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The first issue of The Dialectic Review, gathered from our first open call: one essay each in political philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology — not by design so much as by what arrived and held up under review.

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POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

What Makes a Rule Worth Following?

Some rules seem worth obeying even when breaking them would go unpunished and unnoticed. This essay asks what separates these rules from the ones that are not.

Sana Iqbal Riverbend Grammar School, Lahore

Most people would return a dropped wallet with the owner's address inside, even in a city they will never visit again, with no camera watching and no chance of being caught if they simply kept the cash. Most of these same people would not feel the slightest pull to obey a rule requiring them to wear a specific color on alternate Tuesdays, even if such a rule existed and carried an identical, zero chance of enforcement. This essay asks what separates these two cases, given that enforcement and consequence, held constant across both, cannot be doing the explanatory work.

The easy answer is that returning the wallet serves some independent moral purpose — preventing harm, respecting the owner's property — that the alternate-Tuesday color rule does not, and that we follow the wallet rule because of this independent purpose, not because it is a rule at all. This answer is not wrong, but it undersells something interesting: even rules that seem entirely arbitrary in their content can acquire a real, if thinner, kind of pull once they become established as a genuine convention that other people are relying on, in a way the never-adopted color rule does not. Consider which side of the road to drive on: there is no independent moral reason to prefer the right side over the left, and yet the rule, once established,

generates a real obligation, because everyone else's safety now depends on a shared, arbitrary convention being reliably followed, not on the convention having independently good content.

This suggests two genuinely different sources of a rule's pull, often blended together in ordinary moral experience. The first is content-dependent: a rule is worth following because what it requires is independently good or right, and the rule is really just a convenient, memorable summary of an obligation that exists whether or not the rule was ever formally stated — return what is not yours, do not cause needless harm. The second is coordination-dependent: a rule is worth following because its existence as a shared, mutually-expected convention is itself what generates the value, regardless of whether its specific content could be independently justified — many rules of etiquette, traffic, and procedure fall here, where almost any specific convention would do the coordinating work equally well, but some particular convention has to be the one actually adopted for the coordination to succeed at all.

Most real rules are not purely one or the other, and confusing the two produces bad reasoning in both directions. Treating a genuinely coordination-dependent rule as though it had independent content-based force can produce a rigid, moralized attachment to arbitrary specifics — insisting the right side of the road is somehow morally better than the left, when the entire point was coordination, not correctness of content. Treating a genuinely content-dependent rule as though it were merely a coordination device, worth following only because others expect it and not because it independently matters, can produce a dangerous willingness to abandon it the moment enforcement or expectation disappears — exactly the reasoning that would let someone keep the wallet the instant they were confident no one was watching, since if the rule's force were purely coordinative, an unwatched moment really would remove the reason to comply.

The practical upshot is a genuinely useful diagnostic question to ask of any rule one is tempted to break when no one is watching: if literally everyone simultaneously and permanently stopped expecting this rule to be followed, would anything of value be lost beyond the coordination itself? For the wallet, the answer is clearly yes — something of independent moral worth (honesty, respect for others' property) survives even in a world where the specific social expectation vanished. For the side of the road, the answer is clearly no — nothing but the coordination itself was ever at stake, which is exactly why it is fully appropriate to switch sides when crossing into a country with the opposite convention, and fully inappropriate to decide, unilaterally and unwatched, to keep someone else's wallet. Knowing which kind of rule you are facing, before deciding it does not apply because no one is watching, is most of the work of knowing whether it was ever really about the watching at all.

METAPHYSICS

Does the Present Moment Have a Size?

Physics treats the present as an instant with no duration. Experience does not seem to work that way. This essay asks which one is wrong.

Owen Bellweather Ashcombe College, Kent

Physics, at least in its classical formulation, treats the present moment as an instant: a durationless point on the timeline separating a determinate past from an as-yet-undetermined future, with zero temporal extension of its own. This is a mathematically convenient idealization, and it creates an immediate puzzle when set beside ordinary experience, which does not seem to present the world to us instant by durationless instant. When you hear a short melody, you do not experience a rapid, discontinuous sequence of durationless tones with no relation to one another; you experience the melody as a melody, a brief but genuinely extended whole in which the earlier notes are still, in some sense, present alongside the later ones. This essay is about what philosophers call the specious present — the puzzling, apparently extended "now" that experience seems to deliver, despite physics insisting the actual present has no size at all.

