

Fallen foundations, language games, and crossing cultures

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260. What is an intellectual?

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In item 218 of this blog I used a definition of the intellectual from Foucaultⁱ: ‘The person who uses his knowledge, his competence, and his relation to truth in the field of political struggles’. Elsewhere, I found a similar definitionⁱⁱ: ‘... engagement in public life, in the service of a cause that divides politicians, elites and simple citizens’.

The paradigmatic case is that of Emile Zola, with his ‘I accuse’, in the upheaval in France with the affair Dreyfus. Another is that of Sartre. The notion of a public intellectual seems especially French.

This leaves room for a wide variety of intellectualsⁱⁱⁱ: of the left, the right, progressive and conservative, of humanism (Thomas Mann was mentioned, but there was doubt whether he might be too a-political), and even of Nazism (Heidegger). Some defend universal values, such as freedom (Sartre), while others (Foucault) militate against universals in defence of particulars. One may even be an intellectual at arms against any hegemony of intellectuals.

While Foucault pleaded for the intellectual as an expert in some area, Sartre proposed that the intellectual begins where the ‘technician of practical knowledge ends’.^{iv}

An important feature is independence, if not autonomy. In item 218 I discussed how difficult it may be to maintain it.

Connected to that, and connecting with Bergson and Derrida, as in preceding items of this blog, I add what I think is a central feature: the intellectual is engaged in Bergsonian ‘duration’ and Derridaist ‘deconstruction’. This elaborates on the idea that the mission of the intellectual is to break dogma and shift established, taken for granted beliefs or perspectives.

Even deconstruction may be deconstructed. As I argued in item 251, the change, transformation involved in duration and deconstruction cannot be without pause. Some stability is required, and it is part of the task of intellectuals to bring it about, in diffusing, explaining and defending perspectives.

Max Weber distinguished between a ‘morality of conviction’ and a ‘morality of responsibility’. The first may be obvious, but is the latter a requirement for an intellectual? And is the criterion for responsibility then feasibility of the views expressed? I am inclined towards responsibility, but I grant that feasibility may lock one up in the status quo.

While feasibility and stability may be virtues, it is a challenge not to be co-opted in dominant perspectives, as I argued in item 218. The intellectual must have the courage to maintain independence even at the cost of being ignored, ostracized or persecuted. That is easier said than done. Nazism denounced intellectuals as enemies of the state, forcing them to either conform (Heidegger) or to emigrate, either in reality or virtually, in ‘inner emigration’.

But often, in liberal democracies the price intellectuals pay is bearable, with a little courage. It can help to congregate in societies of their own. Yet, one may ask how many exercise such criticism, at universities, academies of science, and editorships of scholarly journals.

To use other terminology from Foucault: the intellectual engages in *parrhêsia*, or should do so, taking risks in engagement, being committed rather than maintaining the aloofness of a philosopher, teacher or scientist. The art of it then is to nevertheless maintain the telling of truth, or the search for truth, in the form of warranted assertibility, and not fall into rhetoric to mould assent.

261. The truth of Foucault

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Foucault tugged at the notion of truth in several ways. In his earlier work on power embodied in social systems (prisons, clinics, asylums, ..) he proposed that those constitute ‘regimes of truth’ that ‘make something that does not exist able to become something’, such as notions of insanity or illness. ‘They are things that do not exist and yet which are inscribed in reality under a regime of truth dividing the true and the false’. Such a regime ‘.. is not an illusion, since it is precisely a set of practices, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality’^v How, I now ask, are we to understand things that ‘do not exist yet are inscribed in reality’?

In this blog I proposed the notion that abstract, theoretical notions, such as madness and illness, and happiness, justice, and meaning, are subject to an ‘object bias’ (see item 29 of this blog). They are conceived of like objects in time and space, while in fact in important ways are not like objects at all. In that sense they are not real, but they are real in their consequences of being accepted and enacted. Is that how we might understand ‘inscription in reality’?

In this blog I adopted the notion of truth as ‘warranted assertibility’ (item 104), as supporting argument with warrants of purported facts, logic, and tested theory.

In his later work, Foucault turned from systems of power, regimes of truth, to the construction of the subject, the self, that is entangled in such regimes. He rejects Platonic notions of truth in terms of contemplating ideal, universal eternal concepts in another world, removed from the empirical world we live in. He also turns away from truth as identity ($x = y$), or as correspondence with something in reality, towards a view of *praxis*, action in this world, which is a view of difference and development, not of identity, universality and constancy. It is not oriented towards another world but to another life in this one.

That, I propose, is close to the dynamic, pragmatist stance (items 26, 108), ‘philosophy and imperfection on the move’, that I have taken throughout this blog, building on the work of the American pragmatist philosophers (Peirce, Dewey, James), and the practical wisdom of Aristotle.

The classical Greek ‘taking care of the self’ that Foucault adopted is not aimed at discovery of one’s soul but at the aesthetics of existence, life as a work of art, plus a truthful accounting for one’s conduct, in *parrhêsia*, being truthful. It works with anecdotes, narratives and exemplars rather than theory and analysis.

Here we have truth not in the epistemological sense, of an accounting in terms of logic or facts, also not in the sense of warranted assertibility, but in the sense of talking about a 'true human being', or 'true hero', or true 'love' or 'friendship'. It is not the truth of science but of conduct, not of knowledge but of ethic, in what I called 'debatable ethics'.

Foucault recognized four dimensions of this truth:

1. Unhidden, not absconded, no occlusion, but open, revealed
2. Unadulterated, pure. In some places this becomes: independent.
3. Straight, no deviance. In some places this becomes: in accordance with nature
4. Constancy, steadfast. In some places this becomes: sovereign.

