# Puzzles in philosophy

by Bart Nooteboom

## 1.What philosophy? published 25-7-2012

Literally (in ancient Greek) philosophy means ‘love of wisdom’. That suggests that philosophy is about how to live, and indeed that was so with the ancient Greeks, but later branches of philosophy turned to abstractions and formal analysis of concepts that drifted away from life. There was opposition to that, and recently there has been a revival of the philosophy of life, and that is where my blog belongs. I will not ignore the more formal analytical philosophy but will use it where useful, but without getting too technical. I appreciate clarity and I think that philosophers should be as clear as it is possible. But it is not always possible. Ambiguity is not only unavoidable but also salutary. Without ambiguity no change of meaning could take place, no shift or novelty of concepts, and that is what interests me most of all.

This blog is aimed at a reasonably intellectual but wide audience. I will connect philosophical issues with phenomena in life and society. In the view of some philosophers it is not the task of philosophy to solve problems or even answer questions, and is only a matter of rephrasing questions. And indeed, a number of questions return again and again without receiving a final, conclusive answer. Yet in my view one should try to connect philosophy with experience. For example, when discussing the relation between self and other, between individual and collective conduct, I will look at the banking crisis. When discussing justice I will look at debates on immigration. When discussing the possibility of altruism next to egoism I will consider its viability in the economy, in markets.

In the view of some philosophers philosophy and science are of different orders and should be kept apart. I disagree. As science moves along, it tends to take over issues from philosophy, but old philosophical questions remain and many of them have not been resolved. Philosophy starts where science ends, trying to tackle questions that science cannot answer yet and perhaps never will. Foundations of science are often philosophical, and scientists do well to consider them. Philosophers should build on science where they can, and when what they say is in contradiction with science they should reconsider. In issues of knowledge, for example, and the question whether free will exists, one can make use of recent insights from brain science and social psychology. Philosophy and science are still of different orders but that does not mean that there are no connections.

## 5. Free will? published 27-7-2012

There is no free will, says brain science. ‘We are our brain’. Our brains behind our backs concoct our choices. Afterwards we contrive reasons to rationalize our conduct and we believe in them because we are not conscious of the processes that in fact determine our choices. The philosopher Nietzsche, and before him Schopenhauer, and before him Spinoza, already said that free will is an illusion. Nietzsche said: the ship follows the stream, not the steering by the captain. If this is true, what remains of responsibility for our actions? What sense remains of reward and punishment?

In the debate there is confusion that can easily be cleared up, as follows. Next to unconscious impulse, conscious thought does have an effect on our actions even if we do not have full free will. One can have influence without being in control. The famous experiment in brain research that triggered the present debate showed that actions preceded awareness of them, and this was taken as the proof of the absence of free will. However, the experiment does not prove that conscious thought has no causal effect. An unconscious impulse to action may previously have been fed by conscious thought, and conscious thought may after the impulse affect its execution. We can consciously execute unconscious motives.

There is extensive experimental evidence in social psychology. While actions may be triggered unconsciously they are often preceded by conscious preparation, in mental simulation of the actions and possible repercussions, including reward and punishment, in anticipation of possible regret, and in reflection on outcomes from past conduct. We consciously analyze the pro's and cons of an option, explore scenario's of what might happen if …., discuss it with others, and then leave it up to 'intuition' to form a decision. In buying a house we do engage in rational pro's and cons of location, state of repair, price, sewage, parking, etc., and then 'after a good night's sleep' leave it up to 'how it feels'. Though conscious deliberation does not clinch the choice, it does affect it. Reward and punishment also affect the development of unconscious impulses for future actions.

It has also been argued that the prime importance of conscious thought is of a social and cultural nature, in the use of language in communication. Unconscious thought can hardly be expressed, and conscious thought is needed for handling series of words in sentences, a chain of logical argument, and a chain of causes and effects.

In sum: We are not in control but we do have influence on the will

## 7. Geometry and finesse

published 25-7-2012

The 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal made a distinction (in his Pensées) between the 'spirit of geometry' and the 'spirit of finesse'. Geometry (mathematics) is hard, in the first approach, because there, as Pascal formulates it, in the twist of abstraction one must turn one's head away from the world before us in all its complexity and variability. But then it becomes easy because in rigorous deduction one can march straight to clear and indubitable conclusions. Finesse, by contrast, is easy, at first, because one can hold one's gaze on the world as it lies before to us. But then it becomes difficult to argue without error while maintaining full complexity and variability. According to Pascal both have their value but they cannot be mixed, like water and oil. We must shuttle to and fro between them. There often is division of labour: some are better in the one and others in the other. We find it in the difference between exact science and humanities. The English author C.P. Snow talked about ‘the two cultures’.