William James, who coined the phrase, described the specious present as "the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible," a saddle-back on which we sit perceiving both a bit of the past and a bit of the future at once, rather than balancing on a razor's edge with no width at all.[1] The puzzle is not merely poetic. If the physical present has literally zero duration, and

perception only ever has direct access to the present (since we cannot perceive the past, only remember it, and cannot perceive the future at all), it becomes mysterious how perception could ever deliver anything with the felt, extended structure of a melody, a spoken sentence, or a person's smile spreading across their face — all experiences that seem to have real, if brief, temporal thickness built into how they are directly perceived, not merely reconstructed afterward from memory.

One response denies that the specious present is really a perception of an extended interval at all, treating it instead as a durationless snapshot that merely represents extension, the way a single still photograph can represent motion blur without the photograph itself taking any time to be exposed — the felt sense of duration, on this view, is a representational content packed into an instant, not literal extension in the perceiving itself. This has some appeal, since it respects physics' zero-duration present without requiring experience itself to somehow stretch outside it. But it faces a serious problem: a photograph's motion blur is produced by the camera's shutter actually being open across a real interval, integrating real, temporally extended information; if perception's specious present is meant to work the same way — representing extension by actually integrating information gathered across a real interval — then perception itself, the integrating process, must actually be extended across that interval, which is precisely what the zero-duration view was trying to avoid needing.

A more promising route, defended in different forms by philosophers including C. D. Broad and, more recently, Barry Dainton, treats perceptual experience itself as genuinely, if very briefly, extended — not because the physical present has secretly gained duration, but because a single unified experience can integrate information gathered across a short physical interval into one presented whole, in

the way a single musical chord is genuinely one experience even though the notes composing it, played in quick arpeggiated succession, arrive at slightly different physical instants.[2] On this view, the specious present is not a claim about the size of physical time, which remains exactly as durationless as physics says; it is a claim about the size of a single unit of conscious integration, which can genuinely span a brief physical interval without this requiring physical instants themselves to have width. The present, on this view, really does have two different sizes — zero, as a physical parameter, and brief-but-nonzero, as a unit of experiential integration — and the apparent contradiction dissolves once we notice these were never claims about the same kind of quantity to begin with.

This leaves a genuinely hard empirical and philosophical question only partly answered: what exactly determines the size of the specious present's integration window, why does it seem to hover, across a range of experimental paradigms, somewhere around a few hundred milliseconds regardless of the specific sensory modality involved, and what does this stable, cross-modal figure tell us about how the brain's temporal binding actually works. But the conceptual puzzle that motivates asking the question at all — how can experience present something extended, if the present it draws from has no extension — has a real answer, once we stop assuming that the present of physics and the present of experience were ever claims about the same variable, measured on the same scale, in the first place.

NOTES

1. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), ch. 15, "The Perception of Time."

2. C. D. Broad, *Scientific Thought* (1923); Barry Dainton, *Stream of Consciousness: Unity and Continuity in Conscious Experience* (2000).

ETHICS

Can You Owe Someone an Apology They'll Never Hear?

If an apology cannot reach the person it is owed to, is there still a point in making it? This essay argues the point survives, but changes what the apology is actually for.

Grace Oyelaran St. Peter's Jesuit College, Abuja

Suppose you wronged someone years ago — said something cruel, betrayed a confidence, failed them when it mattered — and by the time you are ready to genuinely apologize, they have died, or become permanently unreachable, or, in a case that raises the sharpest version of the question, they have no memory of the event at all, due to illness, and would not understand an apology even delivered directly to their face. This essay asks whether a duty to apologize, or the value of apologizing, survives the impossibility of the apology ever being received and understood by the person it is owed to, and argues that it does, but that recognizing why requires giving up the assumption that an apology's entire point is located in its reception.

The standard picture treats apology as fundamentally a communicative, dyadic act: I acknowledge a wrong to you, specifically, in a way designed to be heard, understood, and, ideally, to repair something in our relationship. On this picture, an apology that cannot reach its addressee has failed at the one thing apologies are for, in the way a letter that can never be delivered has failed at being a letter, whatever comfort writing it might have given the sender. If this exhausts what apology is, then apologizing to someone who

cannot hear or understand it looks like a private act of self-soothing wearing the grammar of a moral gesture — understandable, perhaps even psychologically useful, but not actually discharging any genuine duty, since the duty, on this picture, was always to the other person's hearing and understanding specifically.

