Top ten blogs   November 2015

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19. Beyond nihilism: Imperfection on the move   published 10-8-2012

The philosopher Nietzsche dealt a death blow to belief in old absolutes, raising the spectre of nihilism. God is dead, and truth, morality and beauty have become subjective, relative and evanescent.

There is weak nihilism: regretful loss of belief, and strong nihilism: no longer seeing such belief as desirable. Could we not see the loss of old absolutes as a discarding of shackles, an opening up to the flourishing of life? What room is there for life and humanity when we are bound by universal, immutable ideas? Nietzsche turned the issue around in condemning the old beliefs as a form of decadence, suggesting even that genuine nihilism lay in the old absolutes, in their denial of the forces of life. He heralded the coming of an 'overman', who could live beyond nihilism.

There is also a distinction between passive and active nihilism. In the first, there is immobilization, despondency, inability to act, which may end in suicide. Another form of it is withdrawal into the self, or suspension of the self, as in Buddhism. In active nihilism there is an urge to destroy all that is now without sense or aim. An alternative, more positive response, in strong nihilism, is a flight forward, in an attempt at life beyond nihilism, in acceptance of it as a positive opening.

Nietzsche indicated the dilemma that in our criticism of old ideals, including that of truth, we seek that same truth, and thus cannot really step out of it. Nihilism arose from inside: the drive to truth led to the recognition of its limits. To tell the truth, we are unable to quite tell the truth.

Nihilism is a spectre only so long as one thinks that without belief in absolutes there can be no meaningful belief at all. Here, in this blog, I argue that we can escape from the old ideal of certain truth and still seek truth more modestly, in truth as warrantable belief, something that works, for the time being, or in certain conditions, and is imperfect and prone to shift as we stumble on. We seek that makeshift truth because without it we would not survive, and as a result the urge towards it is instinctive. We can act on temporary, imperfect truth on the move, in testing our beliefs, in critical debate.

Key words are imperfection and movement. I plead not for mere acceptance but positive appreciation of imperfection, not just the impossibility but the undesirability of absolutes, and acceptance of change, of ideas, knowledge and morality as provisional but the best we can do now. In change, imperfection can become less imperfect without ever becoming perfect. In that change lies the journey of life. And as Nietzsche indicated, pain, misery, grief, and anguish are part of that life and should be faced rather than hidden in the distraction of false beliefs and hopes. Is there some ultimate goal of that journey, beyond life? Who knows? Probably not. Is it not enough?

68. Trust: what is it?

Here I start a series in which I try to clarify the rich and slippery notion of trust: what is it, what is the basis for it, what are its limits, how does it work? Much is derived from my book Trust: forms, foundations, functions, failures and figures *(Edward Elgar 2002).*

Trust is a psychological state, a disposition that can lead to trusting behaviour.

What can one trust? The subject of trust is the *trustor*, the object is the *trustee*. One can trust things (the car) but it becomes interesting and more difficult when the object has a will of its own. One can trust a person but also an organization (e.g. on the basis of its reputation) or an industry (banking) or an economic system.

To trust one needs trust on all levels. People with good intentions may be caught in larger, countervailing interests. One needs trust in the people, the organization they work for and one has to take into account the pressures of survival on both. Will teaching ethics to bankers eliminate their misconduct? Bankers claim that they would prefer not to misbehave (taking too much risk and hiving it off on society; paying exorbitant bonuses) but can afford to do so only if other banks go along, and since all banks argue like that they lock each other up in their misconduct (in a *prisoners' dilemma*). Thus one will either have to impose a way out of that dilemma or change financial markets to eliminate the incentives for misconduct. Ethical reform may help but does not suffice.

A distinction has been made between confidence and trust. With the first, one has no choice; one cannot regret to have become dependent, it was inevitable. Thus one speaks of confidence in the economy, or God, or the legal system.

Another important distinction is that between trust in competence, the technical ability to act in line with agreements, and trust in intentions, the will and commitment to do so according to the best of one's ability, and not to cheat. Failure in competence requires a different response from failure in intentions.