Perhaps authenticity can be clarified as 'being true to oneself'. This, in turn, may be clarified with Foucault's four dimensions of such truth: being open, straight, independent, and sovereign.

According to Foucault, classical Greek cynics (such as Diogenes) take this, and their truth telling, to extremes. Openness, disclosure becomes living out in public spaces, as a vagabond, exhibitionist, in squalor. Life is reduced to pure, elementary nature. Conduct is uncultured, primary, direct, without shame, confrontational, militant. The cynic is staunchly independent, sovereign, uncompromising. All this is in the service of holding up unadulterated truths to people, exposing their laziness, materialism, gluttony, hypocrisy, artificiality, slavery, bondage, ...

What to think of all this? I think it is overly pretentious, and counter-productive in part.

1. Disclosure presupposes self-knowledge and transparency, while in fact much is hidden in our subconscious.
2. Independence and sovereignty are an illusion: we need others to constitute ourselves. We need their opposition to mend our prejudices and to attain some freedom from them
3. We rarely go straight, but amble around in improvisation, bumping into errors and novel opportunities and then changing direction.

So, while the ideals of this truth are commendable, normatively laudable, worth striving for, they are hardly realistic and harbour a risk of hubris and self-delusion. My objections are the same as the ones I had against Nietzsche (item 60), in the illusion of developing oneself as a subject by oneself, overcoming oneself, like the baron of Munchausen pulling himself out of the swamp by his bootstraps.

263. Order and disorder in thought

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With babies, thought is erratic, incoherent, in what the philosopher William James called 'a blooming, buzzing confusion'. As they develop coordinated movement, in focused action, thoughts mirror this in some coherence, in neural configuration. Then comes the miracle of language to further form and order thought.

Montaigne withdrew from public life to his castle, disenchanted by the hypocrisy, cowardice, mediocrity, and inanity there. He withdrew into himself and to his dismay found his thoughts flying off in all directions. He found that he had to discipline his thought in the order of writing them down, addressing some indeterminate audience.

Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a private language. Meanings of words need to be stabilized in the order of discourse.

In sum, one needs others to stabilize one's thoughts.

Nietzsche was insane for the last ten years of his life. One speculation about it is that his insanity was due to a syphilis that purportedly he contracted from a whore, seemingly the only time he had sex in his life. I offer an different possible speculation. Nietzsche argued for will to power, sublimated in transcending the self, overcoming resistance of the self to its transformation. Pain, suffering is an inevitable part of that, a price to be paid. Nietzsche certainly had his share of pain and suffering. Physical pain from a chronic migraine. Mental pain from loneliness and isolation. His one friend, Paul Ree, with whom he had a triangular relationship with Lou Salomé, was ultimately chosen by her over him. His earlier infatuation with Wagner's wife Cosima was dissolved in his break with Wagner. Nietzsche ostensibly believed in self-transformation, in lifting himself from the swamp by his own bootstraps. I wonder: could this have contributed to his insanity?

As I argued extensively in this blog, one needs opposition from others to correct and develop oneself. To order one's thoughts it helps to write them down, as Montaigne discovered. It may help even more to call in the discipline of logic, or mathematics, if possible, to get a grip. But response from others, rejoinder in debate, yields a more powerful boost.

One needs that to get out of rigidities, ruts, vicious circles of thought. In this blog (item 49) I argued that it contributes to the highest level of freedom: freedom from one's prejudices.

However, perhaps discourse, harnessed in language, is still too structured, too limited in its scope of variety. Perhaps one also needs more random sources of disturbance. The role of randomness for learning is shown in so-called genetic algorithms in computer science, inspired by the evolutionary logic of random mutations of genes and cross-over of parental chromosomes to generate new forms of life. Earlier in this blog (item 35) I referred to the 'neural Darwinism' developed by Gerald Edelman, which applies such evolutionary logic to the brain.

And how about dreaming? And mind-blowing drugs like LSD? I recently read in a newspaper article that MRI scans of the brain show that patterns from LSD are similar to those of sleep and of babies.

Perhaps thought requires an alternation of order and disorder: order of language and logic, minor disorder of shifts from discourse and debate, and more radical leaps of disorder in dreaming. Perhaps this entails the same logic as the one for invention that I developed before, which also included a dialectic of order and disorder, in assimilation and accommodation, in exploitation and exploration, with convergence and divergence (see item 35).

In item 137 of this blog I suggested that this may be linked to the dialectic of Yin and Yang in Taoist philosophy.

In this blog I have adopted the notion of truth as ‘warranted assertibility’. The warrant is to be based on arguments and facts. In this blog I have also adopted pragmatist philosophy, found in American philosophers Peirce, James, and Dewey, but also in Nietzsche (see item 149) and Wittgenstein. Some people^{vi} claim that pragmatism demands that we no longer claim or ask whether someone or something is ‘right’ but only whether it is useful. That is not my view.

As I argued in item 246 of this blog, it is still useful and warranted to claim one is right, compared to some rival claim, in the sense that one has better arguments. Without any such claim, what is the point of debate? To stand behind one’s arguments is to claim one is right.

Note that there is a pragmatist argument here. If usefulness is the criterion of warrant and we can argue that debate is useful and that for debate claims of being right is useful, then claims of being right are warranted.

While some (American) pragmatists indeed claim that something is true if it useful, what I make of it is the wider criterion that ‘it works’. To be useful something must work, but if it works it need not be useful. What does ‘it works’ mean? Dutch has the expression ‘het klopt’. That expresses exactly what I have in mind, but is difficult to translate. It means something like ‘it fits’, ‘hangs together’, ‘stands up’, ‘works’.

