

KENWOOD HOUSE | SEPTEMBER 23-24

HowTheLightGetsIn

LONDON 2023

The Big Ideas

12 pages of stimulating debate from Britain's biggest festival of philosophy, politics and music



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The big ideas

This year, the *New European* has partnered with HowTheLightGetsIn festival taking place at Kenwood House in London to bring you a selection of the most influential thinkers tackling some of the most important questions of our time.

Debates of this sort are all the more important now that war has returned to Europe. But in confronting leaders whose values we do not share, how can we achieve peace? That question is addressed here by **David Omand**, one of Britain's most senior intelligence officials.

Perhaps by convincing them that western democratic capitalism is the most effective government structure? But as **Madeleine Pennington** of the Theos think tank writes, capitalism isn't delivering broad benefits to back up that claim. Why does the economy benefit such a narrow section of society?

Exposing these social imbalances is the role of the media. A free media must strive to be impartial – but is that possible? Here, **Philip Collins**, the former *Times* columnist, takes up the debate.

The socialist thinker EP Thompson certainly wasn't impartial – he always gave his opinion in the strongest terms. Thompson was once famously shamed by an audience who felt he had gone too far, and here **Sophie Scott-Brown**, the historian of ideas, asks whether shaming of that sort can in fact be beneficial.

Don't be ashamed if you read the fascinating piece by the philosopher **Barry Smith** and find yourself shaking your head in wonder. Barry is an expert in the senses, and when you read what he has to say, you'll never look at the world – or smell or taste it – in quite the same way again.

If you want peace, study your enemy



How do you talk terms with someone like Vladimir Putin? The former head of GCHQ on how to create real peace from bloodshed.

DAVID OMAND

I am a visiting professor in the department of war studies – not peace studies – at King's College London, and after a career in UK defence, security and intelligence, the study of war makes me conscious of what we would need to know before encouraging a peace process to end Putin's war of aggression.

An essential step is to lay bare the

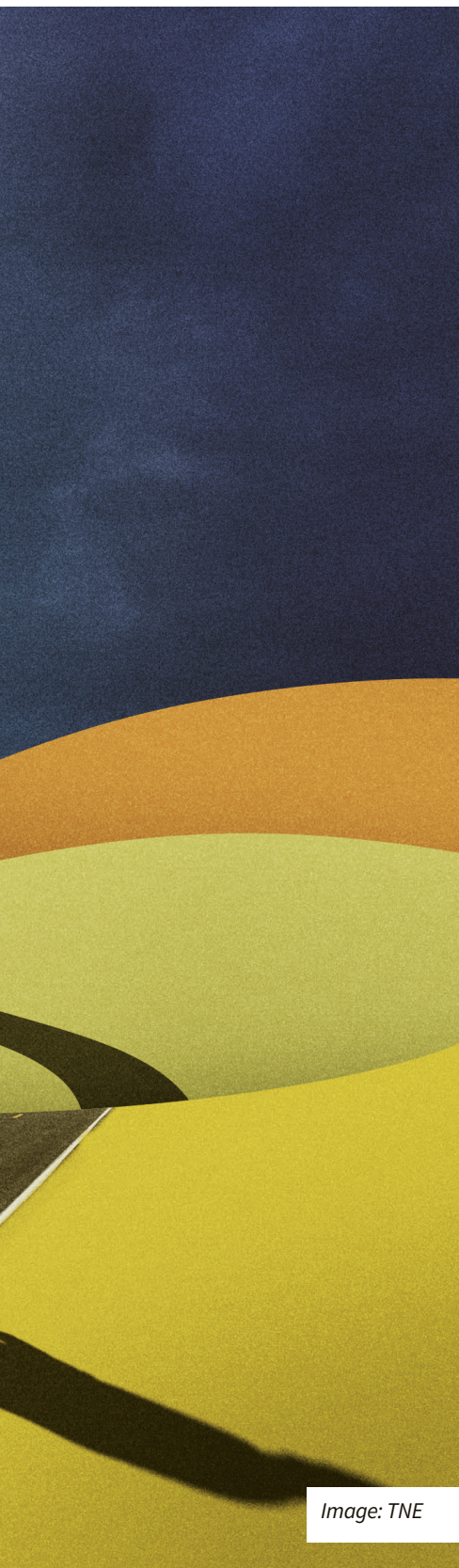
motives that the aggressor had for deliberately starting the war, despite the waste of human lives and destruction of physical and social capital that armed conflict always brings. We need to understand – from their perspective – the world views of the Russian president and his key supporters. That may not be easy. For those of us brought up in the liberal democracies, that means suspending our justified prejudice against those we blame for starting what we consider to be unjust wars, and for committing war crimes in the course of their military campaigns.

It is unlikely to be a pretty sight seeing the world through the eyes of a dictator who is pursuing an unjust and criminal war. We will ask ourselves, as we might after studying

violent conspiracy theorists such as the most extreme adherents of QAnon, why anyone could hold such apparently irrational and at times abhorrent views. But without that effort at getting into the shoes of those making war, any attempt at making peace risks sliding into naivety, or being based on delusions about the motives that led the aggressor to act. Truly understanding others does not, of course, mean we have to end up agreeing with them, let alone conniving with them.



Puncturing the illusions that are held on both sides is a task that peacemakers will have to confront if an agreement is to bring a genuine



the Soviet embassy in London, that Andropov had therefore ordered the KGB to monitor for signs of imminent attack, including counting the number of lights burning at night in the Ministry of Defence in London. In the west it seemed inconceivable that the US president, Ronald Reagan, or British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, let alone the French president, François Mitterrand, or the German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, would have entertained such a thought. They had many other priorities for their administrations, to put it mildly. Having worked inside Nato, to me it was impossible that the organisation would ever agree to initiate planning for an unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union. What's more, it would have been impossible to keep such a plan secret.

