

# FROM THE EDITOR

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*Jeffrey M. Perl*

The special issue of *Common Knowledge* that you are reading commences the journal's twenty-fifth volume. At least some readers, I hope, may remember that, a quarter century ago, we began with calls for papers issued by individual editors and members of the editorial board. The journal's name, after all, was not meant to imply that consensus prevailed among the founders and participants but, instead, to suggest our intention to build toward agreement over time. As a colleague and I observed in 2002, the name was also meant

to express unease with the term or slogan “local knowledge,” made famous by [Clifford] Geertz, a member of *CK*'s founding editorial board. “Local knowledge” had been a shorthand for the contextualist premise of [Thomas] Kuhn and the many scholars in the many fields he influenced, that truth and meaning are goods obtainable solely inside a language game, a paradigm, an episteme, a coherent circle closed on the outside—that truth and meaning are, in other words, local, untranslatable, and incommensurable with any knowledge obtainable across frontiers, whether those be spatial, cultural, or temporal. The “local knowledge” argument arose to oppose the universalism of positivist and structuralist theories, but also to defend both living cultures against imperialism and long-ago cultures against condescension. The moral impetus of the argument, however, was belied by unethical applications.

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The conversations that resulted in the founding of *CK* took place as the Cold War was winding down and the Balkan crisis heating up. It was a time when various champions of “local knowledge” contextualism were seeking to map commonalities among discrete communities, or at least—in the East bloc vernacular adapted by Richard Rorty—to achieve solidarity among them. *Common Knowledge* enmagazined that project.<sup>1</sup>

The “conversations that resulted in the founding of *CK*” have continued here since 1992, as a call for papers that Rorty issued in that year foretold:

The word *conversation* is a useful, relatively bland substitute for terms like *argument* and *dialectic* and *philosophy*. Many of our best conversations are with people whose books we have pondered but have never met, or met only in passing. Indeed, much of our inner lives consist of conversations with such people. I’ve been asked to call for papers, so: I call for papers from people who would like to write up fragments of their inner lives—fragments which consist of conversations with people from whom they have learned but who inspired in them interesting and important disagreement. I wonder, what have Feyerabend and Popper learned from one another? Fang Lizhi from Mao or Kolakowski from Marx? What would Geertz say he’d learned from Lévi-Strauss, Alasdair MacIntyre from Foucault, Kenner from Ellmann, Irigaray from Mailer, Quentin Skinner from Raymond Williams, or Derrida from Gadamer? The editors of *CK* have agreed to hoard responses to this call and publish them together in an issue devoted to conversation(s).<sup>2</sup>

We never did publish a single “issue devoted to conversation(s).” Instead, the entire quarter century became a conversation, or a set of conversations, of the sort that Rorty had called for. Perhaps the best example is the memorial tribute to Rorty himself by Alasdair MacIntyre. The cultural politics of those two could hardly have differed more. Still, MacIntyre, a Thomist moral philosopher and a radical critic of liberalism and secularism, wrote of the liberals’ champion that “I learned more [from Rorty] in a shorter period, during lunchtime walks by the lake at Princeton, than I have ever done before or since.”<sup>3</sup>

In our first series, of seven volumes, when the publisher of *Common Knowledge* was Oxford University Press, symposia consumed one issue each or were spread seriatim, one article at a time, across several issues—and in some numbers of the first series there were no symposia at all. In its second series, with Duke University Press, *Common Knowledge* has become a venue exclusively for symposia, and indeed of multipart symposia that, as I like to think, are of unprecedented

1. Perl and Isaacs, “Postscript on Method,” 148.

2. Rorty, “Call for Papers XIV.”

3. MacIntyre, “Richard Rorty,” 185.

thoroughness. The symposium on xenophilia that this anniversary issue interrupts has taken four installments so far (23.2–24.2) and is likely to require three or four more to complete. Other multipart symposia in series 2 have been:

- “In the Humanities Classroom” (23.1, 24.3);
- “Peace by Other Means: Symposium on the Role of Ethnography and the Humanities in the Understanding, Prevention, and Resolution of Enmity” (20.3–22.2);
- “Experimental Scholarship, Revisited” (20.1, 2);
- “Fuzzy Studies: A Symposium on the Consequence of Blur” (17.3, 18.2–19.3);
- “Apology for Quietism: A *Sotto Voce* Symposium” (15.1–16.3);
- “Devalued Currency: Elegiac Symposium on Paradigm Shifts” (14.1–3);
- “A ‘Dictatorship of Relativism’?: Symposium in Response to Cardinal Ratzinger’s Last Homily” (13.2–3);
- “Unsocial Thought, Uncommon Lives” (12.2–13.1);
- “Imperial Trauma: The Powerlessness of the Powerful” (11.2–12.1);
- “Talking Peace with Gods: Symposium on the Conciliation of Worldviews” (10.3, 11.1); and
- “Peace and Mind: Symposium on Dispute, Conflict, and Enmity” (8.1–9.3).