In science, something is taken to be true if it ‘works’ in the sense that its implications accord with logic and experience. For warranted assertibility I propose that an assertion should work either in that sense or in the wider sense that it has implications for action that are effective, reach some goal, are indeed useful in that sense, or for which there are arguments also in a moral sense. In the latter, warranted assertibility becomes what I called ‘debatable ethics’. In sum, I render ‘warranted’ as ‘workable’, which is wider than ‘useful’.

I recall that the philosopher Hegel said, in German, that ‘Das Vernunftige ist das Wirkliche, und das Wirkliche ist das Vernunftige’. ‘Vernunftig’ means rational, or reasonable. ‘Wirklich’ means real or actual, but literally it says ‘workable’. So perhaps what I am saying in this piece is attributable to Hegel.^{vii}

‘Working’ has several dimensions: logical, empirical, practical, moral, validity, Thus warrant is relative to which of these aspects one is talking about. These, in turn, depend on perspective, context, purpose.

The question then is what or who determines whether ‘it works’, or what criteria apply. Here I arrive again at Foucault’s view that it is determined by established, institutionalized ‘regimes of truth’.

In philosophy, one such regime is analytic philosophy, and another is ‘continental’ or ‘non-analytic’ philosophy (see item 158 of this blog).^{viii} They have different views on what are interesting and legitimate assumptions and questions.

In economics, mainstream, neo-classical economics gives priority to formal rigour, in the use of economics. Heterodox economics attaches more importance to plausibility and realism of assumptions.

If in one such system one disagrees and does not conform, one needs to accept the price of ostracism, go in a hiding of some sort, or opt out, or switch to a different system.

Genuine novelty does not fit, offers new meaning, 'does not work', lacks recognized warrant and hence is not accepted, until it is shown to 'work' in novel ways and gathers cognitive, social and political clout to break the old frame. It is 'untimely', as Nietzsche called it.

Are there assertions, questions or expressions where it does not make sense to ask for a warrant? Consider poetry. Is it not the point of poetry to escape from warrant, to say something unwarranted? Even there one may debate, as among literary critics, whether or not, and in what way, a poem 'works', in terms of rhythm, sound, tone, rhyme or alliteration, metaphor, originality,

Consider *illocutionary speech acts*, such as 'go read that book'. One could ask 'why, explain'. And consider expressions of feeling, in the following exchange: 'I love you', 'that is not love', 'why not?', There is a saying that there can be no dispute about taste, but why not? One can explain the liking of something by comparing it to something else that is evidently likeable. But at some point argumentation must stop, as I argued before (in item 173 of this blog). At some point the debate will end in 'that is just how I feel', or 'that is just how it is done'^{ix}.

265. Rebellion

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Previously in this blog, I discussed the problem of how to escape from the tangle of social systems. Here I present two cases, illustrations of it.

In a recent speech^x, Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek minister of finance, narrated his conflict with the committee of EU finance ministers concerning the Greek debt. They wanted to compel Greece to repay the full debt, with severe measures of austerity. Varoufakis argued that this would be self-defeating, since ongoing austerity would demolish the economic basis for repaying the debt. The only viable approach, which would repay at least some of the debt, would be to cancel part of it.

Informally, everyone agreed that he was right, but EU leaders could not sell it to their electorates, and it would damage the northern EU banks that had extended the debt. There was no way that Varoufakis could get his way.^{xi}

To the point for the present discussion, he was told by an insider that he could only survive in the negotiations if he gave in to the austerity game. Do not go against the stream as a matter of principle, but tag along and see what you can achieve in the margins, was the advice. If he stuck to his guns, he would be dropped, forced out. And that is what he chose.

Another case is from my own experience. As a scholar of innovation and member of the main think tank for the Dutch government^{xii}, I headed a team of researchers to produce an advisory report on innovation policy. Our advice went against established policy of planning innovation for selected strong industries. That, we argued, would have a conservative effect of profiting and maintaining established interests and raising entry barriers for newcomers. At

best, it would yield improvement of established technologies and their application rather than yielding genuine novelty.

This criticism was not well received. I had previously been welcome at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, participating in seminars and advisory committees, but now, I heard from contacts within the ministry, I was a *persona non grata*, no longer welcome.

The policy I criticised was ideal from the following perspectives. First, it reduced the risk of spending public money on risky innovation that did not deliver, which would get the minister in trouble with parliament, for ‘wasting public funds’, while it could still be called innovation in some form, thus satisfying the hype of innovation. Second, it satisfied pressures from established (large) business not to engage in ‘creative destruction’ of established positions and investments. My advice was spoiling a game that in a truce between government, a risk-averse parliament and established business was too good to be spoiled.

I appealed to high-placed colleague professors: the then president of the Academy of Sciences, and the then director of the Science Foundation that distributed funds for research. They were both members of the state committee for innovation policy. In private, they conceded that I was right, that my arguments were valid. However, they were facing the choice: go along with my opposition and risk being side-tracked (like me), or going along with the momentum of the policy in force, to protect the interests of the institutions they stood for, which depended on public funding.

I could not blame them. But it illustrates the deep ‘problem of Foucault’ that I discussed earlier in this blog.