But this picture misses a second function apology performs, one that does not depend on reception at all: an apology is also a form of self-address, a deliberate act of taking a specific, considered moral stance toward one's own past conduct, naming it accurately, refusing to minimize or reframe it, and doing this in a way that is not merely a private feeling of regret but an articulated, specific commitment — the kind of thing that changes, or at least tests, what a person is actually willing to stand behind about their own history. This function is not nothing, and it does not require an audience to succeed, in the same way that keeping a promise to yourself, with no one else aware you made it, is not thereby drained of its point. A person who works out, in careful and specific language, exactly what they did wrong and why it was wrong, and commits themselves to that acknowledgment even knowing it can never be delivered, has done something different from, and more demanding than, simply feeling bad about the past — they have done the actual cognitive and moral work an apology requires, minus only the final step of transmission.

This does not mean transmission never matters, and where an apology can be received, failing to actually deliver it, when delivery is possible, is its own separate wrong — withholding from someone an acknowledgment they are owed and could have received is different from an acknowledgment that genuinely cannot reach them through no failure of the apologizer's. The claim here is narrower: the duty to do the internal work of honest acknowledgment does not evaporate merely because the further, external step of delivery has become

impossible, and a person who uses impossibility of delivery as an excuse to skip the internal work entirely ("there's no point, they'll never know") has misidentified what the internal work was ever for. It was never solely instrumental to producing a specific reaction in another person; it was also, always, partly a way of taking one's own wrongdoing seriously enough to name it precisely, on the record if only to oneself, rather than letting it dissolve into vague, unspecific regret simply because no one else will ever check whether the naming was done honestly or not.

This reframing does not fully resolve the case, and something is undeniably lost when an apology cannot reach the person who was wronged — the relationship-repairing function apology is often meant to serve genuinely cannot occur, and no amount of careful internal work substitutes for that loss. But it explains why the impulse to still write the letter that can never be sent, to still say the words to an empty chair or a grave, is not merely sentimental theater. It is the part of apology that was never actually dependent on reception in the first place, being carried out honestly, for exactly the reason it always mattered: because getting the wrong named right, and standing behind that naming, was partly a debt owed to the truth of what happened, not only to the specific person capable of hearing it.

AESTHETICS

Why Beauty Isn’t a Consolation Prize

Aesthetic value is often treated as a lesser good, brought in when moral or practical value runs out. This essay argues the ranking has things backwards.

Mateus Alencar Colégio Horizonte, São Paulo

There is a common, rarely examined assumption in how people talk about value: that moral goods (justice, kindness, honesty) and practical goods (health, security, prosperity) occupy a serious upper tier, while aesthetic goods (a beautiful piece of music, an elegant proof, a well-composed photograph) occupy a lower, optional tier — pleasant, but the first thing reasonably cut when resources are scarce, and the thing we tell ourselves to appreciate as a kind of consolation once the serious business of surviving and behaving well has been handled. This essay argues the ranking, taken as a general principle rather than a practical triage rule for genuine emergencies, does not survive examination, and that aesthetic value is doing philosophical work the other two categories cannot do on their own.

The case for the ranking usually rests on urgency and necessity: you can survive without beauty, but not without health or a functioning moral order, and things we can survive without are naturally less important than things we cannot. This is true as a claim about triage under emergency — a burning building is not the moment to admire the architecture — but it quietly smuggles in the assumption that mere survival is the correct baseline for measuring importance,

which almost no one actually accepts once stated plainly. We do not think a life that merely persists, biologically secure and morally blameless but devoid of anything that moves, delights, or absorbs a person's attention for its own sake, is thereby a fully successful human life, missing only an optional bonus. Most accounts of human flourishing, from Aristotle onward, treat some version of this absorbed, delighted engagement — which aesthetic experience is a paradigm case of — as constitutive of a good life, not decorative to one already secured by other means.

There is a more specific philosophical role aesthetic value plays that the ranking obscures: it is frequently the thing that makes other values legible and motivating to us at all, rather than sitting alongside them as a separate, lesser category. A just institution that is also well-designed — clear, coherent, its fairness visible in its actual structure — does not merely add a pleasant aesthetic bonus on top of its justice; the clarity and coherence are part of what let citizens actually perceive and trust the justice being done, in the way an elegantly structured mathematical proof is not merely a nicer-looking version of a valid but ugly one — mathematicians report that elegance frequently tracks, and helps them find, the deeper structural reason a theorem is true, rather than being an unrelated cosmetic feature layered on top of a truth reached by other means. Aesthetic form, in cases like these, is not decorating an independently achieved value; it is part of the process by which the value becomes graspable, communicable, and motivating to beings like us, who do not respond to bare abstract correctness with anything like the force we respond to correctness we can also perceive as fitting, clear, or beautiful.

