

The human condition:

Enlightenment, romanticism, the good life, being in the world, humanism, existentialism, liberalism, and democracy.

by Bart Nooteboom

15. The human condition

published 7-8-2012

The deepest tragedy of the human being is, I think, that it craves to transcend human mortality and the confusion and fragility of life but thereby gets lost in absolutist, i.e. universal and immutable, ideas concerning truth and morality, which have led to suppression, in theistic religion (religion with a God) and political ideologies.

Theistic religion, not in the last place Christian religion, has produced tempestuous violence in persecution, torture, and extermination of infidels, heretics and Jews, in inquisition, pogroms and crusades. With the advent of the Enlightenment, humanism, and modernity, with human rights and democracy, emerged the hope that the violence would be over. The philosopher Kant dreamed of 'eternal peace'. But since then there has been unprecedented violence, in the French Revolution, the First World War, the Holocaust, the communist Gulag, to mention a few. The shock of it lies not only in the extent and intensity of the violence but most of all in its being systematic, in reasoned design, as part of grand, idealistic projects to improve mankind. Where does that come from? How can what presents itself as virtue produce so much evil, in religion and political ideology?

Is the human condition inevitably and drastically vulnerable, variable, diverse, subject to uncontrollable and unpredictable conditions, or can humanity obtain a rational grip, with fixed, universal, abstract concepts and rules, that apply always, everywhere and for everyone, with which humanity can control its destiny and its environment? That question is as old as philosophy. It goes back to a contrast between the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle.

Plato despised the relativism and rhetoric of the sophists of his time, the spouting of mere opinion, gossip and slander, mystical evocation, the manipulation of truth and the fabrication of falsehood. The Platonic tradition seduces the human being to the higher, the pure, eternal, immutable, in which we reach for the divine. He reached for absolute, universal, timeless concepts, in a 'heaven of ideas', beyond the chaotic world we perceive. The soul is liberated from the body. In politics the platonic tradition has offered a breeding ground for disasters of totalitarianism, fundamentalism and extremism.

Aristotle, who for 20 years was a disciple of Plato, continued to share a few ideas with his teacher. However, for Aristotle thought must be turned into action, and relations with others are part of the good life. And in such relations one is inevitably vulnerable. In his practical wisdom Aristotle moves far away from Plato. For Plato the individual, non-universal is a lower form of being; while for Aristotle it is the beginning of all insight. In human choice of conduct there can be no universal that goes beyond a principle or guideline that in each situation requires an adjudication matching the specific conditions, not rigidly, and is always in development, ready

for surprises, because of the mutability, indeterminacy and particularity of conditions. Not all relevant aspects and options can be surveyed, and situations are often unique, unrepeated.

20. The Enlightenment

published 14-8-2012

Before I move on to the big subject of knowledge and truth, let me first, as an intermezzo, give a thumbnail sketch of the Enlightenment and Romanticism as two major movements of thought in western civilization.

Western culture has to a large extent been rooted in the Enlightenment. There lies an important source of the view of the self as rational, autonomous and capable of making its own future.

The Enlightenment is variegated. Jonathan Israël distinguished between a radical stream and a moderate, mainstream one. In the radical stream we find Spinoza, Bayle, and the French radical *philosophes* (such as Diderot, d'Alembert, d'Holbach, Helvétius, and Condorcet). In the moderate stream we find many of the British enlightenment thinkers (such as Locke, Adam Smith, and Newton) and in France Turgot, Montesquieu and Voltaire. Some philosophers (David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau) are difficult to assign clearly to one of the streams.

There are four central issues on which the two streams differ. A first is whether there is (in case of the radicals) or is not (the moderates) a unity of mind and body. According to the radicals thinking arises from the body, without agency from any external God, and hence there is no immortality of the soul and no hereafter. According to the moderates thinking is infused by God. Separation of mind and body is required for immortality of the soul, which is needed for morality.

The second central issue concerns rationality. Are human beings capable (the radicals) or not (the moderates) of rational autonomy of the self and rational arrangements for a good society. According to the moderates, rationality has its limits and human thought and action depend on habits and on social and institutional conditions.