Yet the Politburo members had been brought up to believe that war between capitalism and communism was inevitable. Since the balance of military and economic forces was seen to be moving to the west's advantage, for Andropov an expectation of a sneak US attack would have appeared logical when seen within his paranoid ideological bubble. That is where secret intelligence can be so valuable in exposing such delusion – and it helped Reagan to recognise the danger of uncontrollable escalation that any conflict with the Soviet Union might bring.

When he was the MoD's chief scientific adviser, Prof Hermann Bondi used to say that a nuclear power is a country that no one can afford to make desperate. That fear still constrains the nuclear superpowers today, as the war in Ukraine demonstrates. The US and Nato nations, although supporting Ukraine as the victim of aggression, have wisely not become combatants – a step that would lead to Russia's rapid conventional defeat. Putin's periodic nuclear sabre-rattling is no doubt his signalling that Nato must not forget the danger of escalation that would then follow. It is significant that he has himself held back from actions that would constitute an armed attack on a Nato member. But below that threshold, of course, in the so-called grey zone, the tide of conflict will flow on.

We cannot always be so fortunate as we were in the early 1980s in having high-grade human intelligence on the thinking of Russian leaders. Today, much of the information we need from inside Russia is available from open sources, such as BBC Monitoring. Not all, however. Secret intelligence, properly assessed, remains an essential stabilising factor in international relations since it helps to expose dangerous assumptions about the motivations of foreign leaders with very different

views and cultural backgrounds.

Just over 40 years ago, the UK Joint Intelligence Committee commissioned a report by an experienced intelligence officer, Doug Nicoll, deputy director of GCHQ, into past intelligence warning failures, such as the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the 1973 Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel, and Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The inquiry found that one of the principal culprits was mirror imaging – that is, imagining that a dictator would make the same types of calculations as we would, for example in weighing up international opinion and the prospect of sanctions. The JIC report went on to identify a common failing on the part of well-educated western diplomats and officials – they did not believe that, in the modern era, wars of conquest could be started deliberately as an act of policy.

Before 9/11, few believed Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri could possibly be serious in their openly expressed intent to use terrorism to recreate the ancient caliphate, taking in the lands of southern Spain and Israel. In the case of Ukraine, before the 2022 invasion, how much notice did we take of Putin's writings on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians and the common spiritual and moral space he saw as occupied by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus? Inside such a world view, Ukraine has no right to an identity outside the Russian empire.

When Putin recalls the deeds of

'Puncturing the illusions that are held on both sides is a task peacemakers will have to confront if an agreement is to bring a genuine end to war'

Tsar Peter I and also Alexander, who was emperor of Russia, king of Poland and grand duke of Finland, he is manifesting an extraordinary ambition for Russia that recalls Stalinist nationalist imperialism. He acts as if it is Russia's messianic destiny, supported by the Russian orthodox church, to shield itself from the influence of the decadent west.

Early in 2022, the German and French governments could not bring themselves to believe that Putin would resort to open warfare to remove the government of Volodymyr Zelensky, especially after Putin had told the French president that he had no such intention, assurances that were given almost certainly after he had privately made the decision to invade. The US and UK intelligence communities had,

however, correctly estimated that the Russian forces surrounding Ukraine would be ordered to overthrow the government in Kyiv. Making that intelligence public helped to frustrate that part of Putin's plan.

By any such analysis the Russian war is an unjust war and we are justified in helping the Ukrainians to resist. But there will be a huge human cost for Ukraine (and Russia) as the war continues through next year and beyond. Hence the natural desire of third countries to try to broker a ceasefire.

But even if the conflict were to be frozen in some brokered peace, we must expect fighting to break out again unless there is evidence of a very different outlook being adopted in Moscow. Negotiations would have to deliver enough for all sides to have an off-ramp, including side agreements to sweeten a deal. As in any negotiation, if an unequal settlement were to be forced upon the parties, then the one that sees itself as coming off worst will try to recoup its perceived losses, either by reneging on the deal or by continuing the conflict by other means. The economists' maxim is to let bygones be bygones, look only to the benefits and costs from now on and forget the sunk costs of the past. That is no comfort when so much blood has been spilt. Blood will exact its own price in a public mood demanding that aggressors pay for their crimes.

Finally, as we focus on Ukraine, we should keep a wary eye open for "slow burn" conflicts elsewhere that may burst out into war. Some problems can smoulder for years in plain sight, their seriousness not recognised – or ignored – until some set of circumstances turns them into a full-blown crisis. The most obvious example is the deteriorating state of US-China relations, based on both real and imagined fears on both sides, including risks to changes in the status of Taiwan.

Finally, let us not forget that major risks to human wellbeing do not just come from malign threats from autocratic states and non-state groups, but also will arise from major hazards such as climate change, with extreme weather events leading to bitter conflicts over resources, including water and food, across much of the globe. If we want to reduce the level of global conflict we must be clear-headed about the causes of conflict. If that sounds pessimistic about the prospects for peace, I would cite Gramsci's 1920 motto for revolution: "Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will."

David Omand appears at How the Light Gets In on Sunday Sept 24 at 2.30pm, in a discussion titled "In Pursuit of Peace".

end to war, even when neither side has imposed a decisive defeat on the other and neither appears to have lost the will to fight on. Otherwise, ceasefires, truces and agreements that attempt to freeze a conflict may offer respites for rearming and regrouping, before renewed, often more intense, fighting breaks out again.

History provides telling examples of the perceptual gap between adversaries. In a May 1981 closed-session meeting of Soviet leaders, the ailing General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and KGB chairman Yuri Andropov (later to succeed him) said they believed that the US was preparing a first-strike nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. We know from MI6 agent Col Oleg Gordievsky, then acting head of the KGB residency in

Is impartiality possible?

The concept is a flawed, imperfect ideal, as absolute neutrality can only ever be an illusion. But the alternative – propaganda – is much worse.