Pascal himself was at home in both: he was a mathematical genius but also a philosopher. While philosophy was usually conducted with finesse, Spinoza tried, in his Ethics, to arrest it in the spirit of geometry, with his use of axioms and deduction of theorems ‘in geometrical fashion’. The spirit of geometry is connected to the bent towards immutable, universal ideas. It is Platonic, while the finesse is more Aristotelian. The distinction is related to the distinction that Aristotle made between certain, provable and deductive knowledge (episteme) and practical wisdom or prudence (phronesis). The second concerns ethics and human conduct, and cannot be caught in the regimentation of rigorous deduction and universal laws.

While geometry and finesse cannot be mixed, they can be combined, in the return, again and again, from the abstract and general to the concrete and the individual. Finesse need not be obscure. In the finesse of philosophy one can try to select each word judiciously and exactly and fit it into the right place. And if I had the opportunity of finding a new math that does justice to finesse I would not hesitate a minute and grab it. But it would not be math as we know it.

History, law and the humanities generally require finesse and dodge geometry. Aristotle recognized that one cannot in all fields demand the same degree of precision, and one should in every case that arises take into account the matter and purpose at hand, and the degree of precision that fits the conditions. Economists have become hooked on geometry and have in large numbers become blind to finesse, removing themselves from practical wisdom. Bankers, by contrast, had the finesse to circumvent the economic order.

## 16. The problem of universals

published 9-8-2012

The ‘problem of universals’ is ancient, and it is still with us. It concerns the status, regarding existence, nature and origin, of a general idea or category (the *universal*) that embraces a number of individual cases that ‘belong to the category’. For example ‘the horse’ or ‘the human being’. Does the universal, as with Plato, have an independent existence, in a separate immaterial world? In Plato’s view individuals are weak images or shadows of it. Recall his metaphor of the cave. People only see shadows on the wall of the cave, of ‘real’ entities behind them that are lit from a fire outside the cave. Or does the universal, as with Aristotle, exist only as thought in the human mind, and does it refer to some essence more or less shared by the individuals, construed by abstraction from the individuals, by eliminating all other features? If universals exist only in the mind, are they then unreal, purely subjective? How then could science exist, since that rests upon universals? With Aristotle the idea was that they are not without realism since they are derived from observations by abstraction.

Aristotle’s view sounds much more reasonable than that of Plato, yet I do not go along with Aristotle either. An essence in which all individuals take part would entail that in the abstraction the individual is lost. With Plato, compared to the universal individuals do not matter. With Aristotle, all corresponding individuals share an essence, and can in that aspect be seen as interchangeable.

My idea on universals goes back to the 14th century philosopher William of Ockham and is called *nominalism*. The universal refers to a resemblance, not some shared thing. If things resemble each other in some feature, do they have that feature in the same way, with the same quality or meaning, with only a difference in quantity? That would mean that in that feature they are interchangeable. And there again is the moral implication of indifference, literally and figuratively, concerning the individual, and subordination of the individual to the universal. The individual is not relevant as a unique carrier and a complex whole but only insofar as it is an exemplar of a reproducible feature (worker, consumer, voter, colleague, nationality, race, …). To avoid this, an individual should have any feature in its own way, in a unique configuration with other features that affects the quality of each.

How universalism can lead to totalitarian thought emerges sharply in Rousseau's idea of the *general* will, as of a collective subject. The nightmare of his thought is that one is only really free when one completely subjugates oneself to that general will, which is supposed never to be in conflict with what one really wants (or should want). If one wants something and it turns out that the collective wants something else one must admit that what one wanted was a mistake. In this way freedom is enforced. The echo of that sounded in Stalinism.

## 17. Universalism

published 9-8-2012

Communism was universalist, but so is neoliberal market ideology. Friedrich Hayek, one of the inspirators of neo-liberalism, pointed out the importance of the spread of diverse, local knowledge and ideas, which can never be matched by any system of central planning. The paradox now is that this insight into the role of diversity is transformed into a universal notion of markets, without regard to diversity according to industry, organization, technology, culture, religion, institutions, history, education, infrastructure, climate, geography, knowledge, etc. The universalism of markets implies non-intervention, *laisser faire.* And that gives ample room for smart people to exploit the imperfections of markets. The myth of markets has led to blindness to the perversities of capitalism and an aversion to intervention until it was forced by an accumulation of excesses.