267 Heidegger, Foucault, Wittgenstein, and how to rebel published 26-6-2016

Here I resume a brief series on rebellion

In his ‘Being and time’, Heidegger proposed the view, taken also throughout this blog, that the self is not a bystander with pre-formed ideas, looking out on the world, but is ‘thrown into the world’, being constituted by it. As a result, one is ‘fallen’ (‘Verfallen’, in German), caught, in the grips of ‘das Man’, the collective, or the ‘One’ in the sense of ‘that is how ONE behaves’. The problem then is how to get free from that grip, to achieve authenticity.

This is very close, I propose, to Foucault’s idea that we are caught in ‘regimes of truth’. One could, I think, capture ‘das Man’ as well as the ‘regime of truth’ in the notion of an ‘institutional system’, with its rules, roles, positions and doctrine. How, then to escape from it?

Both Heidegger and Foucault recognized that we need an institutional system as an enabling system, from which the self forms itself. And we need it to take things for granted, in order to function, not to have to wrangle agreement at every step (e.g. in a language community, division of labour, trade, traffic, in a political system, ...). System power is not only negative, constraining choice, but also positive, in providing options for choice. The issue, according to Foucault, is to accept, to value and to exert, positive power, while maintaining the ability of resisting or counteracting the negative power of suppression.

But how to both use the system to function and deviate from it to develop authenticity? Foucault said that we should ‘shape our life as a work of art’. Yes, but how is that done?

One can find or form a smaller community of more like-minded people, but that yields its own constraints and in any case one is still part of a larger system.

Heidegger said that awareness of the horizon of death, in ‘being unto death’ impels us to commit to a choice to form an individual self, as part of a whole of life, in ‘disclosing oneself’ (‘Entschlossenheit’). The horizon compels us to choose or else waste the potential of life. Fine, but the question still is: how to both employ and escape the system?

Here, I employ Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘language game’. As I did in a discussion of the handling of the Greek financial crisis, in item 206 of this blog. If an institutional system entails one or more language games, what room is there within these rules or for changing the rules?

Earlier, in item 170, I discussed the room left in discourse from the fact that meanings of words are not delimited strictly. Public meanings allow for private connotations. Meanings are open, subject to shift, in individual language use, as is most pronounced in poetry.

Rules of the game leave room for individual technique and style. Take Muhammad Ali: he obeyed the rules of boxing but developed his own style to ‘float like a butterfly and sting like bee’. Some authenticity is possible within the rules.

Still, from inside the game it is difficult to change the rules, and as an outsider one would be simply ignored, not taken seriously. However, by being an expert, superb player, one can use the reputation to make controversial, deviant statements. Muhammad Ali did that, to criticise racism and discrimination.

Another example, in economics, is Kenneth Arrow. As a reputed scholar he earned attention for a fundamental insight that challenged economic doctrine.^{xiii}

However, even then it is difficult to rebel and change the rules radically from inside. Arrow showed that an important part of economics as we knew it does not work, but not how a new economics would work.

Apart from pressure from others in the system to conform, it is difficult, intellectually and morally, for oneself to retain and enact independence of thought, to change the system. In fighting the system one may destroy one’s reputation built on it.

To radically change the rules, in creative destruction, one has to accept ostracism, being an outcast. One has to struggle in the desert to get one’s deserts. To have novelty adopted one needs to show that ‘it works’, to those, often a novel generation, that are open to it. Often recognition does not arrive in ‘being unto death’ but after it. The commitment to leave something behind, beyond death, according to the best of one’s talents, should carry its own reward.

An alternative, which I reject but is increasingly adopted even by scholars, is to leave the arena of rational debate, fire up the rhetoric and mobilize the populace, appealing to emotions and ‘gut feeling’ to win the day.

272. How do you find your selves?

Published 19-7-2016

In the present series on foundations and language games, this item is an intermezzo on the self.

Richard Rorty defined the person, the self, as an ‘internally coherent cluster of beliefs and desires’^{xiv}. The question remains of course, what ‘coherent’ means.

This definition allows for multiple selves, each with a form of coherence. I proposed earlier (in item 134 of this blog), that there is not only one single, fixed self, but multiple selves, constructed by internalizing experience by adapting neural structures, possibly in a variety of ways.

Against David Hume’s denial of any coherent, stable identity I claimed that there is more or less stable coherence due to the condition that mental and endocrinal processes occur and arise together in a single body that survives or not as a whole, and functioning for survival requires some coherence. Images that produce fear trigger hormones that serve action, which feeds back in forming mental images.

According the Freudian psycho-analysis there are different ways to assimilate one’s past, yielding several, often conflicting, selves, some of which may be suppressed and hidden in the subconscious.

Psycho-analysis may help to tease the spooks of hidden personality out of the dark. Does one need this? Or can one do it by oneself? But one put them in there, in the dark, to begin with.

Might the ability to do this teasing out of hidden selves be nursed with reading literature? Earlier (in items 92, 120) I proposed that literature can help to develop the ability of ‘moral simulation’, imagining what consequences one’s actions might have, which sustains the feeble free will (92), and in that sense may make people better (120). In good literature, one also witnesses how the hide and seek of selves happens to other people, or how the author teases hem out. Or would one have to write a novel oneself, where one can project one’s hidden selves as the novel’s characters? Is writing used for therapy?

What self or selves does one want? Usually, morality is associated with obligations to others, but there is also a morality concerning the self, a duty to preserve oneself, perhaps to realize one’s potential, not to let the precious gift of it go to waste. Or that, at least, is what I think, my credo of life.

Rorty offered a choice. Does one want to go for a pure, single, self, freed from the encumbrances of life in the world, seeking one’s ‘true self’, illusory as it may be? Or does one opt for what Rorty called ‘enlargement of the self’, in developing novel selves from the richness of experience, harvesting it rather than retreating from it?