PHILIP COLLINS

It is the plight, but also in a way the privilege, of the comment writer in a newspaper to be accused of bias. Publish a piece in which you commend the leadership of Keir Starmer over Jeremy Corbyn or suggest that it is time the Conservative Party were replaced by the Labour Party as the government of the nation and you invite the accusation that you are not the impartial reporter you claim to be. Yet there is the error. The commentator makes no such claim. Indeed, one is employed precisely because of one's views. A certain ideological position is, implicitly, in the job description.

We have to distinguish between those media outlets which are striving for an ideal of impartiality and those which are not. There is no requirement in regulation for the *Telegraph*, *Guardian* or *Times* to be impartial. All those newspapers have a position, which is part of the reason their readers choose them. This is communicated most obviously through the comment pages, where the balance of opinion tends towards the vantage point of the reader. But it is also there in the news pages, increasingly so these days, in the selection and the coverage of stories.

Perhaps this is a shame. The distinction between news and comment was once more clearly observed than it is today, though we should be wary of nostalgia on this point. It is not just the egregious examples – the *Daily Mail* and the British Union of Fascists and the *Times* and appeasement – that should alert us to the fact that newspapers have always taken sides.

In a vibrant, plural democracy we need partial voices, placing the range of views into public argument. It would be preferable, of course, if there were a balance of views and if more views were represented, but this is a problem of the range of available partiality, not an argument against partial argument. Yet there is also something obviously dispiriting about the endless clash of partisan points of view. Not everyone comes to the discourse with a prior view they wish to have confirmed. There are still people who come to find out what is going on. There is still a place, in other words, for the ideal of impartiality in public debate.



There are two easy ways to denigrate the idea of impartiality. The first is empirical and political. How can impartiality mean anything in a world of proliferating and fragmenting media, in which polarised views can find self-chosen segmented audiences? Now that the appointment to view is no longer kept, broadcasting is just a race and usually a race to the bottom. This is the world of Brexit lies, the era of Trump, beyond truth and past all hope.

The second objection is philosophical. Everyone is coming from somewhere, there is always a context, always a vantage point, always a view being expressed, even if the speaker is barely conscious of what they are doing. In its application to the public realm, this sounds like a clinching critique. Interests and views do not just distort a journalist's coverage of the news, so the argument goes, they are necessary for it to exist at all. Deciding which stories to cover, how to cover them, how to determine whether they are true, and which opinions are allowed on to the programme or the newspaper are all done for particular reasons, and thus cannot be entirely neutral between all interests. The very notion of impartiality seems to disappear.

Both of these critiques bite. It is true that the idea of impartiality is under considerable attack from partisans who do not care about the integrity of the public realm. It is true too, if we are determined to be philosophically pure about it, that an absolute ideal of neutrality is an illusion. But that is hardly a reason for giving up. (The alternative to impartiality is not just a necessary partiality; it is propaganda.) Neutrality is a competition between truths in which the richer argument would usually prove to be the stronger. And just because an ideal cannot be realised in its purest form does not mean that an impure version is not worth having.

Britain does have an ideal of impartial broadcasting and it needs to be defended. The history of public service broadcasting rests on an ideal of impartiality. This applies not only to the BBC, whose mission to deliver news of due impartiality is set out in the Royal Charter and Agreement, but also to Channel 4, whose purpose is enshrined in legislation, and ITV, which is subject to some of the most onerous public service broadcasting regulation in the world despite taking no public funds.

The BBC is not an especially philosophical institution in the sense that it does not usually define an idea which it then seeks to put into practice. Instead, the BBC does what the BBC does and constructs an ideal from its accumulated practice. To discover what impartiality has meant in journalism, we need to look at how the BBC has sought to embody it. Jean Seaton, the professor of media history at the University of Westminster, and now the official historian of the BBC, has conceded that there have been times when the BBC has yielded too readily to the interests of established power. That is always a risk for a broadcaster funded by a form of taxation and in which the government continues to take a great interest in its appointments.

During the General Strike in 1926, the second world war and the Troubles

in Northern Ireland, the BBC has aligned itself with the government of the day. Whether this is justifiable or not – the case of the war differs from the others here – there wasn't much of a pretence at impartiality.

The BBC was set up in 1922 in the midst of a debate, soon after the expansion of the franchise, that sounds familiar. There were fears that big business could bribe the new voters, that public views might be distorted by foreign ideologues, that the press was egregious, partisan and too influential and that the new broadcast media could easily be exploited to divide the nation. The objective of Lord Reith, the founding director-general of the BBC, was to create an institution which would conduct a single national conversation. It was an elite idea, it was much more *de haut en bas* than we



British tightrope artist Harry Daves performs a death-defying feat in Zurich 1949. It could be argued that striving to maintain impartiality in the media is in fact the ultimate balancing act
 Photo: RDB/ullstein bild/Getty

would permit today and it remains somewhat under-defined.

In 2007, BBC impartiality was updated in a report written by Richard Tait and John Bridcut: “It remains an elusive, almost magical substance, which is often more evident in its absence than in its presence. Imagine 12 bottles on the alchemist’s shelf, with the following labels: Accuracy, Balance, Context, Distance, Even-handedness, Fairness, Objectivity, Open-mindedness, Rigour, Self-awareness, Transparency and Truth. None of these on its own could legitimately be relabelled Impartiality. But all the bottles are essential elements in the Impartiality compound, and it is the task of the alchemist, the programme-maker, to mix them in a complex cocktail”. It is no wonder the idea is controversial in

each instance if this is as philosophically rigorous as we can get.

There is more that can be said. Impartiality is not mere “balance”. Ever since Hugh Carleton Greene was director-general, the BBC has made it clear that it has no need to equivocate over racism, prejudice and anti-democratic movements. A later director-general, Charles Curran, suggested the BBC was like representative democracy in the sense that it had a responsibility to seek explanations and allow the viewers to make up their own minds.