The spread of market processes to public services, such as transportation, education, and health care, has led, not to the proclaimed simplification of society, but on the contrary to an increasingly complex system with a large diversity of controls to govern the market imperfections to which one was blind. And these increasingly complex controls are in their turn understood in universalistic terms.

In organizations people are confronted with a managerial drive towards abstraction and the sway of universal rules, in a compulsion towards control that under the cover of 'rationalisation' forms a plague for professional work. From a legitimate feeling of responsibility or 'accountability' towards shareholders and citizens, managers in business and public services impose more and more controls. Yet is has been known for a long time, in the relevant literature, that professional practice is too rich, too diverse and too variable, from one application to another, from one patient to the other, one pupil to the other, from one bridge to be built to the other, etc., to be identical, so that room must be left for improvisation and professional discretion of practitioners. This is proven in the condition that when workers shift to exact conformance to the rules (*work to rule*) this is a form of sabotage.

As indicated in an earlier piece, Aristotle already recognized that human activity often cannot be fully consistent, because practical conduct has to deal with ever changing conditions. With more regulation and regimentation of work less appeal is made to intrinsic motivation in work, in professional ethics and pride and the challenge to mend errors from one's own sense of responsibility. If people are told precisely and fully what to do they unlearn thinking for themselves what it is good to do.

Because of the increasing complexity of systems of control their design is increasingly entrusted to specialists. We are getting ensnared in vicious circles where managers lose authority because they no longer have control over the controls that obstruct professional work. Professional workers lose authority because they can no longer offer professional quality, and are no longer motivated to do so, and this contributes to a further strengthening of external control mechanisms.

## 18. Change

published 10-8-2012

Change, of ideas, concepts, knowledge, beliefs, values, rules, and so on, is perhaps the most blatantly obvious part of experience. But for many philosophers it was an insoluble enigma. It was denied for two reasons. First, acceptance of change would mean a denial of immutable absolutes, and that would mean a fall back into the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of human earthly life. That is not an argument but an emotion. An argument was the following. Either novelty is really new and does not arise from what already exists (*discontinuity*), and then it arises out of nothing, which is not credible, or it arises from what already exists (*continuity*), but then it is not really new. So, change is illusory, that was the preposterous conclusion.

The argument against novelty in continuity is silly. There can be genuine novelty arising from what existed before. The paragon example is evolution. New species are genuinely new forms of life yet they arise from previously existing gene pools, by mutation and recombinations of genes together with evolutionary selection of their carriers.

How about knowledge? How can new ideas arise out of old ones? In a later piece on invention, in a series of pieces on knowledge and truth, I will show how that might work.

In language new words arise and meanings of existing ones change. Consider poetry and science. In a later piece on meaning change, in a series of pieces on meaning, I will show how that might work. I will also show how universals may change in the process of their application to individuals. I will also discuss how not only the meaning of a sentence depends on the meanings of the words in it, but also the meanings of words depend on the sentence and its context of expression.

That is a crucial point of logic in view of an earlier discussion, in this blog, of how individuals (here sentences) can have features (here words) that have a quality (here meaning) that is uniquely their own, even though there is also similarity of quality (meaning) with the same features (words) in other individuals (sentences). This point is crucial for preserving the integrity of individuals under the sway of universals.

Not only is it possible to account for change, but inclusion of change helps to resolve persistent philosophical problems that are insuperable from a static perspective, the perspective that denies change. Consider what is perhaps the most fundamental, perennial problem of philosophy: the question whether the world (or our view of it) depends on the mind (*idealism*) or, the other way around, that the mind depends on (is constructed from observation of) the world (*realism*). From a static perspective it cannot be both, but from a dynamic perspective it can. At any moment we perceive the world according to mental categories (*idealism*) but those categories have previously been formed in interaction with the world (*realism*) (and they will keep on changing from experience).

## 28. Realism?

published 26-8-2012

The question still stands: do we know the world as it is? According to the empiricists we know it through elementary ‘sense data’. According to idealists it is all in the mind. I argued that we see and conceptualise the world according to mental categories that we develop in interaction with the world. That effect of the world on our thought yields a form of realism. However, this implies the assumption that the world exists. On what is that based?

We cannot prove that reality exists but we can hardly do other than make the assumption, as a ‘natural belief’, as the 18th century philosopher Hume already said. The philosopher Heidegger also argued that we cannot do other than think in terms of being, of a world that exists. It would be difficult to make sense of our life and the world without it. If the world does not exist, how could we have developed ideas to survive in it? But this argument is circular, assuming a world to survive in.