A preliminary definition of trust may be: one is vulnerable to actions of an other and yet one feels that no great harm will be done. That leaves open many reasons to have trust.

A useful notion is that of reliance, which includes trust and control. The trustor may exert control over the trustee, for example with a contract, or as 'the boss'. Trust goes beyond control, where the trustee is trustworthy on the basis of morality, ethics, friendship or custom or habit.

A narrower, tighter definition of trust then is that one expects no great harm to be done even though the trustee has both the opportunity and the incentive to cheat or to neglect the relationship, because his ethical stance will prevail. However, it is too much to expect the trustee to be loyal even at the cost of his/her own survival. The extent to which the

trustee foregoes advantage at the expense of the trustor depends on his/her moral strength and on pressures of survival.

In sum, trust is a four-place predicate: the trustor (1) trusts the trustee (2) in some respect (3, competence, intentions), under certain conditions (4, pressures).

I will elaborate on these points in upcoming items.

63. Nietzsche and Levinas   published 8-12-2012

At first sight few views are so much opposed as those of Nietzsche in his rejection and Levinas in his radical acceptance of responsibility of the self for the other. At second sight there are also commonalities.

First, both use the perspective of embodied cognition, as I do in this blog. Impulses, perceptions and feelings precede cognition and ethics and form the basis for them. Second, both turn away from God. Third, both accept that God was invented as consolation for human vulnerability, and now we must find another way to deal with inevitable suffering. Fourth, for both the making of sacrifices for others is not a moral duty or limitation of freedom, but arises autonomously from inside, either as an overflow from the fullness of life (Nietzsche), or as a deep-seated feeling of responsibility that precedes the self (Levinas). Fifth, both try to say the unsayable, beyond established categories of thought and language. Sixth, both are suspicious of universals that cause neglect of diverse, individual, unique human beings. Seventh, both try to escape from the limitations of the self (transcendence). Eighth, for both identification between people, in reciprocation that results in a merging and equalization, is both impossible and undesirable. Ninth, both turn away from the *conatus essendi*, the drive to survive and manifest oneself, though in very different ways. Tenth, both (but Levinas more in his earlier than in his later work) take the sensual, feeling, exuberant self as a starting point.

But then begins the big difference. Nietzsche begins with the exuberant self, the child, and thinks he can find transcendence from within the autonomous self, from an internally generated fullness, without regard for claims from others or demands for self-constraint, a self that dissociates itself from the other, and in his philosophy he ends up again with the child. Starting with the self, Levinas veers away to the other and its ethical call on the self. For Nietzsche that is treason to the life forces of the self, in a hypocritical and crippling Christian morality of compassion. For Levinas, however, the ethical call to the other is not an appeal to asceticism, not a denial but an affirmation of the self, in being elected.

According to Nietzsche the self experiences a primitive excitement at the suffering of another, and no one benefits from pity, which only multiplies suffering. For Levinas the suffering of the other is unbearable and brought under the responsibility of the self. For Nietzsche suffering is a condition for transformation of the self by the self. For Levinas suffering is a condition for ethics and an escape from the self by the suffering of the

other. For Nietzsche separation between self and other yields protection of the self in his emergence from himself, for Levinas it opens the self to the other. Thus, at third sight, in spite of the commonalities between Nietzsche and Levinas the difference is as big as it appeared at first sight.

72. Uncertainty and openness   published 3-1-2013

Trust pricks up its ears when expectations are disappointed. What is going on? The problem is that when expectations are disappointed, the cause is often ambiguous. What went wrong? Was there a misunderstanding in expectations? Was there an accident that was none on the trustee's fault and prevented him/her from acting as expected? Was his/her competence less than thought? Did he/she not pay attention; was there lack of commitment? Or was he/she deliberately taking opportunistic advantage at the expense of the trustor? This is the *causal ambiguity of trust*. Often one cannot establish what cause is at work, for lack of information or ability to interpret what happens. Especially the opportunist will claim a mishap for an excuse.