The philosophy may be slight but the practical demands of impartiality are clear. Journalists should not express partisan opinions. Truth matters more than balance. The BBC’s own guidelines state that “due impartiality usually involves more

than a simple matter of ‘balance’ between opposing viewpoints”. This is not always straightforward. Where the distribution of opinion on a question is different in the national political and popular discourse to that of the academic field, the impartial journalist has to make a choice. Climate change denial is a very common position among members of the Republican Party and is thus an important part of national public discourse in the US, but among climate scientists it is not truly a serious position at all. In this instance, there is a requirement for the news organisation to represent what they judge to be the truth. There are times they get this judgment wrong but impartiality is not a warrant to avoid such choices. It is not meaningless and it is not impossible.

On the contrary, seeking to place truths into the public realm is a noble mission which has fewer defenders today than it needs. The time when George Orwell could write in *Tribune* “I heard it on the wireless,” and mean “I know it must be true” has long gone. There is a risk that the public realm does splinter into partisans shouting uncomprehendingly at one another. The technological impetus towards this outcome is strong. We should not, as far as philosophy can help resist it, simply join in and accept this as a destination. The flawed, impure idea of impartiality still has something to be said for it.

Philip Collins appears at How the Light Gets In on Saturday September 23 at 10.30am, to debate “The Impartiality Illusion”. Can media ever be truly impartial, or is partisanship inevitable?



The productivity trap

We can measure it, but does it measure us? Productivity needs to take into account our values as well as our economic goals.

MADELEINE PENNINGTON

Britain has a productivity problem. For much of the 20th century, productivity rose markedly across the west as emerging technologies and better education drove more efficient work. As the economist Silvana Teneyro notes, in the decades before the financial crisis, productivity grew at such a rate that the average worker in 2007 was producing twice as much “value” per hour as their counterpart 30 years previously.

But productivity took a hit with the 2008 crash and has struggled to recover its momentum in the UK. Consequently, we are now behind the US, France and Germany. The most recent confirmed productivity figures show that: we were 0.6% less productive in the first quarter of 2023 than during the same period in 2022; we delivered the weakest annual growth in output per hour worked since early 2013; and we had the

weakest annual rise in output per worker and output per job since 2009.

Of course, this matters. Partly it matters because it represents a whole tangled mess of problems, distilled elegantly into a single measure, all of which need addressing in their own right. Those problems include the continued dragging effects of Brexit, the low investment in skills and infrastructure, a higher proportion of low-skilled managers than in other comparable nations, and acutely unequal (and therefore inefficient) resource distribution across regions and within communities.

It also matters because, in our economic system, productivity is the key determinant of living standards. At its best, more productive work enables wage rises, greater spending power, higher investment, more ambitious innovation, and continued comfort for the (growing) retired population. More efficient use of non-labour resources is also critical to building a more environmentally sustainable economy – perhaps the most pressing task in an age of climate emergency.

And in theory, higher productivity offers liberation for our personal lives too, as we work more efficiently but for fewer hours, freeing up the rest of our diaries for leisure, volunteering, relationships, and rest. John Maynard

Keynes predicted we would work 15 hours a week by 2030, so high would productivity rise.

Why, then, has productivity growth not brought these things? Material living standards have improved drastically over the last 50 years, but this didn’t create a fairer, happier, or more sustainable society; if anything, it has led to the opposite.

And this brings us to the second problem, which is ethical, cultural and even spiritual. As we create more, we want more; as we earn more, we consume more; as we spend more, we need more – or we believe we do. Measures of productivity alone make no judgement on what a reasonable input would be (either by hours worked or resources spent) or when an adequate output might be achieved. They simply compare two values, creating a number that we expect will continually increase. In Britain, we are told, it isn’t growing fast enough.

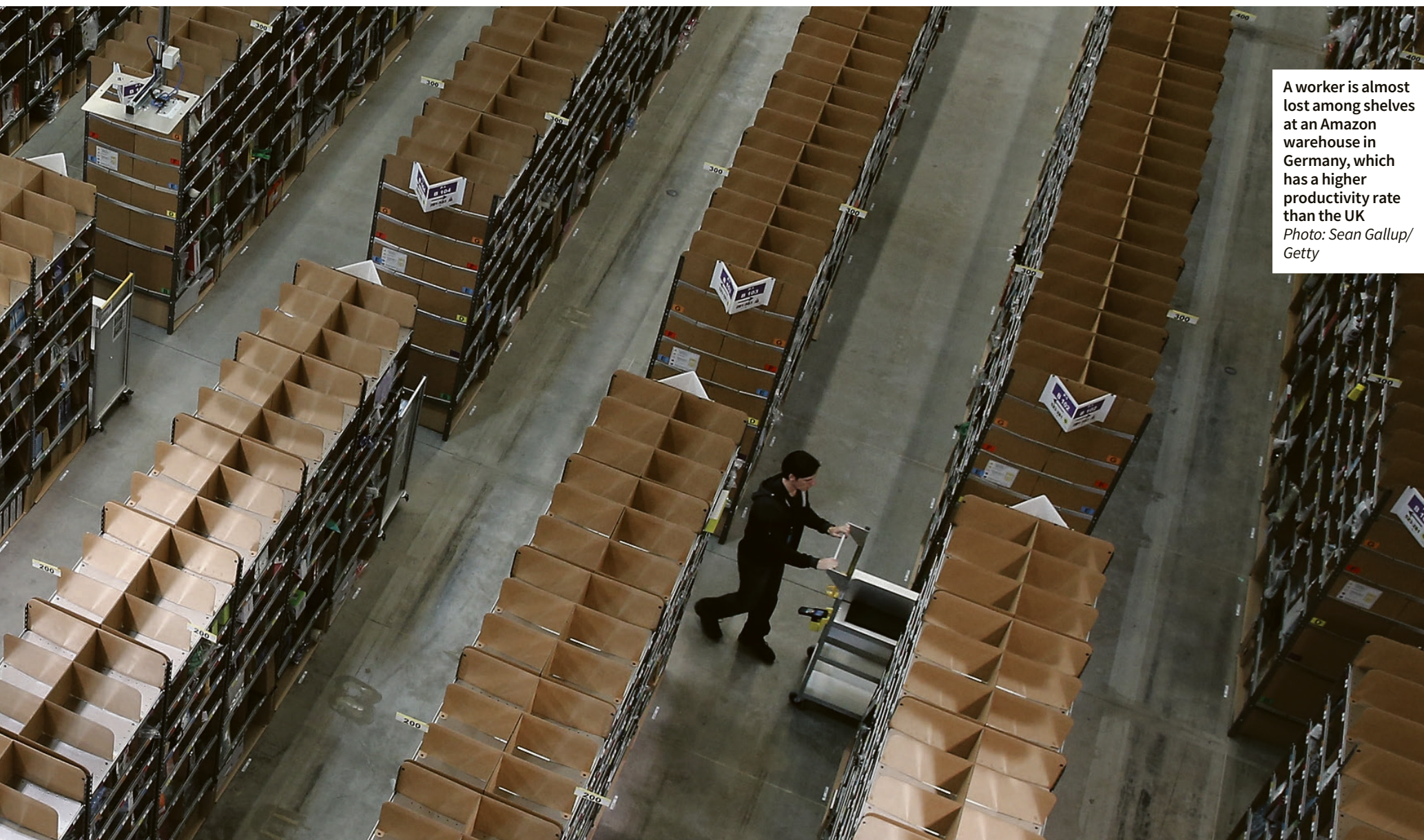
The limitations of using productivity alone as a yardstick are highlighted by a closer look at our neighbours: Ireland consistently ranks among the most productive nations on earth, but this is largely down to its low corporation tax, which attracts many billions of dollars to the Irish economy through highly profitable multinationals. The limits of the