To believe in evolution we need to believe in a reality that forms a selection environment. Let us assume that this reality indeed consists of objects in space and time, things, animals and people that act. Especially those are salient for functioning and survival in the world. We would not have survived if we hadn’t formed a reasonably adequate mental representation and understanding of them. And that implies that we have an inclination to categorize in such terms of time and place, form, volume, matter, mass, place and movement. Those were of predominant importance to find food, hunt prey, and escape from the sabre-toothed tiger.

As Gilbert Ryle indicated in 1949, ‘intelligence’ does not refer to some psychic object, but to a constellation of capabilities, inclinations and practices. All this does not prove that reality is indeed as postulated, but it does form a coherent argument.

That view of reality, plus evolutionary theory, and an explanation of our survival and the consequences for our thought then form a coherent whole. That makes the assumption of external reality a warranted belief, even though we cannot prove it. Admittedly, it is like a house of cards: different elements supporting each other. Not strong perhaps, but still better than a single card.

## 29. Object bias

published 26-8-2012

In their book *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff and Johnson argued, in 1980, that apparently self-evident categories, even in what appears to be direct observation, are in fact metaphors rather than ‘literal descriptions’. In fact, literal description does not exist. An apparently literal description is always already a conceptualisation. We grasp our actions in the physical world, in which we have learned to survive, to construct meanings of abstract categories. ‘Up’, ‘upwards’ and ‘rising’ according to Lakoff and Johnson indicate something good, and ‘downwards’ and ‘falling’ something bad because when we are alive and well we stand up while we are prostrate when ill or sick.

The basis for far-reaching metaphorization lies in ‘primary metaphors’ that build on proprioception (groping, grasping) and bodily survival. Think of our own movement in the world, the speed and direction of the sabre-toothed tiger, the shelter of a roof, a spear and its trajectory, the whereabouts of a lost child, the carrying of a burden. We would not have successfully evolved if we hadn’t been reasonably accurate with such categories. This yields a certain basic conceptualisation in our thought and language, in terms of things, including actors, their movement in time and space, distinction between subject and object, and their action, including causal action.

This is reflected in Chomsky’s *universal grammar*, where the basic elements of sentences are *noun phrases* and *verb phrases*. The basis for thought lies in things (including living things) that ‘do’ something. Those ‘things’ form the paradigmatic nouns and the ‘doing something’ forms the paradigmatic verb.

The object bias would suggest that we think in terms of distinct, discrete entities that appear in sequence in time, and that it does not come easily to us to see entities connected in a continuum, or in a field of force, or in an integrated process of *duration*, in which moments are not experienced as discrete but as integrated in a flow, as Henri Bergson proposed. We experience it but are unable to conceptualise it.

When we move a word from one sentence to another we are inclined to think that its meaning remains the same, as if we move a chair from one room to another, while in fact the meaning shifts. As if the legs drop off the chair or it changes colour. We think of communication as the transfer of meaning-things across a communication 'channel', while in fact in expression and interpretation meanings are transformed.

In sum, my thesis is that in our conceptualisations we have an *object bias* and an *actor bias*, a difficult to dodge inclination to see everything, including abstract, immaterial things as objects that have a location, move or do something. The grammatical notions of 'subject' and 'object' still carry intuitions of causal action while mostly there is no question of that. How does that conceptualisation do under current conditions, where abstractions, such as happiness, meaning, truth, morality, not to speak of democracy, identity, and so on, may now be crucial for human survival?

## 106. Relativism

published 12-8-2013

The philosopher Jacques Derrida initiated the notion of *deconstruction.* Here, constructions of language, in science or narrative, are analyzed, taken apart, for their possible, possibly hidden, and possibly multiple meanings. A text has no unique, best or final interpretation. There is no single, unambiguous meaning, given in 'what the author really intended'. Authors may themselves admit that what they intended is ambiguous, multiple, paradoxical, or hidden. That arises most of all in poetry. Interpretations depend on the context and on who interprets.

Readers develop their own interpretations, though those are not unrelated to what the author may have intended. This is in line with the theory of language that I proposed in this blog (in items 32-37). There I argued that *reference*, i.e. that what a story is *about,* is identified on the basis of *sense*, the way in which one identifies things on the basis of a repertoire, formed in personal experience, of what one knows and associates with what is talked about. Identification is achieved in combination with the context, which triggers selection from the repertoire of sense. In dialogue, different ways of making sense by different people are put up for discussion. This may lead to convergence or divergence of views. And the discussion will contribute to the development of one's repertoires of sense making. Discussion alters the way one looks at the world.