This suggests the tiered picture has the relationship backwards in an important range of cases: rather than moral and practical goods being primary and aesthetic goods an optional decoration added afterward, aesthetic form is frequently part of what makes moral and

practical achievements real and effective in a human life at all, rather than merely true or correct in some abstract, unfelt register. A moral truth stated with no attention to how it lands, a just arrangement built with no attention to how its fairness is actually perceived and experienced by the people living inside it, is not obviously a fuller achievement of moral value than the same truth or arrangement given real aesthetic care — it may simply be a less complete one, missing the dimension that lets the value actually reach and move the people it is meant to serve.

None of this means aesthetic considerations should override moral or practical ones when they conflict, or that a burning building really is the moment for architectural appreciation — the triage intuition remains correct as a rule for genuine emergencies, where speed and survival correctly take priority over everything else. What it means is that outside genuine emergencies, treating aesthetic value as a lesser, optional tier, brought in only once the serious business of morality and survival has been fully handled, misunderstands the actual relationship between the three. Beauty is not what you get to enjoy once the important things are settled. For a great deal of what actually makes the important things matter to the people living them, it is part of how they get settled at all.

EPISTEMOLOGY

The Trouble with Trusting Your Own Mind

We treat introspection as a uniquely reliable window onto our own mental states. This essay surveys the evidence that the window is far cloudier than it feels, and asks what follows.

Freya Lindholm Vasastrand Gymnasium, Stockholm

Introspection — the capacity to examine one's own mental states directly, from the inside — is treated in ordinary life as close to infallible in a way perception of the outside world is not: you might be wrong about what you saw, but surely not about whether you are currently in pain, or currently wanting a cup of coffee, or currently believing a specific proposition. This essay surveys a body of psychological research suggesting this confidence is significantly overstated, and asks what remains of self-knowledge once the strongest version of introspective authority is given up.

The most striking evidence comes from studies of what psychologists call confabulation: cases where people confidently report a reason for a preference or a decision that demonstrably was not the actual cause of that preference or decision, without any awareness that they are guessing rather than reporting. In a classic study by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson, shoppers asked to choose among several identical items laid out in a row reliably preferred the rightmost item — a well-documented positional bias — while confidently explaining their choice by citing the item's specific qualities (its texture, its color) and denying, when asked directly, that position had played any role at all.[1] These subjects were not lying; they had no introspective

access to the actual cause of their preference, and their introspective-seeming report was, in fact, a plausible after-the-fact construction, generated by the same general reasoning capacities they would use to explain someone else's behavior from the outside, not a direct readout of an internal cause they had privileged access to.

This suggests a distinction worth taking seriously: introspection may be considerably more reliable about the occurrence and rough qualitative character of a mental state — that one is in some kind of pain, that one currently wants something — than about that state's actual causal history or precise content, which the confabulation research suggests is often reconstructed rather than directly read off. This is a significant retreat from the strongest, traditional picture of introspective infallibility, but it is not a retreat into total skepticism about self-knowledge; a great deal of ordinary self-report (I am hungry, I am anxious about tomorrow) plausibly survives the confabulation evidence largely intact, since these studies specifically targeted causal explanations of preference and behavior, not the bare occurrence of the state being explained.

The practical stakes are genuinely large once this distinction is taken seriously, particularly in domains that lean heavily on people's confident causal self-reports: a juror's or an employer's trust in someone's sincere, confident explanation of their own motives ("I didn't consider his race at all when making the decision") deserves real scrutiny given that confabulation research consistently shows people can be entirely sincere, entirely confident, and entirely wrong about the actual causes of their own judgments, particularly regarding factors, like implicit bias, that carry social costs to acknowledge and that the confabulating mind has every reason to route around unconsciously in constructing its explanation. This is not a claim that people are typically lying about their motives; it is the more unsettling claim that sincere introspective report and

accurate causal self-knowledge can come apart completely, with the person doing the reporting having no internal signal at all to warn them when this has happened.

This does not counsel abandoning trust in introspection generally, which would be its own overcorrection — introspective reports of immediate, occurrent experience remain about as reliable a source of evidence as we have access to for many purposes, and most of ordinary self-knowledge does not depend on the specific causal-explanation cases the confabulation literature targets. But it does counsel a specific, calibrated humility exactly where confidence is currently highest and scrutiny lowest: whenever a person, including oneself, offers a fluent, confident explanation of *why* they did or preferred something, particularly where the true cause might be one they would find uncomfortable to acknowledge, that fluency and confidence is not, on the evidence, good grounds for trusting the explanation — because fluent, confident confabulation is exactly what the introspective process reliably produces whether or not it happens to be tracking the truth.

NOTES

1. Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy D. Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84 (1977).

MASTHEAD

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FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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