measure are reflected in Britain’s own productivity figures too, where in the first quarter of this year, output per hour fell because the number of hours worked grew faster than the value added. Across the economy, real estate had the biggest fall in productivity, driven mainly by an increase in hours worked. And while our actual productivity over this period was lower than in 2022, it was higher than in 2019. The picture looks more or less bleak depending on which figures you choose, but taking this snapshot as an example, Britain was more productive than it was before the pandemic, working longer hours, in more jobs, and with more workers.



How does it feel to live and work within such a system? You know the answer. Dissonant. Task-crunching. Quiet Quitting. For all our hard work, a focus on productivity growth alone can leave us running faster to stand still – or even go backwards. Clearly, we need other measures to interpret what is either flourishing or stagnant.

Here is where the economic picture collides forcefully with our cultural obsession with personal productivity. We are all being asked to produce more than a person needs to because



A worker is almost lost among shelves at an Amazon warehouse in Germany, which has a higher productivity rate than the UK
Photo: Sean Gallup/Getty

productivity is a measure with no limit. The natural tendency towards personal ambition leads to longer hours, but this literally makes the problem worse, both because of how productivity is calculated, and because evidence suggests we are actually less productive if we work too much. Fundamentally, the target is impossible.

The productivity growth curve, then, is really a challenge for human nature: why do we approach efficiency as an endless rainbow to chase, rather than the route to a simpler, more grounded life?

Culturally, “productivity growth” is often presented as the aspiration first to increase output, then to decide whether to reduce our input or simply enjoy having more. Britain has longer average working hours than either France or Germany, so it seems we choose the latter. But many of the biggest problems facing our society – over-consumption and unequal resource distribution especially – are made worse by an excessive focus on growth. As Jeremy Williams and Katherine Trebeck write in *The Economics of Arrival*:

“What a tragedy it would be if, in the rush for more, the fruits of progress rotted before everyone had a chance to enjoy them. There’s no need to keep running, on and on. It is time to

recognise that the richest countries have already Arrived in the world long hoped for... The priority is now to make ourselves at home – a very different task from that of pursuing more and more without regard to quality or distribution.”

Of course, “arriving” is made urgent by the climate emergency. Simply, we need to use fewer resources, and increased productivity could help us get there, so long as it does not involve cutting jobs or chasing further output. The twin challenges of transitioning to a net zero economy and managing the direct damage caused by climate change position us at a point in history when we must be open to alternative economic measures and ways of managing the economy.

But it is more than that: reimagining our approach to productivity also enables a revaluation of those forms of work that can’t be endlessly streamlined (an increasing share of modern western economies) or that don’t appear in the data at all – that is, to recognise afresh those elements of human activity that really are worth slowing down for.

Consider the care worker. There is a limit to the number of house visits that can reasonably be conducted in an hour, and hoping for that number to increase is literally counter-productive – not to

mention dangerous. Human-centred work is inherently time-consuming, and its outputs are usually difficult to measure – but indispensable. We can make the other parts of the job more efficient, but there comes a point when the core task is irreducible.

In England alone, around 1.52 million people worked in the adult social care sector in 2022-23 – more than in the NHS – and an increasing share of the economy is located in caring and service-based professions more generally, making this a growing challenge for Britain’s productivity puzzle. So this isn’t a sentimental question: what is the most reasonable way to measure, in economic terms, the gift of somebody’s attention?

Consider also the full-time parent. How should we measure the huge investment of time, creativity, endurance, emotional energy, and opportunity cost taken to raise a child? Parenting is generative and creative, just as it is economically necessary in the establishment of a future workforce, but counts for nothing in traditional assessments of the national economy.

Or consider the grandparent helping to care for the children as the parent goes back to work; the water-cooler moment in the office that bonds a new

team; the conversation you have while lingering at the bus stop on the way home, which might lead to a new job opportunity, or just to a more humane journey. None of these are efficient; all of them are, in the truest sense of the word, productive.

