
In the Philosophy Room: Australian Realism and the Digital Content Object

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The recent digitisation of the papers and lecture notes of the Australian realist philosopher, Challis Professor of Philosophy John Anderson, has given us cause to reflect upon, on the one hand, the suitability of the TEI model for encoding digital documents and, on the other, the possibility that Anderson's philosophy itself may be relevant to some of the issues and debates in contemporary markup theory and practice.¹ The claim here is not that Anderson himself addressed, much less solved, the challenges we face in the construction of digital content, but that in our current situation reflection on ontological matters in this way may enlighten our thinking about the nature of the digital object and its descriptive encoding. We have come to think that the philosophical issues to be explored through this inquiry have a bearing on many of the more immediate empirical questions that we have previously raised. In this paper we seek to bring the philosophical debate to the fore. In an earlier presentation opening our case for the use of TEI in the description of digital library materials (Scifleet et al.), we argued that the collection and evaluation of information relating to actual markup practice from various institutions and research projects over time would further our understanding of difficult theoretical issues relating to the digital content object. The current paper extends this project to questions implicit in the TEI encoder's task of representing the text, which is increasingly seen to be a surprisingly problematic ambition. Our paper aims to contribute to philosophical debates of TEI encoding that have appeared in the work of a number of the leading theorists and practitioners in the field over the past decade.

Our study includes a brief review of debates on TEI ranging from McGann to Renear.² The trajectory of these debates suggests we may no longer be in the "progressive research program" that we had imagined. Many of the criticisms made of the ordered hierarchical model for encoding humanities texts have made an impression. On the other hand, criticisms from literary scholars of the descriptive encoding model are not

warranted in asserting the purely interpretive or constitutive nature of the encoder's task. Although the notion of representing the text in digital form is unclear, descriptive encoding is not interpretation all the way down. Textual features identified by our markup practices do have a reality independent of our thinking so and we do seem to be recording real and significant features in our assignment of tags to the digital content object. Nonetheless, there are real problems in practice in digitising materials such as the Anderson lecture notes and our project is driven by a desire to work some conceptual confusions through in a theoretically satisfying manner. Encoding is not a simple matter of reading off or copying textual features waiting to be recorded in digital form, for determinations about the nature of an object must be made. There seems to us to be a clear need for more information and guidance based on analysis and evaluation of actual markup practices over time. In place of this kind of guidance and engagement with real models, TEI proponents are left to gauge the extent to which they have failed to represent some ideal abstract object through resort to "tag abuse" and other coping mechanisms.

John Anderson is generally recognised as the most original and important philosopher to have worked in Australia. Between 1927 and 1958 he lectured in the Philosophy Room at the University of Sydney. His lecture notes in the Archives are acknowledged to be amongst our most important records of his philosophical thinking. Anderson developed a systematic realism which fostered a tradition of thinking about properties, qualities and relations which would seem to us to have some relevance to the encoder's world of elements, attributes and structural relations. Many of the recent debates on TEI and the descriptive encoding model have centred on our understanding of these seemingly intuitive concepts and the hierarchical structures they commit us to. We think that Anderson's insistence upon ontological seriousness and objective inquiry may help to illuminate many of the assertions about TEI's role in representing the text and that our problems may be clarified by establishing more clearly the ontological commitments of the various disputants. It would not surprise us to find that much of our conceptual thinking about these issues has been insufficiently critical in Anderson's sense.

In this paper we examine many of the current debates in the light of our understanding of Anderson's work: issues relating to the reality of the text; the descriptive and prescriptive distinction manifest in markup; whether identifying textual features is really an imposition upon the text and what this view might commit us to; whether TEI's acceptance of the markup language model leaves it unable to adequately represent imaginative, materially inscribed documents, as opposed to purely informational manuals and so forth. It is easy to take a distanced view of these issues and assume they don't directly affect the practice of encoding either in the digital library or the scholarly editing environments. However, the peculiar nature

of the TEI use of markup does seem to consistently raise issues we thought had been resolved, or which seemed to present no real constraint on practice. There is evidently some room for conceptual clarification here and it is possible that we have something to learn by adopting an attitude of "ontological seriousness" in relation to how we think about our markup practices. In that case, there may be some value in considering the lessons of an older philosophical tradition as practiced in John Anderson's Philosophy Room.

1. The John Anderson Papers at the University of Sydney Library <<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts/anderson.html/>>
2. Renear; Buzzetti; Caton; McGann; Huitfeldt; De Rose et al.; and Barwell et al.

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