A third issue is the classic problem of universals, which I discussed in a previous item in this blog. For the radical stream conduct must be guided by universal principles of reason, with a universal notion of the individual, while the mainstream had an eye for the limits of reason, the role of unique individuals, institutions, customs, norms, unintended consequences of social dynamics (Hume), diversity of societies on the basis of climate, location, environment and religion (Montesquieu), and technology and entrepreneurship (Turgot). It is often not so much a mistake, an error of reason, that is in the way of truth and goodness as existing habits, routines, laxity, established interests and resistance to change. The radical stream is a-historical, the moderate stream is not.

Fourthly, there is a difference of opinion whether there is free will (the moderates) or not (most radicals). I discussed free will in a previous item of this blog.

On the four points of difference one can take a moderate position on one and a radical position on another. One can maintain that there is no separation of body and mind, that thinking arises in the body, there is no providential, miracle-producing God (radical), and no immortality of the soul (radical). One can doubt the rationality of the human being and society (moderate) and one can doubt the validity or immutability of universal ideas and rules (moderate). That is more or less where I stand.

21. Problems with the Enlightenment

published 14-8-2012

The Enlightenment has brought much good, in freedom, equality, democracy, universal human rights, education, and science, but has run into its imperfections. The ideals, especially of the radical stream, are wonderful but the ideas do not quite work. The individual is not so rational and not so autonomous. Objective knowledge in a strict sense is unattainable. The main source for correcting one's errors and revising one's prejudices lies in critical response from others. In social and political structures and processes rationality loses out to conflicts between private and public interest, and to institutional and political interests. Individuals are socialized and indoctrinated into existing practices and views and are locked into them. The moderate Enlightenment had more eye for this than the radical stream.

We cannot do without the use of rational, logical argument with sharp, exact, well-defined concepts, but when that rules supreme, it blocks the vitality of inspiration, invention, innovation and art. Those require doubt and ambiguity, shifts of meaning, and new ideas of which the boundaries are not yet clear. Invention, development and the flourishing of life require the acceptance of uncertainty and ongoing though shifting ignorance.

In their overestimation of the mind some Enlightenment philosophers (but not Spinoza, for example) neglected the body. Cartesian (and platonic) separation of body and soul, needed to maintain immortality of the soul, and to keep the soul free from blemishes of the body, led to underestimation of the body and human nature. I will discuss the relation between body and mind later in this blog.

We should take into account the limits of reason and of knowledge, ill-understood human nature, roots of cognition in the body, lack of transparency of the self to the self, the unconscious in our cognition, the feeding ground of thinking and feeling in social connections, the hidden power of institutions, a penchant for mysticism and an urge to transcend the human being in something that is higher and carries it across death. More than 90% of our thought is unconscious. I discussed this in an earlier piece on free will.

All this pulls the rug from under the radical Enlightenment. To me that is not an occasion for joy. I would that there could be more Enlightenment thinking. I dread a society such as the present, which evolves towards more emotion and less reason, more opinion and less argument and fewer facts, more impulse and less reflection, less patience, and more drama. In due course that cannot but go wrong. The temptation for demagogues to manipulate it with new totalitarian ideologies and fanaticisms is too great. It can lead to new hunts for heretics, suppression, persecution, murder, and war.

We should keep on striving for reasonableness, freedom, justice, peace and universal human rights, and here we can maintain at least the spirit, if not the substance of the Enlightenment. Perhaps the core of it is openness to critical debate.

22. Romanticism

published 17-8-2012

Partly in response to the radical Enlightenment, in what some have called the ‘Counter-enlightenment’, Romanticism developed from the second half of the 18th century, with mostly German philosophers, but with Rousseau as an important instigator. In the notion of *romanticism*, as a style and vision of life, much, perhaps too much, is thrown together. In an attempt to create some order in this I propose a conceptual differentiation between four aspects of romanticism: the romanticism of *individualization*, of *transcendence*, of *unification* and of *feeling*. These four aspects of romanticism can in various ways go together.

In the *romanticism of individualization*, partly in reaction to the universalism of the radical Enlightenment, the individual strives for selfhood, in self-expression, development of the self, the creative self, the transgression, breaking or shift of boundaries, making oneself free from the coercion of rules and conventions, in anarchy, heroism, in an intrepid self-consciousness, in the fullness of life. The self is an adventurer, or conqueror, and genius is glorified.