When it comes to productivity, therefore, pragmatic and moral arguments point in the same direction. It’s not that we shouldn’t aim to create a high-skill, high-investment, well-managed economy, but that economic measures need to reflect both the kind of economy we are building and our values – and we will never “arrive” with the models and values we currently have.

Trying to address the economic problem without a wider look at our culture will not, therefore, give us the kind of economy we need. However, a reimagined culture might have something to offer the economy – and ultimately, it could even help us to move towards what truly encourages human flourishing: spontaneity, and connection. After all, what should it profit us to gain the whole world, but lose our soul?

Madeleine Pennington will appear at How the Light Gets In on Saturday September 23 to discuss “The Economics of Almost Everything”.

The politics of rudeness

Political shaming is all too rare nowadays. But one day the famous left wing theorist EP Thompson just went too far.

SOPHIE SCOTT-BROWN

On December 1, 1979, hundreds of left-wing historians gathered in St Martin's Church, Oxford, to hear a much-anticipated plenary debate on "History, Culture, and Theory." The speakers included Richard Johnson, a young lecturer from Birmingham, and Stuart Hall, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, also at Birmingham. The real star attraction, though, was Edward Palmer (EP) Thompson, revered socialist intellectual, co-founder of the first New Left movement and veteran anti-nuclear campaigner. A recording of the debate is available from the Raphael Samuel Archive held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London.

The crowd expected fireworks. Thompson was a notorious speaker, renowned for his acerbic wit and caustic attacks on political and intellectual enemies, on the left and right alike. Sure enough, he delivered. Turning on Johnson, the unfortunate author of an article he disliked, he demanded to know if the man had not felt "a chill in his epistemological organs" when he set down his absurd claims about the limits of humanism. A few titters came from the floor. Johnson, who until then, believed himself a friend of Thompson's, squirmed visibly.

This was not especially vicious. Worse salvos were fired at Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn when they took over the *New Left Review*. The French philosopher Louis Althusser had irked him so much that he wrote *The Poverty of Theory* (1976), an extravagant satire ridiculing the man's mechanistic theory of culture. Yet on this occasion, Thompson simply misfired. Dissenting grumbles grew steadily from the floor, eventually drowning out the gigglers. At last, the chair of the session, Stephen Yeo, intervened: "personal power to make laugh, to goad, cajole, to shift people out of position, to persuade and so on is marvellous," he said gently, "but there were moments... when I felt a

certain lack of consciousness about the personal power he wields."

Astonished, Thompson upbraided his critics for their lack of politics and reminded them that Marx had been a ferocious polemicist who never spared the intellectual whip – Marx's castigation of the anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1847, remains one of the most vicious public critiques ever published. His old comrade John Saville came to his aid insisting that "the left must stop pussy footing" around and be very hard if they wished to get any definition of purpose. This made matters worse. Over the weeks that followed, the meeting's organisers were inundated with letters complaining about Thompson's uncomradely behaviour.

The dramatic events of that evening dramatised long simmering tensions among the broader "New Left" on the question of means, ends, and the popular movement. While never amounting to a fully coherent programme in any of its national guises, New Left affiliates shared similar preoccupations. Firstly, to restore an ethical basis for socialism and disassociate it from Stalinism or bureaucratic labourism. Secondly, to confront the implications of rapid socio-economic change for capitalism and class politics. Finally, to explore and exploit the potential of culture as a mechanism for social transformation, even non-violent revolution.

In Britain, Thompson, an ex-communist who left the party in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, quickly emerged as a leading New Left advocate. Stalinism, he argued, indeed, all forms of totalitarianism, came about when opportunities for dissent were shut down. No truly socialist society could evolve without the free play of conflicting perspectives. The job of the socialist intellectual, then, was not to dictate how the revolution must go or how things must be at the end of it, but to inspire in people the spirit of revolutionary energy necessary to free themselves from the thrall of authority.

In advancing this case, Thompson was not, or not just, thinking of Marx, but of the urban poet and artist William Blake. In Blake he found an ideal model for the public intellectual, part hellfire prophet, part divine messenger, whose urgent, furious

poetry flayed the hypocrisies of the idle, commercialised society he found himself in. Blake's was not the only 18th-century pen to inspire him. He also admired the satirists Pope and Swift. In their case it was less the substance of their politics (both inclined to Toryism) but their intolerance of what they considered modernity's intellectual slovenliness, and, of course, the deliciously clever malice of their writing.

Satire, then, provided him with an important political tool, especially during the dismal days of the 1950s when, with Labour out of office, international communism discredited, and the cold war at full chill, being radical in Britain prompted at best derision, at worst outright hostility. It allowed him to work "from the inside". By exaggerating the foolishness or callousness of powerful individuals and institutions, Thompson could expose the disjuncture between the values they claimed to stand for and their actual deeds. This, in turn, undermined their authority, exposing it as a cynical illusion and freeing people to judge for themselves the respect due to them.

The political significance of satirical savagery went beyond the contemporary political platform. Thompson found a similar spirit abroad in the history of the English

'When Thompson took the stage with all the swagger and bluster of an experienced speaker used to adoration and belittled his fellow speaker, the gathered crowd turned the tables'

people where it played a definitive role. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) he reconstructed how the working class formed as a political identity from the torn threads of an ancient patrician culture which had, at least, assured them certain rights, and the brutal experiences of the new industrial order which destroyed these. From here, he moved backwards, delving into how a fragile "frontier" between the poor and gentry was maintained via a complex cultural interplay. His essay, *The Moral Economy of the Crowd* (1971) rejected the idea that mob violence in the

18th-century food riots was motivated by base instincts alone, drawing attention, instead, to how it mobilised ancient codes of popular justice and punishment.