When the trustor is under pressure or lacks self-confidence or is inclined to distrust he/she may jump to the worst conclusion, that of opportunism. If the trustee is in fact reliable, he should therefore when making a mistake or incurring an accident immediately report it, explain what happened, announce his commitment to immediately try to mitigate the problem, and promise that after the crisis he/she will engage in deliberation about how such problems may be prevented in the future. That is trustworthy conduct. In other words, the problem of causal ambiguity yields the need for openness about failures. Secrecy does not pay. The trustor will conclude that the trustee acted opportunistically, because if not, why didn't he/she come clean earlier, and help to solve the problem?

Take the bankers. Many people say that the bankers should have apologized for the financial crisis. But such apology alone is cheap. One should add what I just indicated: clarification of the causes, attempts to redress the problem, and commitment and deliberation for future prevention. Since the bankers did not do any of that all trust in them was destroyed. The conclusion was that they acted deliberately and opportunistically.

The reverse side of this coin is that when something goes wrong the trustor should not jump to the conclusion that the trustee is opportunistic, but should extend the benefit of the doubt to the trustee and let him/her explain. Here empathy also comes in: the trustor should put him/herself in the shoes of the trustee, to try and understand what was going on.

There are further arguments for openness for the sake of trust. Not only should the trustee be open about his/her failures, the trustor should also be open to the trustee about his fears concerning the relationship. That gives the trustee the opportunity to try and reduce the risk involved. Secrecy robs the partner of opportunities to help. Good negotiation is not seeking to yield as little information and advantage as possible, as instinct may

dictate, but to seek out problems on the part of the partner that carry great weight for him/her, and see if one can prevent or mitigate the problems at comparatively low cost. If the partner does the same, then in this give and take both partners will flourish.

88. Wabi-Sabi

published 9-4-2013

In this blog I have pleaded for *imperfection on the move* (see item 19): for a positive appreciation, not just acceptance, of imperfection, the impossibility, even undesirability of absolutes, and acceptance of change, and of the provisional nature of ideas, knowledge and morality. In change, imperfection can become less imperfect without ever becoming perfect. In that change lies the journey of life. And as Nietzsche indicated, pain, misery, grief, and anguish are part of that life and should be faced rather than hidden in the distraction of false beliefs and hopes. Is there some ultimate goal of that journey, beyond life? Who knows? Probably not. But cannot life yet flourish, and isn't that enough?

How does this relate to art? Does art aim to achieve perfection, or can it rejoice also in imperfection on the move? There is a Japanese tradition in art that does just that. It is called *wabi-sabi,* which means the beauty of imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness. It stands in contrast to modernism, in a way that perhaps resembles my opposition to Platonic and Enlightenment ideals of context-independent, immutable universals.

In his booklet on wabi-sabi Leonard Koren (1994) lists the following differences between modernism and wabi-sabi:

modernism	*wabi-sabi*
the box as metaphor (rectilinear, precise, contained)	the bowl as metaphor (free shape, open at top)
manmade materials	natural materials
ostensibly slick	ostensibly crude
needs to be well-maintained	accommodates to degradation and attrition
purity makes its expression richer	corrosion and contamination make its expression richer
solicits the reduction of sensory information	solicits the expansion of sensory information
is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction	is comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction
cool	warm
generally light and bright	generally dark and dim
function and utility are primary values	function and utility are not so important
perfect materiality is an ideal	perfect immateriality is an ideal
everlasting	to every thing there is a season

I would not want to subscribe to all these features of wabi-sabi, to the point of rejecting modernism. I still rejoice to see modernist Bauhaus architecture, for example, though I

might not want to live in it, but I equally rejoice in seeing an gnarled old wooden door about to fall from its rusty hinges, though if I lived there I might want to replace it.

Are we here facing Nietzsche's opposition between Apollo and Dionysus again, in a different form? Before (in item 81), I argued for a dynamic unity of the two, an echo of dialectics in philosophy, where there is temporary balance, reduction and purity, that is next carried into novel settings that break harmony, in a falling apart of an established order that meets its limits. I would like to see wabi-sabi decay as a movement towards new life, in new forms that aspire to a perfection that is never achieved.