Some people seem to interpret deconstruction as implying that theory of meaning should drop the notion of *reference*.

This idea has been inspired, in part, by Ferdinand de Saussure, who claimed that meaning is *structural*: derived from the position of a word or expression in a totality of language or discourse. 'A word means what other words don't mean'. Thereby language becomes *self-referential.* I think this is valid and useful, but the idea has run amok in the position, adopted by some *postmodern* philosophers, that 'therefore' language no longer has external reference. I don't see that has to follow. Meanings may shift depending on other meanings, while there remains an intention to refer to something.

I think the abolition of reference is madness because it would abolish the *aboutness* of language. Surely, a central aim of language is to talk about things, and that is what reference means. True, as I showed earlier, language is not *always* reference, or *only* reference, and often constitutes a *speech act* of *illocution*, as in making requests or giving orders, accusations, endearments, etc. But animals have that, in growling, calling, warning, posturing, luring, purring, or barking, while with them reference is in doubt. Dropping reference is to take away what people have more than animals have. It is de-humanizing.

Is all this *relativism*? Yes, in the sense that interpretations depend on the context and on the cognitive make-up of the interpreter, resulting from his/her path of life. But *not* in the sense that any interpretation is as good as any other. There is argument, a comparison or confrontation between differences in sensemaking.

This is closely related to the notion of *warranted assertability* replacing truth in any absolute and universal sense, discussed in item 104. There may be different judgements of purported truths in the same way that there may be different interpretations. Knowledge of the world is an interpretation of it. But some truths and interpretations are more warranted, have better arguments, than others.

## 135. Universals and individuals

published 3-3-2014

Previously in this blog, in items 16 and 17, I criticized universals that are taken as immutable absolutes, applying everywhere and always, and I pleaded for more modest, temporary, mutable universals, with room for deviance of particulars, individuals, in a variety of contexts, which causes universals to shift.

We do need universals. Without them we could not make inferences, in science, in generalizations, in laws or regularities that apply across contexts. It is not clear to me how Eastern philosophies deal with this. How does science fit in Eastern philosophy? There is a strong tendency there to shun ‘conceptual thought’ in favour of intuition or ‘direct perception of reality’. For me, that is not good enough.

To resolve the problem of individuals and mutable universals, we need a theory of how the dialectic between them works, and I don’t see that Eastern philosophy, with its view of ongoing change, with a variety of particulars, provides it, except for the Taoist notion of Yin and Yang, in cyclical processes of production, reproduction and transformation, in opening and closing. I will expand on that in the following item of this blog.

Here, I want to recall my earlier proposal (items 36 and 37) of change according to the *hermeneutic circle.* From specific events in specific contexts, we abstract notions for generalization, shedding context-specific detail. We need this to transfer experience from one context to another. The generalization, when applied in a new context, needs to be enriched with context-specific details. It may fail in the novel context, and then is falsified, and needs to be revised or replaced, tapping from the new context. That is the process of pragmatist experimentation.

Here, use is made of the notions of the *paradigmatic* and the *syntagmatic*. *Paradigms* are the universals, expressed in words, which have a repertoire of possible meanings. In a s*yntagm* paradigms are configured into sentences, where meanings of words are picked out from repertoires of meaning, triggered by the context at hand. Syntagms are modified, in reconfigurations of familiar entities, until sense is seen to be made in the context. When this fails, novel meanings of existing paradigms or tentative novel paradigms may arise. This can be seen as a process of first closing, eliminating detail in the construction of a universal, to step away from context, and then opening up a universal for new content from a new context. A question is whether this may have some relation to the cycle of Yin and Yang, which I will consider in the next item.

Another challenge, somehow related to the above, is to resolve the issue in sociology of conceptualizing the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency. The structure of institutions (macro) that enable and constrain actions is somehow reproduced or transformed by those actions (micro). For example, markets enable agents to engage in supply and demand, but the institutions that enable or constitute markets are modified or broken down by entrepreneurial or political action. Here one can think of laws of property or liability, regulations concerning safety, health and the environment, technical standards, advertising, distribution channels, and deeply seated sentiments, meanings, habits and intuitions). I will return to markets later on in this blog.

## 158. Analytical and continental philosophy published 11-8-2014

There is supposed to be a rift between *analytical* philosophy, with a mostly Anglo-Saxon tradition, and *continental* philosophy, mostly from continental Europe. What is the difference? Bernard Williams said that analytical philosophy was a matter not of substance but of style:

*‘ .. a certain way of going on, which involves argument, distinctions, and, so far as it remembers to try to achieve it and succeeds, moderately plain speech’.* [1]

But continental philosophy, like any philosophy, also entails ‘argument and distinctions’. I admit that often it is difficult to read, obscure, not ‘moderately plain speech’, but that also occurs, though indeed less, in analytical philosophy.