Consequent work on *Rough Music* developed this further by recovering traditions of mock processions during which popular disapproval against some perceived violation of social norms was expressed by hoisting an effigy of the offender and parading it in public. During the event, marchers accompanied themselves by clattering improvised instruments (the "rough music"). Crude and often violent though these were, Thompson's point was that displaying such aggression was a vital resource to the poor in an otherwise grossly uneven struggle.



Rituals like this worked in two ways. First, they regulated a degree of group unity. Any deviance from common values and norms weakened "the people" as a collective and their capacity for political leverage depended on their solidarity. Second, the savagery of the display signalled a warning to the wealthy and powerful of just how threatening they could be if pushed too far, even when the gentry were not themselves the direct targets.

Thompson's discoveries fit the late 1960s countercultural mood well. Unilateral disarmament or the abolition of capitalism might be a distant dream, but not all was lost. One could keep the bastards honest, even force a few concessions, not just by pounding pavements with piles of party literature but by having fun and being rude.

For the audience gathered in St Martin's on that cold December evening, however, things had changed. In 1970, Ruskin College, Oxford, hosted Britain's first Women's Movement Conference. Over the decade the movement grew, its historians and intellectuals not just recovering women's histories, but using feminism to challenge existing ones, including those in vogue among the left. While acknowledging a great debt to Thompson, writers like Catherine Hall acknowledged the heavy masculinity of *The Making of the English Working Class*, the marginality of female experience, labour, and organisation in its pages, and the silence surrounding the oppression



British historian,
socialist and peace
campaigner
Edward Palmer
Thompson
(1924-1993)
Image: TNE/Getty

women faced within the labour movement as much as beyond it.

As for *Rough Music*, how often had that folk devil, partly used to reinforce a collective identity in a broader social conflict, been a woman accused of moral deviancy and worse. Even when the result of such public shaming had not resulted directly in the subject's death, how often had women, for whom social reputation was so important, been rendered disgraced beyond all redemption. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), the character of Lucetta was so mortified by the procession against her that she miscarried her baby and died from the complications. It was not just women – there was an all too long and galling history of people persecuted for their skin colour, their sexuality, or some other feature of their person or behaviour that “the group” considered “not normal”.

So, when Thompson took the stage with all the swagger and bluster of an experienced speaker used to adoration and belittled his fellow speaker the better to affirm his own position, the gathered crowd turned the tables. Now it was he who transgressed the norms they held, or wished to hold, namely that a real counterculture should be cooperative, not combative. Any sort of tribalism, or them-and-us thinking, resulted in tyranny. Genuine socialism was not exchanging one set of bullies for another but refusing to bully. To affirm their collective solidarity on this, they embarrassed Thompson by not laughing.

The man himself was unrepentant. A few days later he wrote a blasé reply to the organisers dismissing their concerns. He did not consider anything remarkable or unpleasant had happened that night. A few unnecessary acid drops perhaps, but as far as he was concerned, that was politics. Looking ahead to the 1980s, to Thatcher, and the resurgence of the British nuclear programme, he believed the country as a whole would need every ounce of outrage it was capable of mustering for what would be another impossible fight against implacable enemies at unwinnable odds. Sometimes the people cheered you, sometimes they turned on you, which was not necessarily a bad thing.

Sophie Scott-Brown will appear at How the Light Gets In on Saturday September 23 at 2.30, discussing “Naming and Shaming”.

Coming to our senses

If you don't like the taste of your glass of wine, try changing the music. Exploring the surprising cross-talk between the senses.

BARRY SMITH

As you rise from bed each morning, feeling the floor beneath your feet, reaching the bathroom, turning on the shower and brushing your teeth, you are already in receipt of a torrent of sensory inputs, helping you navigate the world, telling you how things are with you and how things are in the world. These early waking moments are shaped by what you see, what you hear, feel and taste. But they are not what they seem.

All our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us come through the senses, and although, of late, we have grown used to relying mostly on audio-visual information – a legacy of living our lives in front of screens – the rest of our senses are constantly active in shaping our perception of the world.

But how many senses do we have and how do they conspire to shape everyday experience? It may surprise you to learn that the commonly held assumption that we have five senses is entirely wrong. So is the idea that the senses work independently of one another. We don't see and hear, taste, touch and smell, as distinct and different ways of perceiving.

As you read this article, you know where your limbs are, however they are arranged. If you pay attention, you will notice the smell of your surroundings. Perhaps you also have a residual taste of tea or coffee in your mouth. These sensations take place in the same unified consciousness. We don't see, then hear, then feel, smell and taste. They don't occur in separate experiential parcels: they are all there at once, making a simultaneous, unified impression on our

consciousness. Experience is always multimodal: we experience the world with all our senses.

There is always cross-talk between the senses. They constantly interact, shaping each other's inputs and impacts: what we hear can affect what we feel, what we see can affect what we hear, and what we smell or hear can affect what we taste. We say lemons taste sharp, although sharp is a feel, not a taste. And did you know there are odours in shampoo that make your hair feel softer? There are plenty of associations we all make between shapes and sounds, colours and tastes. People, when given lime green and red coloured liquids to taste, even though they are just water with tasteless dyes, will report that the red liquid tastes sweet and the green liquid slightly sour.

By contrast, cross-modal associations between one sense and another are universally shared. Look at the two shapes at the foot of this column and ask yourself – which one is Bouba and which one is Kiki?

Wherever you are, people will tell you that the rounded figure is Bouba and the jagged-edged one Kiki. Tribes people in Namibia without written language give the same answer. So do small children. Marketing companies have noticed these associations. Think of fizzy and still water. Is fizzy water Bouba or Kiki? It's Kiki, right, and that's why San Pellegrino bottles have a red star on them. It prepares you for the harsh-edged CO₂ bubbles. What of milk chocolate and dark chocolate? Is milk chocolate Bouba or Kiki? You get the idea.