Note the Nietzschean, Dionysian streak of this.

The first choice is akin to the Platonic urge to purify ideas from the rich hubbub of experienced reality, to contemplate ‘underlying fundamental reality’.

The second choice is akin to latter day philosophy that does not seek pure, distinct, fixed ideas behind appearance, or any pure, essential self. As I put it in this blog, it is ‘imperfection on the move’, including development of the self.

Science, or 'normal science', as Thomas Kuhn called it, takes certain primitive terms and basic premises for granted, often not even consciously, as the rock bottom to build theories on and conduct experiments. That is what makes it 'hard'.

We might see it as the playing of a Wittgensteinian language game.

In his 'theory of scientific research programmes', Imre Lakatos proposed that a scientific theory consists of a fixed 'core' of basic notions and principles, with a 'protective belt' of auxiliary assumptions that may be adapted to protect the core from falsification, accommodating misfits, thus 'saving appearances'.

When contrary evidence becomes 'excessive' (Kuhn), and repair with auxiliary assumptions becomes too forced and contrived, there arises pressure for a more fundamental change of view, called a 'paradigm switch' by Kuhn, consisting of a breakdown and replacement of the core.

Here, I want to re-connect this with the 'hermeneutic circle', discussed in several earlier items in this blog (see e.g. item 252). Along the 'paradigmatic axis' words and concepts ('paradigms') are taken for granted, are inserted in sentences/propositions, in specific contexts of action, along the 'syntagmatic axis'. Let me call that 'the way down'. There, abstractions are enriched, infused, nourished to life from practical life. And then, in application, in the practical business of life, one sooner or later encounters misfits or novel opportunities, where concepts seem forced, and this occasions tentative shifts or replacements of them, along the paradigmatic axis. Using words shifts their meaning. Let me call that 'the way up'.

That is the business, in particular, of literature, in storytelling, where life is shown to be richer than theory. Conduct that according to norms of normality are irrational or immoral are swallowed in a 'suspension of disbelief'. Literature burrows into individual experience that bursts the seams of abstraction. The most telling case of meaning shifts is that of poetry.

Then, the difference between science and literature is that between applying paradigms in application, in normal science, and using experience to shift notions and meanings, in literature. Philosophy used to be seen as belonging to the first category: using concepts to clarify experience. 20th century philosophy rejected that and made philosophy more literary, narrative, going from experience, from action in the world, to shifts of concepts. No longer only the way down but also the way up.

Science is in crisis when it also needs to take the way up, to craft a paradigm shift. Established abstractions are unhinged. Then it becomes more like literature. Fundamental discovery is the poetry of science. It remains narrative until scientists have put novel abstractions in place, and scientists can again throng along the way down.

These days I am confronted with this as follows. I am participating in a large project to transform economic theory and teaching. The financial crises have woken up some economists to the inadequacies of their science. In a recent meeting, new principles were proposed. They were discarded by other economists as 'mere story telling', in betrayal of the established rigour and clarity of their science. There, in defending and maintaining its analytical strength science becomes a force of conservatism.

Elsewhere in this blog, I proposed a ‘cycle of invention’, with an alternation between fitting experience into existing theory, along the ‘way down’, in ‘assimilation’. In several stages this can lead to a break into new theory, along the ‘way up’, in ‘accommodation’, and I indicated the connection with the hermeneutic circle. The cycle of invention is one guise, or form, of the hermeneutic circle.

In earlier work I used the term ‘discovery’, but that literally means the removal of a cover from something that exists, lies there, ‘behind experience’, waiting to be dis-covered. The term ‘invention’ is better, with its connotation of ‘creating by thought’.

274. Is pragmatism conventional?

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I has been claimed (e.g by Richard Rorty) that pragmatism is conventional: ‘treating conventionally accepted norms as foundations’^{xv}. I am a pragmatist and yet I disagree, up to a point. If pragmatism were conventional, it would be inherently conservative, and I propose that pragmatism can support novelty.

What is conventional? I propose that it can be rendered as operating within an established language game. Certain terms, meanings and ‘rules of the game’ are taken for granted. In science, it could, I proposed in the preceding item in this blog, be rendered as preserving the ‘core’ of a ‘research programme’, in the terms presented by Imre Lakatos: fundamental theoretical and methodological principles that are not susceptible to falsification. Empirical anomalies are to be dealt with by means of alterations in a ‘protective belt’ of auxiliary assumptions.

In my view, as I argued before (in item in this blog), something is to be accepted as ‘warranted’ when it ‘works’, logically, empirically and practically. I propose that this does not necessarily require fit in some existing language game, and hence can escape conventionalism in that sense. I grant that it does presuppose some agreement on criteria concerning logic, empirical testing, and practical success across language games. There is no rock bottom for truth beyond any and all perspectives, but we may not stand empty handed in trying to step out of a language game, or a research programme, into a wider, more generic one. I am not claiming that this is always possible, and that there is some ultimate, authoritative language game that can decide universal legitimacy.

There is overlap of at least some terms, principles, assumptions, perspectives, between language games, even if they are in different languages (English and French, say). If terms are shared, they are not likely to have identical meaning, since meanings depend on relations between terms in the game, but, I propose, they are likely to have some family resemblance if they are used across games.

To be specific, let me expand a bit on a project for a radical transformation of economic science, which I mentioned in the preceding item in this blog. That is based on radically different perspectives on human conduct, ethics, scientific conduct, and the notion of uncertainty. Many economists reject this out of hand. However, I do employ some established concepts from economics, (such as ‘transaction costs’), though twisting and extending them a bit, and I refer to phenomena that economists might acknowledge (though they look differently on their relevance for theory). My ambition is to show that alternative theory

explains certain facts better if only one accepts them as relevant. That ambition may fail, but it is not necessarily hopeless.