On a national level there is the striving for the nation’s own distinctive identity, with its own spirit (‘Volksgeist’), with its unique culture, in religion, morality, habits, mythology, symbolism, art, etc. and their roots in ‘blood and soil’. The paradox of that is that the individuality of national spirit and nationalism overpower the individualization of the individual. The individual is subordinate to the collective of the nation.

In the *romanticism of transcendence* one looks for transcendence of the self and the world, groping for the sublime, the infinite, the eternal. There is nostalgia for the religious. Platonism is romantic in this sense.

In the *romanticism of unification* one wants to belong to a large whole, to be absorbed in something greater than the self. In the Enlightenment it was found in the whole of humanity. Romanticism found it in the nation, as an organic whole, united in national spirit, in which the individual is rooted. The human being does not make its society but is made by it.

In the *romanticism of feeling* one seeks an escape from the chains of reason, again partly in opposition to the radical Enlightenment. Rapture and ‘truths of the heart’ replace or qualify reason and empirical evidence, and revelation replaces truth. Especially here, the influence of Rousseau is evident. One reaches for a vitality that is opposed to rationality, imagination as opposed to knowledge, poetry as opposed to philosophy, feeling as opposed to reason, spontaneity as opposed to deliberation, passion as opposed to prudence, myth as opposed to logic, body as opposed to mind, nature as opposed to culture. One wants to say the ineffable. Here we see a striving for fantasy, surprise, passion, mystery, and also the dark, and a fascination with death.

The orientation towards change, growth and transcendence of the self, in a way out from nihilism, which I plead in this blog, may perhaps be called romantic in the first sense of romanticism, moving across or shifting boundaries to the self.

39. The good life

published 26-9-2012

Morality is, or should be, subordinate to ethics, to what the good life is. What is happiness? It is customary to classify ethics into three kinds: *virtue ethics* (e.g. Plato and Aristotle), *consequentialist ethics* concerning the effects of actions, such as utility, and *deontology* or *duty ethics* (e.g. Kant).

My preference is for virtue ethics, following Aristotle. Virtues have no other goals than themselves, forming a broad notion of happiness. One can enjoy virtue, though that is not its purpose. There is no universal moral duty rooted in absolute, transcendent reality, as with Christianity, or in rationality, as with Kant. Happiness is not only a feeling or psychological state but lies especially in action. Deeds not only have an extrinsic, instrumental value but also intrinsic value. There is no overarching measure, no guaranteed *commensurability*, of what is good; not all good things can be reduced to a single measure such as pleasure or utility. One cannot add up happiness in love, attending a concert, sympathy for others, etc.

Overarching virtues for Aristotle were prudence, moderation, courage and justice. Material conditions, pleasure and enjoyment are part of the good life, but in moderation. Virtues can also conflict with each other. Insoluble dilemmas occur regularly. For the human being the highest good is the realisation of the potential he/she has by nature, in *human flourishing*. According to many Greek and enlightenment philosophers (e.g. Spinoza) the highest potential is that of the intellect. However, for Aristotle also feeling and emotion are part of practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Next to realisation of potential my preference goes to virtues of benevolence, reasonableness, extending the benefit of the doubt to people, openness, sincerity, commitment, moral courage and justice. That comes close to old Greek virtues.

It is a long tradition in philosophy, with some ancient Greeks and Romans, and later especially with Schopenhauer, to seek happiness first of all in invulnerability and peace of mind, in avoidance of pain, danger, risk, and emotion. That leads to what Schopenhauer himself called 'the half life'. The only achievable happiness lies in the avoidance of danger and dependence on others. The ideal is *autarky*: liberation from what is foreign and different, from what comes from outside. The blind person is happy because he/she is not bothered by all there is to see. One should treat others as if they are objects: without mind and immutable, or as children: don't spoil them with friendliness or openness. Suspicion is better than trust. There is freedom only in lonesomeness.

But that is the freedom of a prison into which one has locked oneself. I turn it around: we need the foreign, the different, the other, from outside, to free ourselves from incarceration in the self.

The other does not revolve around us, we revolve around others.

There is no life without risk. Ambition and creation carry risk of failure and danger, but also an opportunity for new possibilities and insights, and also suffering is a ground for learning. We find this also in Nietzsche.