I am reminded of the late self-portraits of Rembrandt: the decay of old age, lines becoming diffuse in rough, thick strokes of paint, the ruby blotch of a thickening nose, astonishingly expressionist for his time.

76. How much community?   published 26-1-2013

From previous items in this blog I can now piece together my answer to Charles Taylor's question: How much community should a democracy have?

I agree with him and with (other) communitarian philosophers, that a liberal society that ensures only *negative freedom*, in minimal interference with individual action, is not enough. As I argued in item 43, on *justice*, I go along with Martha Nussbaum's notion of *capabilities*: society should also provide *positive freedom* in ensuring minimal access to such capabilities.

In view of the discussion of *immorality of groups* (item 48), such as recently appeared among bankers, who allow themselves to be caught in prisoners dilemma's of antisocial behaviour, society should actively restrict their freedom to do so.

But do we, going beyond that, require a shared definition of the good life? Next to laws that aim to ensure negative and positive freedom, should there be a shared ethic, in a shared culture? In item 10, on culture, I declared myself against the notion of some *essence* in culture, and pleaded for more or less shared or overlapping elements of culture.

I am afraid, and so is Taylor, of anything that might end up in something like Rousseau's *general will* to which people must conform and submit. History has demonstrated, in communism for example, how that can lead to totalitarianism.

I do subscribe to a set of shared values, which are not necessarily universal in that they depend on historical conditions and priorities of time and place. Presently what we need is shared values of tolerance, appreciation of diversity, taking responsibility for one's actions and for society, loyalty to collective interests of society, a modicum of altruism (depending on pressures of survival), and openness to discussion and exchange of ideas

between individuals and cultures. These values do not constitute any essence of any single culture but fortunately are shared more or less between different cultures.

The underlying philosophy that I developed in this blog is that people are not autonomous, are limitedly rational, and do not have any given, unitary identity that is to be revealed in 'authentic expression'. People develop their identity in interaction with other people. Within constraints laid down by the potential embodied in one's genes and constraints in outside conditions of development, one can develop one's self. The crucial point is that for this one needs a basis of shared language and ethics, indicated above, as well as opposition from the other person and other culture. Those yield potential for development of the self because they are different. Even if one is only self-interested one needs the other for the self to develop and to be free also from one's own moral prejudice, but for that to work one must be open, empathetic and committed to trustworthiness.

Fortunately, the ability to 'cross cognitive distance' to others who think differently is also economically advantageous, in favouring innovation (see items 57 and 58).

This opens up the need to develop attitudes and skills of collaboration and trust, which are not only desirable but also viable. See the foregoing items on trust (68-75).

77. Beyond Enlightenment and Romanticism   published 1-2-2013

Charles Taylor noted that in contemporary society there is an uneasy mix of ideas from Enlightenment and Romanticism. From the Enlightenment: ideas of universality and rationality (rational design, rational choice, efficiency, rigorous analysis, …). From Romanticism: diversity, individuality, feelings and emotions, realization of the authentic self, self-expression, …

We find the Enlightenment in universal, equal human and citizen rights. We find it in rationalization in science, management, and increasingly also in public administration (e.g. in health care, education, …).

The rationalized economic system tends to constrain innovation. Innovation carries radical uncertainty that undermines rational choice and hence economic thought. It thrives on diversity and deviation from rules and established practices. It is, in other words, romantic and does not fit well in a rationalized economic system. That is why innovation policy is so difficult.

We find Romanticism in the private sphere of self, family, friends, clubs, and in entrepreneurship, art and discovery.

Is this combination of opposites a problem?

While economic rationalization is perhaps accepted as inevitable, it also yields the experience of clashes and tension. How humanistic is rationalized health care? Many people feel alienated in a uniformity of rules, jobs, and performance measurement, in increasingly impersonal, anonymous relations. Gaps are felt between the economic world and the life world.

To narrow the gap, should personal life be further rationalized, as economists prod us to do? Or should public life be romanticized? We see both happening.

Politics is made more romantic by making it more expressive and emotional, in a personalization of political figures as public idols. I am deeply suspicious of the hyping of public emotion.