Can a pragmatist offer rigorous arguments? Richard Rorty said he/she cannot because rigor requires unshakeable foundations, which the pragmatist does not accept. Again I disagree. He confused rigor with certainty. One can have rigorous arguments on uncertain foundations. Take mathematics. It is rigorous on the basis of uncertain, merely assumed axioms. The grounds for rigor may shift, but they are still there for some time or in some area. Euclidean geometry was supplemented by other geometries. It applies on a plane but not on a sphere.

I agree (with Rorty) that rigorous argument requires a shared language game, terms with shared meanings, shared assumptions, shared grammar or method (rules of the game), and shared explanatory goals.

Compare this with Thomas Kuhn's notion of a 'paradigm shift' involved in breaking the rules of a game, stepping out of the game, resulting in 'incommensurability', an impossibility of rigorous argumentation between games.

But, as I suggested, one may still have the benefit of a wider, roomier, more general game. A different ball game is still a ball game. Parts of argumentation may show a family resemblance between language games. I do think that discussion between language games involves differences of meaning and intention, and therefore is always imperfect tinkering, and often does fail. Moving between games is more like literary narrative than like rigorous scientific discourse. That may be rejected as unscientific, and then debate is indeed hopeless.

What games are there in philosophy? I take this question also from Richard Rorty. One game is to take philosophy as 'transcendental', reflecting on the conditions under which some theory or practice (concerning truth, reality, or morality) is possible. But what are the conditions for such conditions to be possible? It yields an infinite regress of conditions for conditions. The underlying intuition is that there are, must be, independent, fixed principles to build on.

Another game, going against that intuition, is that of anti-essentialism, anti-foundationalism, as in pragmatism. Think of philosophers Peirce, Dewey, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Quine, Derrida, and Rorty.

Are these two games incommensurable, with no recourse to sensible debate? One may think of the supposed rift between analytic and continental philosophy. However, they still have things in common, such as the themes of knowledge and morality, even if they differ fundamentally in their views on them. Disagreeing on fundamentals, they may still compare implications for science, politics, economics, literature, They may even agree that in some cases the opposition seems to be making sense. And indeed, some bridging between analytic and continental philosophy does seem to be taking place.

275. Science and politics: how different are they?

published 8-8-2016

If there is no ultimate, universal, fixed ground for any science, as argued in preceding items in this blog, does this mean that there is no great difference between science and politics?

Richard Rorty claimed that: ‘ .. no interesting epistemological differences between the aims and procedures of scientists and that of politics’^{xvi}.

I disagree. To make a long story short, I would say that the procedure of science is to argue rigorously inside some language game, while in politics, in a democracy at least, the aim is to achieve some agreement across a variety of language games, and that cannot be rigorous and scientific. Ambiguity and shift of meaning is part of the game. It is more a matter of practical wisdom than of analytical rigor.

Hence the frequent failure of attempts to make policy making scientific, as happened in the delegation of much economic policy to economic scientists, for example.

I connect this difference to that made by Pascal between the ‘ spirit of geometry’ and the ‘spirit of finesse’^{xvii}. As he formulated it: the spirit of geometry is difficult, at first, since one has to switch one’s regard away from the complexity, the richness and variability of the world we are in, in the turn of abstraction. But then it becomes easy, to argue rigorously, in step with the march of logic or math. The spirit of finesse, by contrast, is easy, at first, because one keeps looking at the world in all its complexity, but then it becomes difficult to argue without error while maintaining that complexity.

In contrast with Descartes, I do not think that the spirit of geometry has access to rock-bottom foundations of truth in the form of self-evident ‘distinct ideas’. I do think it helps to clarify arguments and check their consistency.

Take economics. It uses mathematics but the virtue of that, in my view, is not that it yields workable models, but that it allows one to detect errors of argument. But then, to work in application to policy making one needs to revert to the spirit of finesse.

Politics, more like literature than like science, needs to allow for differences and for shifts in perspective, meanings, assumptions, aims, in what people variously think, value and want.

If pragmatism means ‘anything goes that works’, then whether and how it is supposed to work is very different between science and politics.

In science, to work is to be consistent with established theoretical and methodological assumptions, and with what are accepted as facts.

In politics, to work, in a democracy, is to be feasible in the field of political forces and to appeal to a sufficient part of the electorate. Whether it is logically and factually coherent is of secondary importance, alas. In politics this may work, not in science. However, this is no reason not to try to make arguments for policy as consistent and informed as possible.

An authoritarian regime may impose a single language game, with aims, conduct, meanings and values settled centrally, and enforced on all. That is what makes it totalitarian. Some people love it.

It does not thereby become like science. In contrast with science it is not aimed at truth seeking and openness of conduct given established method, but at conformance.

As before, here I make use of the work of Richard Rorty, in this case his discussion of Habermas, Lyotard, and Foucault.^{xviii}

I greatly appreciate Habermas' commitment, against the tides of relativism, to maintain the Enlightenment ideal of rational criticism. He did this from the perspective of 'communicative action' as a basis for reaching social consensus. This was an improvement on the ideal of individual rationality from the Enlightenment in turning it into social rationality.

In this blog (item 270) I also, in the line of Habermas, deplored what I called the present unravelling of rationality. And like Habermas I take a discursive view of knowledge and ethics. Indeed, many years ago I was inspired to this by Habermas's work, among others.^{xix} However, I disagree with the claims and assumptions that Habermas makes.