Our single-issue and seriatim discussions have included:

- “Anthropological Philosophy: Symposium on an Unanticipated Conceptual Practice” (22.3);
- “The Warburg Institute: A Special Issue on the Library and Its Readers” (18.1);
- “Between Text and Performance: Symposium on Improvisation and Originalism” (17.2);
- “Comparative Relativism: Symposium on an Impossibility” (17.1);
- “Neo-Stoic Alternatives, c. 1400–2004: Essays on Folly and Detachment” (10.2);
- “The Disregardable ‘Second World’: Essays on the Inconstancy of the West” (10.1);
- “Outside the Academy: Papers from the Papal Symposia at Castelgandolfo and Vienna, 1983–1996” (7.3);
- “Experimental Scholarship” (5.3);
- “Countertransference and the Humanities” (5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.3);
- “Science out of Context: The Misestimate and Misuse of the Natural Sciences” (6.2);
- “A Taste for Complexity: Ten Nondisciples of Stanley Cavell” (5.2);

- “The Individual and the Herd: The Public Secret of Self-Fashioning” (4.3);
- “A Turn away from ‘Language?’” (4.2);
- “Community and Fixation: Toward a New Type of Intellectual” (3.3);
- “The Unfinished Project of Humanism” (3.1);
- “Exit from the Balkans—The Commensuration of Alien Languages” (2.3);
- “Platonic Insults” (2.2);
- “Beyond Post-: A Revaluation of the Revaluation of All Values” (1.3); and
- “Ambivalence” (1.1–3, 2.2).

To commemorate the journal’s quarter century, this issue consists of pieces from in- and outside those symposia, arranged, to fulfill our obligation to Rorty, in conversational groupings. Readers are invited to shift, from knot to knot, around a common room filled to bursting with lively colleagues, young and old, but also ghosts, whose words mean more and other, now, than when originally written. The dead and quick alike drift from one conversation to another, then some go off, like MacIntyre with Rorty, to walk by some lake in odd couples. The *dramatis personae*, as I say, are representative but only as far as carnivorous agents have allowed. Hence the absence of writers (Kertész, Carver, Sebald, Bolaño, Nádas, Quignard, Calasso, and Hadot among them) whose work a reader of *Common Knowledge* might expect to find reprinted on this occasion.<sup>4</sup> Still, with ventures of this kind, celebrations are best held on the fly and called for in accordance with their peculiar criteria of attainment. On one occasion, marking no milestone of survival, I prefaced the introduction to a symposium (“on the conciliation of worldviews”) by calling for self-congratulation:

The introduction to this symposium consists in its first two contributions: a cosmopolitan proposal by Ulrich Beck for negotiating between worldviews, then a warning from Bruno Latour against presuming we know what a conflict of worldviews entails. I would like to point out, as a preface to that introduction, that whereas versions of this discussion used to center on questions of commensurability—are worldviews comparable, let alone reconcilable?—the discussion here centers on problems of commensuration. How is it to be done and who might accomplish it? From commensurability to commensuration is a long trek, and we should feel self-congratulatory at this juncture. Historic events have turned the Linguistic Turn guild from theory toward—if not practice, then at least talk of practice. The contributors to this first installment of our symposium would have been, let me hazard, Left Kuhnians back when that term meant anything. During the time of dispute over Thomas Kuhn and incommensurability, the Right Kuh-

4. Kertész, “The Last Inn” and “Someone Else”; Carver, “Carnations”; Sebald, “The Rings of Saturn”; Bolaño, “Nazi Literature in the Americas”; Nádas, “Burial”; Quignard, “In Front of My Hermitage”; Calasso, “The Repulsive Cult of *Bonheur*”; Hadot, “Isis Has No Veils.”

nian position was that commensuration between discrete contexts does not occur. Whereas our contributors imply or state that commensuration is the most difficult of all things not impossible (emphasis on both “most” and “not”). . . . It is vital to our moment of self-congratulation to acknowledge that this symposium involves neither, on the one hand, idealist universalism nor, on the other hand, contextualism of the absolute kind. . . . The question, in other words, is [no longer] whether worldviews are commensurable. The question is whether we should do what it takes—all that it takes—to communicate and reconcile with those we fear. . . . But whoever—let us admit it—takes on the task is going to end up with dirty hands. This job is not one for contextualists in white gloves. . . . There is no clean methodology for reconciling worldviews at odds.<sup>5</sup>

By this time, fifteen years later, our hands are filthy, and our shoes unwearable indoors. We are now closer, as a group, to “revanchist optimism,” because Trump, Putin, and other masters of the noble arts of casuistry and sophistry have turned them to the dark side. It has gone unnoticed, perhaps, by most readers (but not, I assure you, by any authors) that this journal, as a policy, avoids the word *fact* and the phrase *in fact*, except where demonstrable facts are involved, since *fact* and *in fact* are devices of rhetoric for bullying readers and listeners. Our authors regularly object to this policy, because composition is made more difficult when “the fact that” is ruled out as a tool for writing easy sentences. Few objected to our hygienic rule, in the old days, on epistemological grounds. These days, however, I hear, even from founding members of the editorial board, that our diffidence about facts feels like capitulation to Trump, who issues “alternative facts” for the credulous on a daily basis. The god-awful state of world affairs presently (things did appear hopeful in our first years of publication) has made the tasks that *Common Knowledge* set for itself a bit less difficult to achieve. Conciliation between parties not malicious seems less impossible to arrange. On the other hand, as I have recently discovered, the world’s most powerful institution committed to friendship between former adversaries—I mean the Roman Catholic Church—stands not only against relativism, which one knew (we dedicated a special issue to the problem in 2007),<sup>6</sup> but stands also, even under the present pope, against “eirenism” or irenicism.<sup>7</sup> Let us talk, by all means; let us break bread together, the bishops say to Protestants, Muslims, and Jews with warmth