40. Being in the world

published 28-9-2012

When considering the good life, we should note that life is being in the world, with 'being' as a verb, not a noun, a process, not a thing. Not *spectator theory*: the self is not pre-established, looking at the world from outside, but is constituted by action in the world. This view was propounded, in particular, by Martin Heidegger (in his *Being and time*, with much obfuscation in weird terminology), and together with other work (e.g. of Nietzsche) formed a basis for *existentialism*.

This is, I think, the ultimate philosophical basis for pragmatism and my view of knowledge as presented in previous items of this blog (23, 26, 28). At any moment we act from ideas, views, normative assumptions and goals that we have, but we adjust them depending on what we encounter in problems and new opportunities.

Going back to the discussion of meaning, and in particular *hermeneutics*, in item 36, I note that Hans Georg Gadamer, with my preferred brand of hermeneutics, was inspired by this view of Heidegger. He adds that when we interpret texts or actions, we do so from the perspective of prejudice or unconscious presumptions or *horizons*, as that literature calls it, which are embodied in our language, in an accumulation of shared experience in the past.

However, as I discussed previously, language and the meaning of words are not monolithic but vary between people, in the repertoires of associations they connect with words, in *sense making*, tapping from their life experience.

The term 'prejudice' is mostly experienced in a negative sense, but prejudices are inevitable. They are *enabling constraints*: enabling and thereby constraining interpretation. See my discussion of *practical prejudice* in item 34.

Thus there is no single, objective, correct interpretation of a text. This does not yield unmitigated subjectivism, with different subjective interpretations existing apart from each other, beyond debate, but yields a basis for debate in which people with different perspectives may revise their interpretations. Interpretation is *dialogical*, a matter of dialogue between alternative interpretative frames. Here I refer back to my discussion of *cognitive distance* in item 55.

While from experience and debate prejudice can be corrected, the outcome remains imperfect: *imperfection on the move* (see item 19). And as I also discussed previously (in item 29), our thought and language may be bound tenaciously to prejudice that is difficult to correct.

Another implication is that a text has a much wider range of possible meanings than the author intended. I think many if not all authors have experienced this: surprise, sometimes, at how one's texts are interpreted. At first, this upset me, with a feeling that 'my' text was violated, but later I became intrigued and tried to learn from surprising interpretations. That lends much greater scope to one's text, and leaves a longer trace of novel interpretations. I hope that this will happen also to this blog, and that readers will tell me.

56. Humanism

published 22-11-2012

One definition of humanism is that it takes principles for human action and life not from nature nor from the supernatural but from humanity itself.

There are varieties of humanism. The term was applied to a stream of intellectual activity in the Renaissance. The term 'rebirth' refers to a renewed inspiration from especially the Greek classics. Earlier, classical thought had already had a large influence. First that of Plato, especially in *neoplatonism* that was a major source of inspiration in Christian thought. Later, in the 13th century, Aristotelian thought, which had reached Western Europe via the moors in Spain, gave a new impulse to Christian thought, e.g. in the work of Thomas Aquinas. From the 14th century philosophy was no longer only a handmaiden to theology. Earlier, in the 11th and 12th centuries, there was a development of cities, emergence of commerce and free professions, and a beginning of capitalism. That yielded a need for knowledge and contributed to the development of individualism and of science. In the 14th and 15th century disastrous failures, moral, political and military, notably in the 100 years war between England and France, of the church and the nobility, contributed to the long-term demise of those old authorities.

The early humanism of the 16th century, with Montaigne, Erasmus, Shakespeare and Francis Bacon, had two characteristic features. First, and above all, it was oriented towards the individual and its flourishing and freedom. It was not antireligious. Second, it had an Aristotelian appreciation of diversity, tolerance, change, intellectual modesty, individuality and context-dependence of judgement, with the intuition that human life does not lend itself to abstract generalization.

In the *Enlightenment*, the drive towards the freedom and flourishing of the individual, and criticism of suppressive authorities of state and church, acquired a new dynamic. Humanism acquired the connotation of a rejection of divine and other supernatural powers. The humanism of the Renaissance was criticized for its distortion of classical texts in subordination to convention and maintenance of Christian faith. In what some have called a *Counter-Renaissance* much of classical thought was rejected, such as the Aristotelian idea that processes in nature strive towards a goal (the *final cause*). There was a development of abstract thought, and especially English philosophers turned to empirical foundations of knowledge. The Aristotelian perspective of practical philosophy was replaced by a more Platonic one, in a striving for universal, immutable, context-independent truths, in *clear and distinct ideas* (Descartes) or *adequate ideas* (Spinoza). The Enlightenment was not, however, platonic in seeking the source of the true, the good and the beautiful outside the subject but sought it inside, and that became part of humanism.