I pick up Rorty's account of a clash of views between Habermas and Lyotard. To make a long story short, I summarize the debate as follows.

Habermas proposed the 'narrative' of communicative action, where in discourse people should and could achieve consensus, in debates of social criticism that are 'herrschaftsfrei', without imposition of power.

Inspired by the horrors caused by 'great narratives' such as those of the French Revolution, Nazism, and communism, Lyotard claimed that we should suspect and renounce such 'grand narratives.'

Habermas claimed that if you do that you lose standards for judgement, in democratic, bourgeois values, and take out rationality and the basis for the liberal society that has served us well.

So, who is right?

At this point I have two questions to Lyotard:

- What is the narrative from which to suspect narratives?
- How suspicious is that one?

And here is my view:

1. You need to assume something, take it for granted, as a basis for judging anything. Like it or not, this is your narrative.
2. Past narratives have indeed failed, run into perversions and disasters.
3. It is rational to allow for the possibility that your present best narrative will turn out to fail. It is not rational to disregard that. Try to avoid the illusion of a-historical legitimation.

Does this now mean that whatever narrative you now have is relativist, context-dependent?

You hold a narrative as you hold an hypothesis in science: for as long as it 'works', while keeping an open eye for its limits and failures. You try to apply it as widely as you can, as purportedly universal, until you run into its failures. That requires that you keep an open

mind, as much as you can, to objections that arise from novel contexts, novel perspectives. In other words, the narrative is universal in its ambition, context-dependent in its revision.

That, I propose, entails the rationality of communicative action and rationality that Habermas pleads for, but cannot and need not be presented as a claim of truth outside of time, of history.

By the way, it is not just by critical communication, but also by observing how narratives of others fare in implementation.

In an earlier criticism of Habermas in this blog (item 117), I argued that discourse without power play is an illusion. People always exert power and counter-power, to some extent and in some fashion. And remember that power can also be positive, in creating new options and more room for others to choose.

So in conclusion, the following:

- Habermas is right in arguing the need for a guiding narrative, and in taking the perspective of communicative action, but mistaken in claiming its unhistorical, indubitable legitimation, and in assuming communication without power play.
- Lyotard is right in being suspicious of grand narratives, but not in rejecting all narrative. Some narrative is needed as something to go on, even if temporarily and subject to ongoing communicative interaction.

I think this comes close to Rorty's view.

To reject all narratives is as silly as rejecting all theory and science. To accept narratives as absolute and inviolable is as silly as accepting that for any theory.

277. In search of a supergame

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In foregoing items in this blog I used the notion of a 'language game'. How are such games related to each other? I talked of 'stepping from a language game into a wider one'. Baseball and soccer are games in wider class of ball games. This suggests a hierarchy of games, which may suggest some game 'at the top', which all games obey. I do think there are nested games, but I do not think there is a hierarchy of all games, governed by some supergame at the top.

Some crucial language games are those concerning justice and ethics. They are rivals. One, the dominant one in western societies, is liberal individualism, with its utility ethics, looking only at outcomes of actions, effected in markets. An older one is Aristotelian virtue ethics and corresponding practical wisdom, aimed at a notion of 'the good life' in the social context of a specific community ('polis'). Another is theological, based on some moral sense granted by God (Augustine, Hutcheson). Yet another one is based on rationally adopted duties that apply universally, regardless of interests (Kant).

Can these rival views be reconciled, compared or judged from the perspective of some wider, encompassing language game? Or are there, at best, some family resemblances?

In this blog I have adopted the notion of 'warranted assertibility', rather than 'truth', and the warrant depends on the perspective. I have employed a pragmatic perspective by which ideas and actions are evaluated on the basis of the extent that they 'work', logically, empirically,

and practically. Does this offer the basis for evaluating rival views of justice and ethics? Those will generally share a respect for some form of logic. Empirical performance depends on facts, but those are interpretations based on conceptualizations connected to the perspective one holds. Practical performance in action depends on evaluation criteria that are also part of the adopted perspective: producing utility, conducive to the good life, obedience to God.

So, while they do share elements, in some family resemblance, they differ on fundamental points. In contrast with all others, liberalism is not oriented towards any notion of the good life. It claims to be neutral with regard to morality and goodness, leaving those up to individuals to choose for themselves. Citizens have preferences from whatever conception of the good life that they may have, and markets serve to allow them to pursue those preferences. So, goodness is not only lacking as a guide, it is ruled out of consideration.

Theological and Aristotelian perspectives differ fundamentally in adopting or not faith in a providential God. In Aristotelian ethics practical reason guides action, while according to David Hume 'reason is the slave of the passions'.

If there is no overarching supergame, is there still any way in which rival views can rationally criticize each other, or are they irredeemably 'incommensurable'?

Alasdair MacIntyre develops the following argument.^{xx} First of all it is important to realize that perspectives of justice are historical, as traditions that form and change in specific social settings and cultures. While in a static view differences between perspectives are irreconcilable, without any 'master game' to adjudicate between them, in a dynamic view of how they develop there may be a way for them to learn from each other.

Traditions adapt in time as experience accrues and conditions change, though they maintain some 'core' of fundamental principles. Can they also mutate into some hybrid, some body of 'novel combinations', by some dialectical process of conflicts and their resolution? That would require some beginnings of a common language.