5. Perl, “Preface to an Introduction,” 426–29, excerpts.

6. See “A ‘Dictatorship of Relativism?’”

7. See, for example, Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis*, which rules that peace must not be an end in itself: “Another danger is perceived which is all the more serious because it is more concealed beneath the mask of virtue. There are many who, deploring disagreement among

men and intellectual confusion, through an imprudent zeal for souls, are urged by a great and ardent desire to do away with the barrier that divides good and honest men; these advocate an ‘eirenism’ according to which, by setting aside the questions which divide men, they aim not only at joining forces to repel the attacks of atheism, but also at reconciling things opposed to one another in the field of dogma” (sec. 11).

and sincerity. But by no means let us worry whether, on questions that divide us, both you and we may be wrong. Let us, in other words, rethink nothing. Thus the white gloves of the episcopate are kept pristine.

Meanwhile, recalling a remark of Rorty's to Gianni Vattimo ("once Christianity is reduced to the claim that love is the only law, the ideal of purity loses its importance"),<sup>8</sup> I have taken as my editorial mantra the following arrhythmic, unrhyming couplet:

The world was never cleaner  
than on the day Noah left the ark.

The difference between cleansing and obliteration is not trivial, but perfect purity is, in itself, nonexistence. When told that my buoyancy about Muslim worship in Christian churches was inappropriate—given that, I was informed, both the Muslims and the Christians involved were indifferent—I replied that

exopraxis and xenophilia are only our latest excuses to broach the topic of affects and attitudes that, although widely spurned, tend to have irenic outcomes. Over the past quarter century, in these pages, ambivalence, "antipolitics," quietism, stoicism, sophistry, casuistry, pharisaism, apathy, cosmopolitanism, "gnostic diplomacy," ecumenism, syncretism, "comparative relativism," anarchism, skepticism, perspectivism, constructivism, de-differentiation, "fuzzy logic," *pensiero debole* and *Verwundung*, "unsocial thought," detachment, humility, cowardice, *caritas*, and well-motivated obnubilation have all come in for cordial scrutiny. . . . If we conceive of indifference as in-difference—that is, a state or sensibility in which differences go unnoticed or, if noticed, are not cared about—then it is fair to say that indifference should rank higher than xenophilia in a hierarchy of irenic affects. No one ever has died a martyr for indifference. And I would like to think that, in some cases at least, a believer has come down from the scaffold, alive, in awareness that to die for Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, in its conflict with one of the other two, is to bear witness in blood to no more than a nest of ambiguities. Never mind the social and historical overlaps, links, yokes, and vector-overlays among the three traditions. There is also a theological knot so undisentangleable that Allah, the Christian Trinity, and the God of Israel are indiffereniable scholastically. However much the *feel* of belief in each differs from the *feel* of belief in the others, I cannot imagine an honest (as opposed to a parochial) formulation that could distinguish among them without undermining the bases of all three religions.<sup>9</sup>

On the same topic, in an earlier issue, "I volunteered that I knew a man in New York, a Catholic convert, originally Jewish, who used to read Sufi hymns

8. Rorty and Vattimo, *Future of Religion*, 79.

9. Perl, "Xenophilia, Difference, and Indifference," 234–35.

to himself during mass. He wanted to be Jewish, Christian, and Muslim simultaneously. My students laughed, so I added that the man in question was renowned in the art world for being ahead of his time.”<sup>10</sup> The man was Lincoln Kirstein, who brought modernism and George Balanchine to America, cofounded the New York City Ballet, and issued caveats that felt like blessings when I asked him how to make *Common Knowledge* happen.<sup>11</sup> On its silver anniversary, it occurs to me that reading Sufi prayers, in a Catholic church, as an ethnic Jew, was a feat of modernist choreography, one from which we may learn a good deal about what are thought to be opposed beliefs. An essay on resistance to harmony makes the point on which this introduction concludes:

David and Goliath may appear to be dueling, when observed from the bird’s-eye perspective of theory. Viewed from up close, however, it may turn out that they are dancing, shifting positions over rocky ground, as each does what he feels he must to keep the only dance he knows from ending.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Perl, “Introduction: Postscript to Brown,” 31.

11. For more on my exchanges with Kirstein, see my review of 1995 (reprinted here) of his memoirs.

12. Beyer and Girke, “Practicing Harmony Ideology,” 235.

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