Nowadays the most current meaning of ‘humanism’ is an attitude to life based on reason, autonomy and self-knowledge of the human individual, and belief in the betterment of the human being, mostly on the basis of its own efforts. Also, everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and to have the opportunity for the flourishing and authenticity of the human being.

65. Otherhumanism

published 15-12-2012

Traditional western humanism is focused on the self. I turn to another humanism that is oriented more towards the other, which I call *otherhumanism*. In this blog I developed arguments for it and I now bring them together.

In item 49 on freedom I argued that the self needs others to achieve the highest possible level of freedom: the freedom to escape from the prejudices of the self about what it should want.

In item 57 I argued that there is more or less *cognitive distance* between people, and that this difference yields a problem, in lack of mutual understanding, but also an opportunity for learning. If objective knowledge is impossible then testing our insights on what ‘others have made of it’ is the only chance we have to correct our errors.

In item 31 I summarized a cycle of invention in which application of existing knowledge and competence to novel contexts, with new challenges and opportunities, can lead to new knowledge and competence. In item 58 that insight was applied for a deeper insight into how communication, by fitting each other’s different insights into each other’s cognitive structures can lead to their transformation. That yields deeper insight into the importance of the other for learning by the self.

In language, there is Wittgenstein’s argument of the impossibility of a private language. The self needs the other to establish meaning and for making sense. In item 37 on the change of meaning I applied the theory of invention to change of meaning. Universals derive their meaning from specific cases and as abstractions from them are only temporary, forming a platform for application in novel contexts by which universals and their meanings shift.

In item 60 I discussed Nietzsche’s (mostly implicit) assumption that the self can rise above itself without the need for any other. In item 61 I discussed Levinas, as a polar opposite to Nietzsche, in recognition of the need of the self to open up to the other as a source of transcendence.

In sum, my argument for otherhumanism is as follows. Any hereafter as life after death is an illusion. The hereafter is not you yourself but the people and their environment that you leave behind. If you want to make your life worthwhile and dedicate yourself to the hereafter then the only way is dedication to others and to the society of the future. Dedication to others is not at the expense of yourself and life. The self needs others to escape from illusory certainties as well as doubt, to achieve the highest possible level of freedom, to achieve its potential, to develop and transcend itself, and thereby to utilize the unique gift of life.

This leads to a notion of the flourishing of life that goes beyond the life of the self, not in a claim to any absolute, universal good beyond the world, but in participation and contribution to the flourishing of others, during and after our life.

The views and analyses that I present in this blog are perhaps more congenial with Eastern, in particular Chinese, philosophy than with Western philosophy. Later, in a sequel to the present blog, I will consider that in some detail. For the moment, let me just give a few indications. My otherhumanism seems close to the social humanism of Confucius, with its perspective of benevolence (although I do not much like the importance assigned to propriety, ritual and respect for authority). In Buddhism and in Chinese philosophy I find interest in change and impermanence, in different ways, which is congenial to my imperfection on the move. The Chinese notions of yin and yang, and later developments in neo-Confucianism (e.g. in the notions of opening and closing in the philosophy of Xiang Shili) seem to have some resemblance to my cycle of invention. There is a strong tradition of integrating thought and action, which is congenial to the pragmatism that I preach and practice.

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'.

116. Reason in the rise and fall of civilizations

published 21-10-2013

According to Cioran¹, when civilizations emerge, the new religion, values, myths, ideology, or doctrine, are vigorous, vital, clear, hard, simple, and compelling. In time, tested by earthly realities of complexity and variability, they develop nuance, differentiation, refinement, tolerance of diversity and individuality, and become soft, more pliable. Culture strays from nature, and instincts are subdued by reflection. This is next experienced as degeneration, decadence. Too clever for its own good. Diversity is seen as confusion. And then the old doctrine becomes vulnerable to a takeover by the next more hardy vision looming on the horizon.

