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Living the Life of the Mind Charlotte Knowles offers an analysis of the hangover

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itbart London, where he recently implied that Greta Thunberg is really a mouthpiece for her father and called the idea of a link between Australia's fires and climate change "pure fake news propaganda". Would my friends have been just as quick to believe the emails proved fraud if they'd read it on Twitter?

I have said for years that much online abuse is the democratisation of behaviour the British tabloids have engaged in for decades. Mainstream media act as both source and accelerant. Take the science journalist who reported Tim Hunt's comments at a lunch for South Korean journalists: she posted a tweet, which got picked up by the BBC and others, then those stories were retweeted, and the resulting Twitter storm led the *Daily Mail* to attack-investigate the reporter, and *then* the attack monkeys went after her like ants finding a jar of honey.

Many people are comfortable with the idea that social media companies should exercise better control over their platforms: remove fake accounts, hinder the spread of deliberate misinformation, curb personal abuse. No one is comfortable with censoring a newspaper, not even the *Daily Mail*.

My friends have spent years critiquing the rationalisations psychics and other paranormal claimants give when they fail scientific tests, and debunking bizarre claims. Yet they have no problem producing very similar arguments to explain why few scientists break ranks on climate change. For them, the East Anglia emails discredit climate science as surely as Andrew Wakefield's debunkers discredited him. "You are going to be wrong about this," I told one of them four years ago, to no effect.

At *New Humanist*, Eleanor Gor-

don-Smith, author of *Stop Being Reasonable*, discusses how people change their minds about deeply held beliefs. (See newhumanist.org.uk/contributors/5555/eleanor-gordon-smith.) Gordon-Smith argues that rationality is more complex than "coolly presenting facts"; it may include emotion and individual trust. In researching numerous personal stories, she found that it's impossible to predict what will make someone change their mind unless you understand the detailed "genealogy" of how they came to believe in the first place. In one case she cites, a long-time cult member finally quit when he discovered that his wife did not and never had believed any of its tenets -- because in the end he trusted his wife's judgement more than that of the cult's elders. Is that rational? It sounds perfectly rational to me -- but it's not unemotional, which is what "rational" is typically thought to mean.

So it may well be that Murdoch's influence is not sufficient to implant something like climate change denial ... but it can sure reinforce it once it's there.

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Living the Life of the Mind

Charlotte Knowles offers an analysis of the hangover

As may have also been the case for many of you, I did not begin 2020 with a 6am run or an early morning spin class. The invention of the Apple Charlotte Royale on the eve of the new decade (1 part gin, 1 part elderflower cordial, 2 parts apple juice and topped off with somewhere less than half a pint of prosecco), might have had something to do with this. When I awoke at the dawn of a new decade, at the crack of midday, I knew I would not be leaping out of bed for a bracing walk, or a refreshing swim in the ocean, but instead would be in for a far more philosophical experience.

The oppressiveness of existence, the continuing, ongoing, never ending anonymity of existence as such, intrudes on us -- this is the experience of the philosophical hangover

It is just over ten years ago, at the beginning of my master's degree, that I read Emmanuel Levinas's *Existence and Existents*. In this work, Levinas offers an account of our experience of the brute "there is" (*il y a*) of existence. A central demonstrative example

in his analysis is insomnia. As he characterises it, during bouts of insomnia:

"The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence. This presence which arises behind nothingness is neither *a being*, nor consciousness functioning in a void, but the universal fact of the *there is*, which encompasses things and consciousness."

And this, I thought in 2009, and on the 1st January 2020, and many times in the intervening eleven years, is the experience of a hangover. Not an "oh I've got a bit of a headache", "I'm a bit sleepy", "give me dat coffee now, boi" fun Facebook meme hangover. No, a proper hangover. A hangover where you literally can't do anything. A hangover that I once described to a student I met at a philosophy talk after she told me she *enjoyed being hungover*, "because you have to figure out exactly what you want to eat". Oh no, no, no, I told her, if you're *actually* hungover, you're not eating anything until at least five hours after you wake up, when you might attempt a Rich Tea Biscuit, or perhaps a slice of dry bread if you're feeling particularly adventurous. And, if you're reading this, girl from a phenomenology talk in Brighton circa 2013, what I was describing was not "in fact alcohol poisoning",



as you confidently proclaimed, because I googled it.

This is not to glamorise accidental over-indulgence, or even recommend it. I would much rather be the naïve young student with her choice of Saturday morning breakfast foods. Rather, I aim to offer some solace to those unfortunates who may have won the title *The Queen or King of Hangovers* at some time during their years on this earth, by drawing attention to what we might call “the philosophical hangover”.

For Levinas, existence is something that presses down on us in feelings of weariness, fatigue and insomnia. In all of these states, the oppressiveness of existence, the continuing, ongoing, never ending anonymity of *existence as such*, intrudes on us. And this, dear reader, is the experience of the philosophical hangover.

