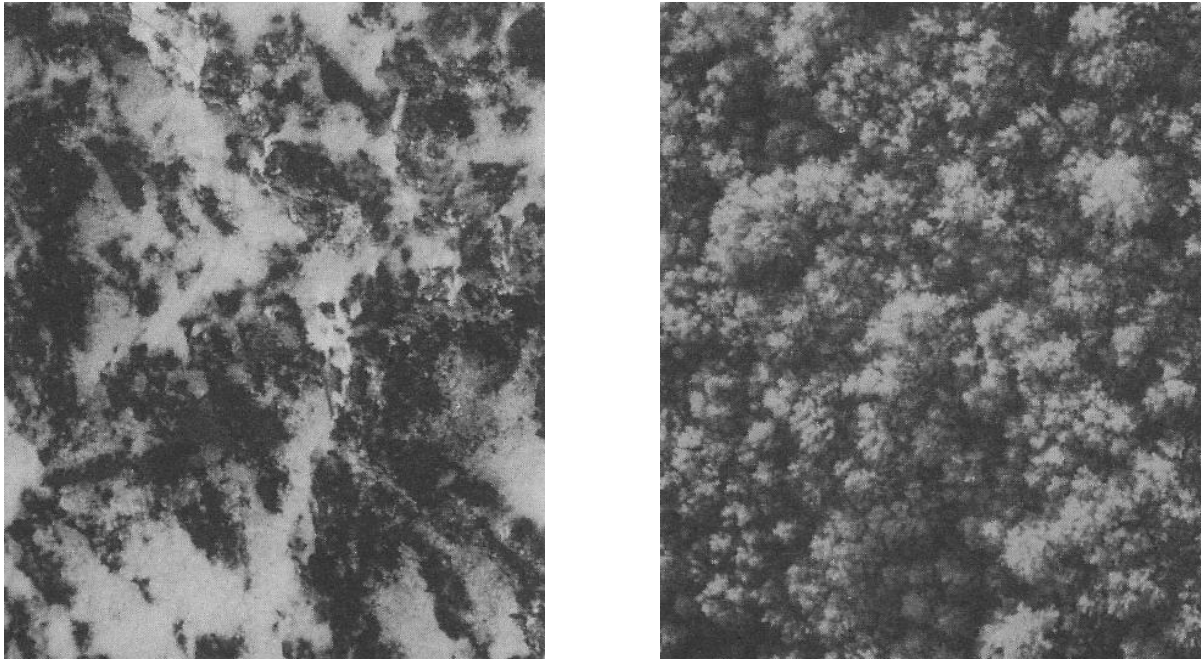


Fig. 2. Snow covered forest at 10cm, and 50m (from Taylor et al 2000).



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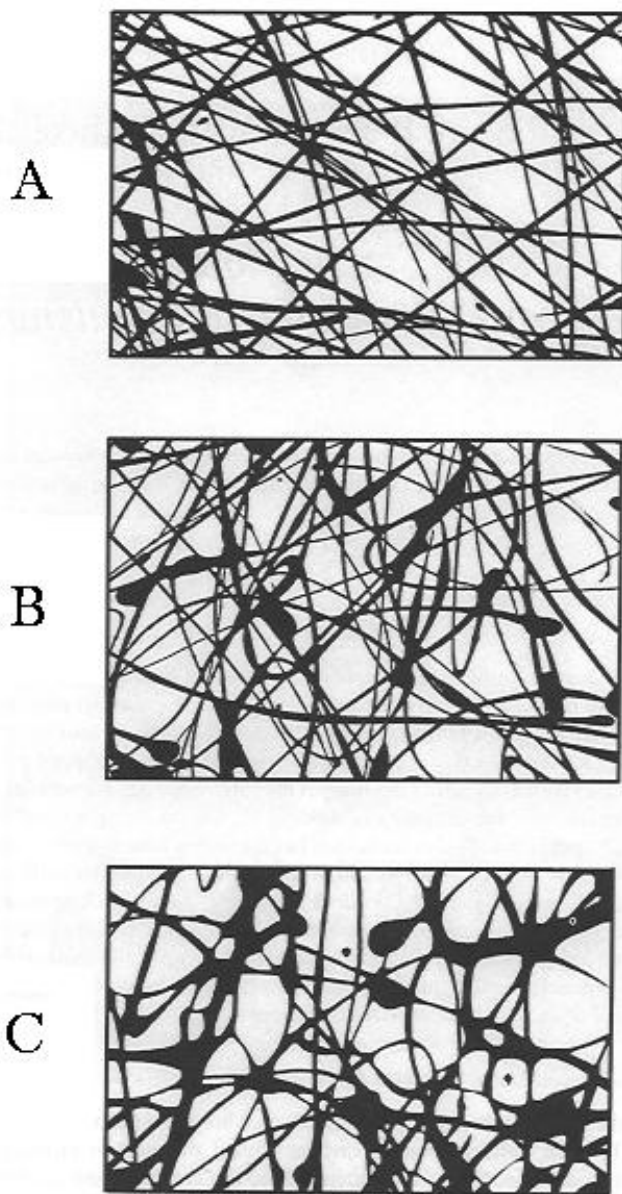