Markets are romantic in that, in contrast with central planning, they tap into diversity of tastes, ideas and local conditions. Firms profit from differentiation of products, and this contributes to variety. But then, more privatization, making more room for markets, also in public services, must, to be consistent, allow for variety of quality and accessibility in public services. But this violates enlightenment universality and equality of citizen's rights in those services. Is that to be accepted?

Paradoxically, while markets allow for variety, market ideology is universal, applied everywhere, and market rhetoric mostly neglects the diversity of institutional and local conditions. As a result of this neglect, privatization and deregulation run into unforeseen problems that necessitate increasingly complex partial re-regulation, supervision and intervention to make markets actually work or to redress their perverse effects. In the end one wonders what the net benefit is.

However, perhaps the most important factor in present society is held in common between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, and that is the almost obsessive pre-occupation with the disconnected, autonomous individual that knows best what it wants That has run into excessive egotism, narcissism and atomization of society.

To get away from that we need a new way beyond both Enlightenment and Romanticism. For that I proposed principles of *otherhumanism*, indicated in item 65 of this blog, and discussed more extensively in my 2012 book 'Beyond humanism: The flourishing of life, self and other'.

70. Forms of identification   published 19-12-2012

In the preceding item I proposed that while empathy is needed for trust, identification can go too far, in that it may lock up or freeze the relationship, by being blind to conditions that require the relationship to be ended or revised. One reader of this blog, Fransje Broekema, indicated that there might be different forms of identification. I think she is right, and here I pick up that point.

Identification can become possessive or imposing, robbing the other of the freedom to go its own way. Fransje mentioned *projective identification*, where one imposes one's own morals, rules or solutions on the other. This may be out of genuine concern, as a parent towards a child. Here projective identification is also *protective identification.* From emotional attachment and a feeling of responsibility it may be very difficult *not* to do so. That is why in puberty children sometimes have to take drastic action to wrest themselves loose to gain independence.

While in projective identification one tries to let the other align with oneself, it can also go the other way around, in *submissive identification* where one aligns with the other. This may be mimicry out of admiration or idolatry.

It can also be *defensive identification*. Here one identifies with someone who exerts negative power, in enforcement, coercion, or terror. A classic example is 'Father Stalin'. His exercise of arbitrary, paranoid terror was too much to bear, and rather than facing it for what it was people convinced themselves that 'the little father' must have his good reasons for what he is doing, and his victims must somehow have deserved their fate. Out of this perverse identification, some people trusted Stalin to the end.

A similar case is the *'Stockholm syndrome'*, derived from a hostage situation in Stockholm, where hostages started to identify with the hostage taker, not only to placate him but also to convince themselves that he is in fact benevolent if only one understands his motives. This may have the beneficial effect of mollifying the hostage taker.

While empathy is necessary for trust, it is not sufficient, even though it should not go as far as identification. Feelings and words of empathy must be followed by *commitment* in deeds. It is not enough to say to someone in distress 'I know how you feel', but one should follow up with further discussion and suggestion what the other might do and how one might help. But one should not let this slide into projective identification.

I should also mention that empathy is not necessarily benevolent. By understanding how the other thinks, and 'what makes him/her tick', and perceiving the feelings of the other in reaction to one's deeds, one is also better able to do him/her harm. Violent psychopaths can be very sensitive, very perceptive of feelings and emotions, apparently tender even, sometimes.

75. Horizontal control   published 19-1-2013

Traditionally, and perhaps instinctively, control is seen as vertical, 'top-down'. 'Someone has to be the boss'. Economists talk of the *principal* who mandates and controls the *agent.* The principal is 'the boss'. We find this in the management of organizations and in how buyers deal with suppliers.

In many conditions, vertical control is counterproductive. The controller pretends to be able to judge the conduct of the controlled party effectively and efficiently. Effectively,

in taking circumstances into account, judging how far competencies go and should go, and what the causes are when something goes wrong (see the *causal ambiguity* discussed in item 72 of this blog). Efficiently, i.e. without costly superfluous control. And all that is hardly the case in relationships with high added value, where workers or suppliers are valuable because they know and can do things that one could not do oneself. Then how can one pretend to be able to adequately judge them?