For Levinas it is important that we are able to withdraw from Being. Sleep allows this, giving us the opportunity “to, like Penelope, have a night to oneself to undo the work looked after and supervised during the day”. However, insomnia disbars this possibility of withdrawal, “the possibility to ‘suspend’, to escape from this corybantic necessity, to take refuge in oneself”. Instead one is confronted with the sheer being there of existence without respite. Similarly, in being hungover, “one is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence”. You awaken to a sense of yourself in the world, but somehow detached. The constant refrain of those close by “can I get you anything?” is a question that can only be met with “no” or a blank stare. There is nothing to be done, no succour or salve to be had. The hangover must simply be endured.

In this regard, the detachment from the

world one experiences in a truly hungover state, is similar to the experience of anxiety as described by another phenomenologist concerned with existence, Martin Heidegger. In his analysis, Heidegger characterises anxiety as a disclosive mood in which the everyday world ceases to have the meaning for us. When a tool breaks-down, the Being of the tool and what Heidegger calls the “ready-to-hand” world, i.e. entities as we encounter them in terms of their use-possibilities, is brought into sharp relief as something from which we are now alienated. Similarly, in a hungover state, I may see the book or the Netflix account, but I cannot interact with these entities as I usually do. They have become inaccessible, because in this hungover state, as in anxiety, “entities within the world are not ‘relevant’ at all”.

The hangover must simply be endured

However, for Heidegger, this slipping away of the significance of everydayness, allows what is more fundamental to come to the fore. We are brought face to face with Being, and more specifically with our own human Being, or what Heidegger calls “Dasein” – literally “being-there”, his term for the human being and the human way of Being. In Heidegger’s account, this encounter with our Being as Dasein can be an occasion for a positive revelation. Once the everyday significance of the world has receded, we see more clearly what is at the core of our own existence: that we are fundamentally free and undetermined beings. Although we cannot dwell within the “truth” of our

Being while also interacting with the world in an everyday way, we can attempt to carry over with us this understanding of what was disclosed in these anxious moments into our normal lives. However, this is not the revelation of the philosophical hangover.

Rather than disclosing anything distinctive about our own Being that may help us to become more self-responsible in our daily lives by recognising the fundamental freedom that characterises us *qua* Dasein; the philosophical hangover confronts us, like Levinas's insomnia, with the sheer *there is* of existence. Like insomnia, the philosophical hangover is an impersonal event. As Levinas puts it, it is "not the notion of consciousness, but of wakefulness, in which consciousness participates". In Being hungover we are aware of existence, but not as something we can do anything with. It is a depersonalised experience of Being. There is some respite in the form of a nap. But otherwise, one lies there "the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought". As Levinas continues,

"To be sure, I have at least the experience of being an object, I still become aware of the anonymous vigilance; but I become aware of it in a movement in which the I is already detached from the anonymity, in which the limit situation of impersonal vigilance is reflected in the ebbing of a consciousness which abandons it."

In being hungover, I am not experiencing *my* Being, but rather Being as such. Or as Levinas rather aptly puts it, "that being which is not to be lost nor duped nor forgotten, which is, if we may hazard the ex-

pression, completely sobered up." I relate to myself as an object simply persevering in its existence without any kind of intention or capable of directed action. *I* am not there, but there is a body that is me, and that in 3 – 4 hours may be able to drink a Ribena.

And then slowly, the feeling subsides. The encounter with the brute *there is* of existence lessens and everyday significance and possibilities for action again begin to come to the fore. You can sit up. You can do more than just stare at a wall. You can go into the kitchen. You begin again to have desires: Rich Tea Biscuits! Ribena! bread! You forget the brute *there is* and absorb yourself again in life, at least until the next time someone breaks out the gin.

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Truth Online

C. G. Prado on why shared opinion now trumps facts

Initially, the use of the Internet appeared to provide a great opportunity for people all over the world to be much better informed and so to have their perspectives broadened. It was an apparent opportunity that promised diminishment of social antagonisms arising from ignorance and ill-informed biases. But as too often happens, wide public use of the Internet has had the opposite result. Rather than broadening people's perspectives, the Internet and its integral social media have effectively narrowed their perspectives. They have done so by in effect promoting a preference for personally shared opinion over impersonal truth or factuality.

I am not referring to shared opinion as being or including judgement or estimation shared on the basis of some measure of confirmation and expertise. I am referring to opinion shared just on the basis of coincidental concurrence of beliefs. My focus is how too many people are resting content with their beliefs when they find others who hold the same beliefs, and not worrying about factually confirming those beliefs. The occurrence of and subsequent preference for shared opinion over factual verification has increased tremendously, thanks to the Internet, and users are entrenching their views rather than being moved to adopt new, broader ones.

The mechanics of how the Internet has narrowed perspectives involve two main

factors. The first of these factors is that the Internet has given everyone a voice by enabling anyone with sound or unsound ideas to communicate those ideas to literally millions of others by posting them on various sites. The second factor is that given the breadth of the digital audience, someone somewhere in that vast digital audience will agree with virtually any idea expressed. Users who post their ideas and partialities readily find support for even the most bizarre notions. Shared opinion is easily found.

*Digital communication
on the Internet and
especially smartphones
has changed us
irremediably*

There is nothing new about individuals favoring others' personal agreement with their beliefs over impersonal factual verification of those views. This is a side of human psychology that has characterised human beings as long as they have existed and communicated with one another. What is different today is the sheer scope of access to others' agreement. When people had communicative access only to family mem-