So, if the distinction is to be meaningful, it must lie elsewhere.

First, it has to do with a striving for logic, rigour, parsimony and clarity, in analytical philosophy, while continental philosophy explores and often crosses the boundaries of clarity and logic, venturing into ambiguities, which indeed regularly derails into obscurity and rampant verbosity.

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[1] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*, 2006 [1985], London: Routledge, p. xvi.

Second, related to this, analytical philosophy tends to separate intellectual, analytical activity from practical judgement, and takes pride in conducting only the first.

For example, *Semantics*, theory of meaning and truth, is seen as separable from, and prior to, *pragmatics*, practical language use. Discussion about what goodness is, in meta-ethics, is separable from, and prior to, considering what is good, in ethics.

Continental philosophy, but also American pragmatism, turn it around: practical judgement feeds (or should feed) intellect, practice feeds theory, and experience feeds understanding. While it is the job of theory to guide practice, it cannot give closure in regulating it. It gives partial and temporary guidelines, not universal, fixed rules. Pragmatics dominates semantics, and ethical judgement dominates meta-ethics.

Continental philosophy's ventures beyond limits of meaning, into ambiguity, issue not from neglect but from conviction, steps deemed necessary. Logic and rigour have their limits and it is a task of philosophy to explore them. Exploration of limits, of knowledge and meaning, in 'transcendental' philosophy, is a goal of much philosophy. Heidegger is a paragon of such style and effort, but not necessarily the most attractive one.

Third, the term 'analytical' indicates that 'proper' thought engages in trying to understand wholes by taking them apart into their components, and processes or phenomena by reducing them to one or few basic principles. It is *reductionist*. Argument has become synonymous with analysis.

Continental philosophy, by contrast, is *holistic.* The meanings of parts depend on the meaning of the whole, and processes or phenomena can be irreducibly complex and variable. Truth is warranted assertability, and ethics is debatable, depending on context and culture.

Now, can one combine elements from analytical and continental philosophy?

One can do one's best to be clear about complexity and ambiguity. One can alternate between analysis and practical judgement. One can combine the notions of the whole being a function of parts with that of parts being a function of the whole. The hermeneutic circle, discussed in item 36 of this blog, does that. The notions of 'sense' and 'reference', taken from analytical (Fregean) philosophy, help understand the hermeneutic circle.

Wittgenstein is an example. Often seen as an analytical philosopher, in fact he played a crucial role in continental philosophy, to the chagrin of his teacher Bertrand Russell, with ideas comparable to those of Heidegger, as I will discuss in following items in this blog.

# 184. Unity in variety published 8-2-2015

*Here I start a series on 'the whole and the parts', on how a composition depends on the components and components on the composition, and how this affects measurability, control and change, and can produce 'system tragedy'.*

Development, creation, and innovation, in nature, language, science, art, and politics, require variety, with individuals escaping from the unity of the universal, and thereby, when successful, contributing to its shift.

Evolution is driven by the generation of variety (in biology: mutations, crossover of chromosomes).

We need a combination of unity and diversity, which is an ancient theme. Isaiah Berlin made a distinction between *unifiers* and *multipliers*. Learning and innovation proceed by an alternation of integration and disintegration. We need both. This appeared in item 31 of this blog, where I presented a theory of invention.

Innovation is often collaborative because innovation feeds upon variety in order to achieve novel combinations of features in a new product. Different, complementary skills or other resources are required to achieve it.

I give a few examples of unity in diversity.

A form manifests itself in a variety of ways, in nature (a species), science (a scientific *paradigm*), and in art (a style, such as impressionism, surrealism).

Along the canals of Amsterdam we see rows of individual gables, with distinctive arches, angles, flats and curves. Yet they have something in common that is pleasing to the eye. What is it? It is the use of the golden ratio[i] for the proportions of the height of windows, with the lowest window the highest, the next window 0.618 of that height, and so on upwards. The golden ratio appears also in nature and in mystic symbols (as in the five-pointed star in the flag of Morocco).

In politics, the blessing of a well-working democracy is that it allows for diversity. To complement that, and as a safeguard, we need a constitutional state that unifies, in a guarantee of equality under the law.