Figure 1. Detail of non-chaotic (top) and chaotic (middle) drip trajectories generated by a pendulum and detail of Pollock's *Number 14* painted in 1948 (bottom).

Fig. 3: Most people prefer fractal patterns to random ones (from Taylor et al.)

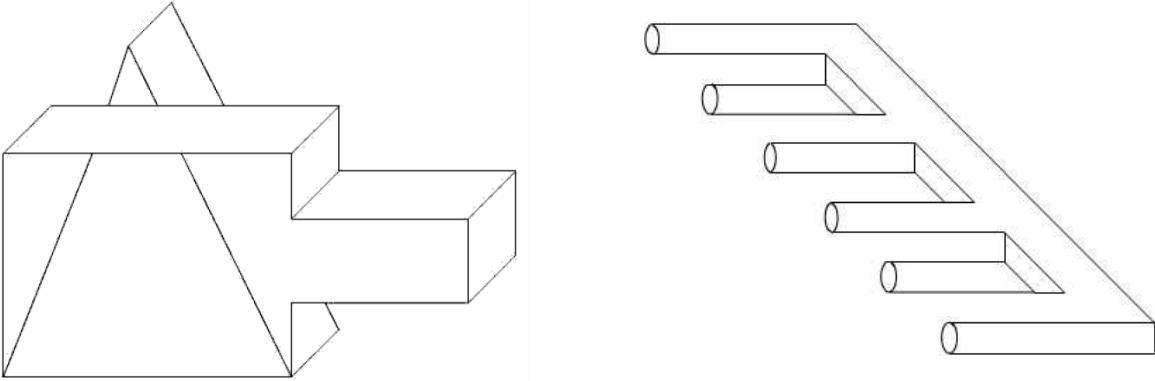


Fig. 4 Possible Pictures of Impossible Objects (drawn by J. To)

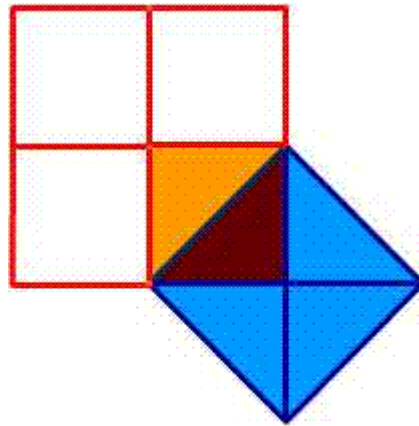


Fig. 5. Meno's slave discovers the way to double a square. (Drawing by J. To.)

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<sup>i</sup> “How if some day or night, a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you are living it and have lived it, you will have to live it 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 immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you—all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over and over, and you with it, a dust grain of dust.” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly.” (trans. by Walter Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche*, (1954), 101–102.)