The alternative is what has come to be called *horizontal control*. There, one asks the one to be controlled how he/she can best be controlled. The advantage is threefold. First, it is efficient, ensuring that control is reduced to the minimum, since redundancy is costly to both parties. Second, it ensures that control is effective, i.e. fits the realities of work processes. Third, in the negotiation about controls to be agreed upon the controller learns a lot about what works and what does not, in a variety of work processes. This improves its capability in negotiation, and this may even benefit the party to be controlled, in improving his/her knowledge about possibilities and experience elsewhere. In other words, horizontal control is a learning system.

What if the party to be controlled cheats and proposes ineffective controls, exploiting the controller's limited capability to judge? Then, when this comes out, as sooner or later it will, in the learning system, the penalty is heavy. The cheat will no longer have the advantage of participating in the horizontal system and will face old-fashioned, inefficient, ineffective bureaucratic vertical control.

The system of horizontal control is not just theory. It has been implemented, for example, in the Dutch Ministry of Finance (with my help), in the tax system for large firms (for small firms the transaction costs of negotiating controls separately for each firm are probably prohibitive) and in the internal accountancy of the civil service.

In business, the basic logic of horizontal control is becoming familiar in buyer-supplier relations of high added value, where suppliers are involved in the improvement of quality and in innovation of the buyer's products. Secrecy about what goes on is counterproductive, in obstructing the pooling of complementary resources that adds most value.

A problem is that this approach goes against the perspective, instinct perhaps, of the present generation of managers and buyers, to whom the old view was brought home in training and in practice. That was, and perhaps still is, the case, for example, in the building industry. And classes in economics perpetuate the old view.

73. Psychology of trust   published 8-1-2013

Earlier in this blog (item 44) I argued that people have an instinct for self-interest and survival as well as an instinct for altruism, at least within the groups to which one feels oneself to belong. According to work in social psychology this is reflected in two

opposing mind frames that people have, a frame of defence and mistrust, in *protecting one's interests* (self-interest) and a frame of trust, in *solidarity* with the group (altruism).

A mind frame operates as a mental framework in which observation, sense making and interpretation take place, plus a repertoire of responses. This may be compared with my earlier analysis of scripts (in items 33, 34): what is observed is fitted into scripts and that triggers response, again according to scripts. In the defensive frame one will be inclined to scrutinize observed conduct for signs of danger and threat, taking untrustworthiness as the default: one mistrusts until contrary evidence arises. In the solidarity frame one will take trustworthiness as the default.

The default of trust rather than distrust is to be recommended. With mistrust, the trustee has to prove trustworthiness and that is as impossible as proving that a theory is true. And distrust blocks the opportunity for a relationship to develop and demonstrate trustworthiness. With trust as the default, when adverse conduct is experienced one can narrow the room for trust and tighten controls.

The main point now is that one cannot be in two frames at the same time, but the other frame hovers in the background. Being in one frame one may switch to the other, depending on evidence, experience and emotions. The more *robust* a frame is, the less easily one will switch. When one feels threatened the solidarity frame may switch into the protective frame, and once that happens the reverse switch tends to be difficult. There is a saying that 'trust comes on foot and departs on horseback'. The solidarity frame often is less robust than the protective frame.

The adoption of one frame or another depends on *relational signalling*: one treats observed conduct as a signal that indicates the frame the other person is in. That observation is fitted into scripts corresponding with the present frame. The trustee should be aware that what he/she does or says has that effect, and when being in the solidarity frame he/she should prevent doubt and ambiguity. Having received an e-mail message one should always respond to it, lest the sender wonders whether the massage was received and is getting attention, or the receiver is not interested.

This analysis further emphasizes the importance of openness discussed in the previous item of this blog. I add here that when one is in the solidarity frame one should make sure that this is reflected in what one says and does: demonstrating commitment, competence, and fair play. It is also important not to create too high expectations that can only lead to the disappointment that may trigger the partner's switch to the self-interested frame.