One may try to understand a rival perspective and then look critically from that perspective at comparative performance. Does the rival succeed where one's own view fails, perhaps? This requires tolerance for ambiguity, paradox and discrepancies of meaning, trying out things even if they seem nonsensical in one's own view. From a pragmatic perspective such attempt would require immersion in the foreign culture, in its practices and its language, preferably in the form of a common project with the 'natives'. Mutual dependence in trying to succeed with the project provides an incentive for sharing. Sharing successes and failures one may gather insight in the relative merits of the different perspectives.

This fits well with the dialectical 'cycle of discovery' that I presented in this blog (items 31, 138). There, the basic logic is as follows. Try to implement your existing view in a novel, foreign context, to discover where it fails while a local practice succeeds. Next, make hybrids from elements from one's own and from the other's context and experiment with them. This mixing of apparent incommensurables will yield anomalies of meanings that do not fit together. Nevertheless the hybrid yields a basis for exploring the potential of novel elements. That may lead to an 'accommodation' to a novel, more coherent synthesis. But the outcome is not a universal, fixed supergame, and will itself be replaced in due course. A paralympic game, you might say. Imperfection on the move.

Could such a procedure perhaps lead to a novel synthesis of, say, liberal and Aristotelian justice and ethics? That is what I have tried to do in a proposal for radical change in economic theory.^{xxi}

278. Talking to the natives

published 27-8-2016

How can one talk to the natives? How to understand people who are native to a different culture or tradition, rooted in a different language game concerning life, humanity, reason, society, or justice?

Here I return to the theory of language and meaning that I used in this blog. There, I employ the notions of *reference* and *sense*, but with a twist. In reference one intends to refer with words to some thing or some class of objects. I rendered the notion of sense as the way in which one arrives at reference, at identifying something as an individual or as belonging to a class.

An underlying problem is that of realism. We aim to refer to things in the world but we cannot know them as they are in themselves. Our concepts are constructions that are realistic only in the sense that they arise from success experienced in coping with the world. Thus, people coping in different conditions conceptualize the world differently.

Reference is social and sense is individual. We achieve common reference from sharing practices, mutually correcting language use, in a shared language game. Sense consists in features one associates with things, collected from experience along one's individual life trajectory. So, while reference is largely shared, underlying sense varies between people even within a community.

Commonality of meaning, in shared reference and overlapping sense, decreases with differences between traditions and the contexts of their development. This can yield incommensurability: reference that mutually does not make sense.

Now I bring in another part of this theory of language. Concepts arise in generalization from individual cases and abstraction from specific contexts. In the process, they lose specificity, richness of detail. To apply the concept, richness of specific context needs to be added again. Then meanings move from the general to the specific in connections between words in the structures of sentences in action contexts. Meaning of the parts depends on the meaning of the whole. Meanings are not the same between different contexts. Intersubjectivity, in common reference, is preserved when contexts of application are shared. Nothing works better for mutual understanding than shared projects.

Even within a culture, meanings shift in their application, moving from one context to another. In this blog I analysed that in terms of the 'hermeneutic circle' (in items), and I will not repeat that here. I have indicated poetry as the most salient case of upsetting, cutting adrift, twisting or shifting established reference in surprising constructions of sense.

Given all this, then, how can one talk with a native from a different tradition?

Read what he/she says as you would read a poem. If you do not grasp intended reference ('what is he talking about'), delve for underlying sense: what connotations does it carry along? And see how that moves with context. See how the hermeneutic wheel turns there, in moving from context to context.

As I indicated in the preceding item in this blog, that is greatly helped by participating in practices in the native context. There, what is tacit or hidden in sense is likely to shine through.

In trying to embed your own concepts, abstractions, in local context, witness how they fail to fit, and glimpse how native concepts work better, arising from local contexts.

Then, in trying to build up communication, use metaphor that fits local practice, trying to explain one's concepts in terms of those of the native.

Be careful with judging the native before you have done all this.

ⁱ In an interview on 'Truth and power' in 1976, reprinted in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, volume 3, Power, The New Press, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Michel Trebitsch & Marie-Chistine Granjon (eds.), *Pour une histoire comparée des intellectuels*, Editions Complexe, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Also from Trebitsch & Granjon

^{iv} Jean-Paul Sartre, *Plaidoyer pour les intellectuels*, a lecture given in Tokio in 1965.

^v In a lecture at the College de France on 10th January 1979.

^{vi} e.g. Richard Rorty in his *Essays on Heidegger and others*.

^{vii} I have not checked with the literature on Hegel whether this has perhaps already been said and is warranted.

^{viii} 'Continental' is a misnomer, since American pragmatist philosophy is also non-analytic.

^{ix} As argued by Wittgenstein.

^x <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihVcrnFag1s>

^{xi} A little later, the IMF went along with the logic of cancelling part of the debt. As an independent agency, they did not need to cater to the prejudices and emotions of an electorate.

^{xii} The WRR: Scientific Council for Government Policy.

^{xiii} In his theorem of the 'impossibility of majority voting': the impossibility to aggregate individual preferences into a well-behaved collective preference ordering.

^{xiv} Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge U. Press, 1991, p. 147.

^{xv} E.g. by Richard Rorty, in an essay on Derrida, in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge U. Press, 1991, p. 119

^{xvi} Richard Rorty, 1991, *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge University Press, p. 172.

^{xvii} In his *Pensées*.

^{xviii} Richard Rorty, 'Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity', in *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge U. Press, 1991.

^{xix} Like Habermas, I was inspired by the work of Jean Piaget.

^{xx} Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose justice? Whose rationality?*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

^{xxi} Bart Nooteboom, *How markets work and fail, and what to make of them*, Edward Elgar, 2014, paperback 2015.