Alas, in some countries this is being reversed: democracy becomes unified and legality differentiated. Democracy is being crafted to a populist, nationalistic voice that clamours for homogeneous national identity. The rule of law is being differentiated between inhabitants who are and those are not seen to belong to the nation, which is leading to outright discrimination. This is happening in my own country, the Netherlands, which used to be seen as paragon of justice for all. In the Italy of Berlusconi the diversity of private connections of family, region, profession, religion, etc. trumped the rule of law.

In markets, competition elicits diversity in the form of product differentiation. It is not profitable to compete only on price, with a universal, simple product that is identical for all suppliers. Profit is made by distinguishing products from each other, each for a different segment of the market. Yet the different varieties share a function in their use and a corresponding market, in which to a greater or lesser extent they compete.

In the Netherlands, health insurers compete on price for the basic, minimum standard insurance package, obligatory for all insured, which all insurers are obligated to offer. They make profits on additional, specialized insurance products in opaque packages with many different forms, conditions of availability and tariff structures.

Next to these cases of *simultaneous* unity and diversity, there are also *sequential* forms.

In science, new theory arises from a disarray of old theory and gets consolidated and standardized in a unified new theory, and then moves on to accumulate empirical misfits that fracture theory again, hopefully to produce a new synthesis, which will sooner or later fragment anew.

## 222. Forms of universals

published 21-10-2015

*The theme of universals versus individuals has been pervasive in this blog (see items 16, 17, 118, 129, 135, 129, 184, and 197). Here I will not repeat all that, though I will give the shortest possible summary of it, and I will next expand on it a bit.*

I rejected Platonic absolute ideas, universal and eternal, existing beyond the world of variety and change that we experience.

I argued that universals, in claims of general truth or value, are needed for the sake of generalization from experience, and for interaction between people, but in a more modest form, seldom strictly universal, and subject to shifts, which arise, in particular, from debate from variety of experience, in variety of contexts.

I elaborated on this along the lines of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ (36): a general idea becomes concrete, focused, or individualized, in specific contexts, where it is combined with other ideas, in a unique constellation of meaning, which can shift the general idea, to be abstracted from the context, ready to be applied anew elsewhere (37). That is in line with my story of the ‘cycle of discovery’ (31, 35).

All this is in line with my pragmatist stance: ideas are applied until they run into problems or novel opportunities, and then they shift. Truth is never final and unalterable, but it is to be supported by arguments, in ‘warranted assertibility’. In morality, norms also are not final and unalterable but part of ‘debatable ethics’.

To proceed, what forms of universals might there be? I propose a distinction between attributive, normative and intentional universals.

First attributive universals. They are of the kind: humans are featherless bipeds (the classic one), thinking animals, mortal, use language, strive to manifest themselves (‘conatus essendi’), have an urge to survive, and an urge to be a legitimate member of a social group. Another example of a universal: all chairs have legs.

Here, I propose, the universal is often strict, applying to all singulars. All humans are indeed mortal. However, animals are mortal as well. Apes also are featherless bipeds. Some animals appear to come close to thinking and using language (whales, dolphins, some birds perhaps). The universal is not always strict, allows for exceptions. Psychopaths have no moral sense. There are chairs without legs. And when all individuals do share a feature, they generally don’t have it in an identical way, in a shared essence. As Mari Ruti noted: ‘universalizing is not intrinsically homogenizing’.[ii] Also, things may be grouped together without sharing one single feature, as according to Wittgenstein’s famous notion of ‘family resemblance’. That would apply, for example, to chairs.

Is truth a universal? If truth is indeed to be taken as warranted assertibility, as I propose, then the warrant can be more or less strong, and there may be disagreement about what is an acceptable warrant .

Next, normative universals. Those are seldom strict. Earlier I contested the universality of Kant’s categorical imperative. It is bad to lie, or to kill, but not always. There are things that I would want for myself but would not want to impose upon others, and vice versa. One may tolerate rules that one would not accept for oneself, and that is indeed the essence of democracy. Yet it is difficult to accept the savage butchery and slavery perpetrated by ISIS under any conditions.

To craft an ethic strong enough to resist excesses of inhumanity such as the holocaust, Levinas went overboard in a strictly universal ethic of unconditional surrender to the ‘face of the other’ (see item 61). That ethics appears to take out the self.

Finally, I propose intentional universals. They are intentions towards others in action and understanding. They are seldom strictly universal, and perhaps should never be, as a matter of normative universality. Perhaps one should always remain open to doubt and prepared to discuss one’s own intentions and those of others. For example, consider Levinas’ unconditional awe and surrender to the other. Would one, should one extend that also to one’s torturer?