Cross-modal associations can surprise us. If you had to put lemons on a scale between fast and slow,

where would we put them? Right across the world, people say "fast". Bananas? Slow. What fixes these associations in our brains? In this case, I think there is an underlying physiological explanation. Sour taste receptors on our tongues are activated quickly, whereas sweet taste receptors have a slower onset and offset timing. The acidity of citrus fruits has a faster-acting effect than the sweetness of a banana.

It is not just these quirky effects we are interested in. Interactions between the senses also create some familiar experiences. Take vanilla. If I give you a pod of vanilla to smell, you will probably say it smells sweet. But sweet is a taste, not a smell. Besides, if I snip off a piece off and let you taste it, you'll realise there's no sweetness there: it tastes mildly bitter and liquorice-like. What's going on here? First vanilla is usually combined with sweet foods like ice cream and cakes, and the aromas of those foods are immediately followed by a sweet taste in the mouth, leading the brain to transfer the sensory attributes of taste on to the smell that predicts its arrival. The brain's association between vanilla and sweet tastes also means that we can add less sugar to ice cream and it will still be perceived as tasting sweeter than it is. This is known as the sweetness enhancement effect. Though food manufacturers beware, this is a culturally specific effect. People brought up exclusively on Vietnamese cuisine, where vanilla is combined with salt and fish, will smell vanilla as salty.

It is not just aromas that can change the perceived sweetness or sourness of what we taste. For many years, the psychologist Charles Spence and I put on wine-tasting events where people wore headphones and listened to different pieces of music while sipping wine. Depending on the music they were hearing as they sipped, the wine could taste more sweet or more sour. High-pitched notes on a violin could

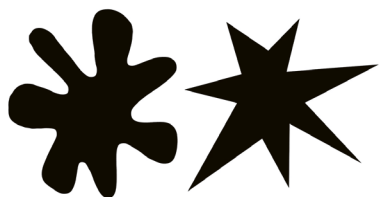


Image: Getty

make drinkers wince. Guitar or piano music could flip the taste of the wine to sweet. What's going on here? The answer is that since the wine has both sweetness and acidity (sourness), we can direct drinkers' attention to one or the other using sound. Spence calls these auditory attention cues "sonic seasoning", and it's worth remembering them the next time you order a bottle of wine in a restaurant and are subject to whatever the duty manager has on their playlist. If you don't like the wine, change the music.



What this tells us is that we have many more senses than five and that the senses don't work independently of one another. And yet, for 2,500 years, philosophers and most folk had followed Aristotle in thinking that we had five senses: seeing and hearing, taste, touch and smelling.

My neuroscience and psychology colleagues tell me that we may have as many as 22 or 33 senses. There is internal sensing, called interoception, by which we register bodily changes such as slowing or quickening of our heart rate, butterflies in the stomach, fear and exhilaration. Consider proprioception: the sense by which we know where our arms and legs are without having to see or feel them. That bodily sense plays a role in another vital sense: your sense of balance. This is due to your vestibular system, a wonderful piece of natural engineering whereby fluid moves through the ear canals running backwards and forwards, side to side and up and down, letting us know which direction we're moving in and which way is up, even when we are lying down.

There's an intriguing interaction between vision and the vestibular system when we are flying on a plane. Usually, the visual system dominates any collaboration with other senses. However, things go differently when we're moving through space. Next time you are on a plane, strapped in and listening to the safety instructions, place your head on the headrest and look along the cabin to see where everything is. Now look again when you have taken off and in the climb. It will look to you as though the front of the plane is higher than where you are sitting. Of course, it is. But how can it look that way? With your head on the headrest, you are in exactly the same optical relation to everything in the cabin as you were on the ground. What's happening is that your experience of "seeing" the front of the cabin as higher than you are is not a purely visual experience – it is produced by the vestibular system dominating the visual system with our ear canals telling the brain we are

tipping backwards. This alters the "look" of the cabin to give us the right result. What we need is less Balkanisation of the senses and a move towards the merging of the senses.

My own research of flavour perception relies on exactly this kind of multisensory integration. We usually think that we taste the flavours of food and drinks on our tongues. But that's not true. All the tongue can give you is salt, sweet, sour, bitter, umami (the fifth, savoury taste), and maybe metallic and fatty tastes. Yet, we "taste" peach, raspberry, mango, melon, cinnamon, mint and sage. We don't have melon or peach receptors on our tongues. Most of the flavours we can taste are due to smell; not sniffed from the outside. It is only when odours from the mouth drift up through the back of the throat, or are pulsed there by swallowing, and reach the receptors in the nasal cleft that they combine with tastes from the tongue to create the experience of flavour. During the pandemic, people often reported that they had lost their sense of taste when what they had lost was their sense of smell. With a bit of prompting they would acknowledge that they could still taste a pinch of salt, or sugar, or a squeeze of lemon juice. What they were realising was how much of what they called taste was actually due to smell.

Add to taste and smell inputs from touch on texture – how crunchy, or sticky, or smooth, or slippery a food is – and sensations of burning or cooling in response to spices like mustard or menthol coming from the trigeminal nerve that serves the eyes, the nose and the mouth, and you begin to see how multisensory the unified perception of flavour really is. We mistake it for a taste and undergo a location illusion, imagining that we are experiencing "taste" on the tongue. That just goes to show that even in the first-person intimacy of our own conscious experience, we can still be wrong: there is room for a philosophical distinction between appearance and reality.

It was revelations like these that led me in 2011 to create a Centre for the Study of the Senses at the University of London, where we pioneered collaborative working between philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists to examine the mechanisms that underlie our perceptions of the world and ourselves. We are still going strong and we are not going to run out of things to do.

*Barry Smith is appearing at this year's **How the Light Gets In** festival. On Saturday September 23 at 11.30am, he will be discussing the philosophy of the senses – is it possible to touch a smell?*

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