Here the difference between normative and intentional universality kicks in. We may morally condemn someone while yet achieving some empathy, or at least understanding of the underlying impulse, for even the most extreme behaviour. Condemn and fight the barbarism of ISIS while seeing how it arises, for some at least, from an sincere motive of transcendence, no matter how illusory we might consider it to be.

All this is part, I think, of Aristotelian practical wisdom.

## 234. What is postmodernism? Published 21-12-2015

What ‘postmodernism’ means is contested. ‘Postmodernity’ is our present society. In one sense, postmodernism is a cultural response to that. In art and architecture it means a mixing of styles. It can also mean a focus on appearance rather than fact, the superficial rather than what may lie behind it, opinion rather than argument. Most widely, it entails a loss of old certainties, and of social, spiritual and intellectual order. According to Lyotard, the horrors of totalitarianism in the 20th century have created suspicion of ‘grand narratives’. Postmodernism recoils from absolutes and universals into relativism and particulars.

Here I look at philosophical notions of the subject, identity, rationality, knowledge, truth and meaning.

Postmodernism criticizes, and to some extent reverses modernism. Modernism is born from the thought of Descartes and the Enlightenment. Its core, I propose, is threefold. First, the idea of a Cartesian subject or self, as a spectator viewing the world, the object, from outside, separated from it. Second, the idea that the self is rational and autonomous. Third, that rationality, in knowledge and moral judgement, has a foundation in indubitable, universal and fixed methods and ideas.

Analytical philosophy adds the notion, in its theory of language, of meaning as reference: words refer to things present in reality, and correct reference is the criterion of truth.

Postmodernism, then, is characterized by opposition to these points. There are four main themes. First, the subject, the self, cannot be separated from the object, is part of the world (‘thrown into it’, Heidegger says), constituted by being in that world, and this constitution forms its view of it. The self is socially and culturally constituted, not autonomous. Identity, individual and cultural, is opaque, plural and subject to change. Second, universality, in ethics and knowledge, is rejected in favour of the diverse, singular, individual. Meaning is context-dependent, pluralistic. Third, rationality is discounted, sometimes dwindling to nothing, and free will is limited or absent. Fourth, all metaphysics of substance, objects in reality, fixed truths and identities, is rejected in favour of open-endedness, in ongoing flux.

More or less postmodern philosophers are Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, Rorty, and Toulmin. However, they did not all share all the above characteristics, nor did they accept the term ‘postmodernism’ for their thought.

Some postmodernists are more radical than others. For Derrida there is no knowledge, just texts. For him the ‘presence’ of objects in reference is an illusion. The idea that one can start thought and judgement with a clean slate, without prejudice, bias or interest, is an illusion. Knowledge is not objective. Ideas and expressions hide underlying, unspoken interests and positions or aspirations of power (Nietzsche, Foucault). There is no truth or it is contingent, multiple, and open-ended.

Open-endedness of ideas and truth was a feature already of Montaigne's philosophy, and it connects postmodernism with pragmatism. Words as tools rather than bearers of truth connect with pragmatism and with Wittgenstein.

Attempts are made to unravel unspoken pre-conceptions, to delve underlying logics, forces, motives, powers or conditions of discourse. With Nietzsche this is called 'genealogy', with Foucault 'archaeology', and with Derrida 'deconstruction'.

Words entail conceptualization, interpretation. They are seldom literal descriptions. Language is predominantly metaphorical. According to Nietzsche language consists of mobile metaphors. There is not one single true interpretation, of nature or books, no single truth underlying texts. The meaning of a word depends on that of other words (Saussure), in some context of action, constituting a 'language game' (Wittgenstein). Outside the game meanings are lost or changed. The example is chess. Away from the board a piece of chess loses its meaning.

Postmodernism is justified in its criticism of the Enlightenment, but it goes overboard. It has been accused (e.g. by Zizek) of abolishing the subject, which yields loss of agency.[iii] In the surrender of illusions of certainty and loss of truth, arguments are surrendered to opinion, and responsibility evaporates in irony. Society turns into a shouting match in an arena of exhibition.

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[i] Take two segments of a line, the smaller a and the larger b, which satisfy the condition: a/b = b/(a+b). That is the golden ratio. Solving the equation yields a/b = 0.618

[ii] Mari Ruti, 2015, *Between Levinas and Lacan; Self, other, ethics,* Bloomsbury, p. 68.

[iii] I doubt the validity of this accusation. The agent is indeed in danger of disappearing, in the view that it is constituted culturally, by which individuality might disappear, but on the other hand Postmodernism also emphasizes differentiation, and hence individuality.