According to Cioran, decline is accompanied by intellectualization and erudition: myth is replaced by science, song by discourse, and emotion by reason. That may have been the case in the decline of ancient Greek culture in Hellenism and in the decline of the Roman Empire. But does it apply to current times?

It seems to me that the Enlightenment, since Descartes, especially in its radical stream, initiated by Spinoza, constituted a new culture at the *peak* of which, in the 17-18th century, myth was

¹ From Rumanian origin, Cioran mostly lived and worked in France.

replaced by science, finesse by geometry, emotion by reason. Central values became reason, truth, freedom, and democracy.

And now we seem to be in a stage of decline where those Enlightenment values, right or wrong, are surrendered for the return of emotion, idolatry, myth, hype, and post-modern relativization of truth and freedom. In which lies the decadence?

Consider the supposedly ‘degenerate’ values of diversity, individuality, tolerance, nuance and change? Early, 16th century humanism celebrated those, notably the philosophy of Montaigne. They were briefly institutionalized in the reign of Henri IV, who instituted the Edict of Nantes for the sake of religious tolerance. According to Toulmin, in his *Cosmopolis*, in the 17th century those were replaced by dogmatic doctrine, and intolerance, and the Edict of Nantes was repealed, under the pressures of religious strife between Catholics and Protestants, as in the 30-year war. Under the polarization of Protestantism versus Catholicism there was no room for nuance: one had to choose sides.

Thus, in the Enlightenment we see an emerging civilization at odds with Cioran's thesis. It is not vigorous myth at the peak, followed by the decadence of reason, but a peak of vigorous reason, with universalistic, pure ideas. Presently we see, I propose, a decline, with departures from reason and argument, and a reopening of the gates for myth, emotions, hype, and delirium. There, I propose, lies the degeneration.

So, what next? Are we in wait for a new, more vigorous culture? Would that require hard myth and ideology without nuance or differentiation, as Cioran claims? Does culture require unreason, intolerance and repression to be vigorous? Or could we, perhaps, think of, and hope for, a revival of the 16th century humanist combination of reason and tolerance, with a dynamic interplay of universals and individuals, the general and the specific, as I have argued for in several places in this blog? Could this not be vigorous?

197. Back to Enlightenment values?

published 10-5-2015

In the West, Muslim religious terrorism has triggered a rush to defend ‘our Enlightenment values’. What does that mean? Is it wise?

The Enlightenment produced absolutes of rationality (Descartes, Spinoza), morality (Kant), justice, and democracy.¹

Absolutes claim to apply forever and everywhere, universally. Mathematics provided the model (Spinoza's Ethics was presented as ‘in the manner of geometry’). If our own values are absolute, then different values of others must be not just wrong but deviant. This is counterproductive, branding alternative views into heresies. It is fundamentalist, by which we practise what we condemn the religious fundamentalists for.

Thought has not stood still since the Enlightenment. Romanticism arose partly in opposition to it. However, Romantic thought bred its own form of fundamentalism, as in Rousseau. I discussed

problems with the Enlightenment, and tensions with Romanticism, earlier in this blog (items 21, 77, 116).

Charles Taylor (2011) noted that in contemporary society there is an uneasy mix of ideas from Enlightenment and Romanticism. From the Enlightenment we have ideas of rationality (rational design, rational choice, efficiency, rigorous analysis, ...) and of individual autonomy. From Romanticism we have diversity, feelings and emotions, realization of the authentic self, self-expression, a sense of adventure, return to nature, and an urge to belong to a larger, coherent whole (such as the nation, blood and soil) ...

The Enlightenment is found in science, economics, management, and increasingly also in rational design in public administration (e.g. in health care, education, ...). Romanticism is found in the private sphere of self, family, friends, clubs, ... This yields a tense combination of opposites.

Existentialist and post-modern thought, in opposition to the 'grand narratives', arose in large part in recoil from the horrors produced by absolutist Enlightenment as well as Romantic thought, in wars and totalitarian ideologies.

The realization grew that absolutes not only of God, but also of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful are illusions. That bred nihilism: despair of achieving them or even of their value. And that has indeed weakened Western moral vigour.

But, as discussed earlier in his blog (items 143-148), beyond nihilism, following Nietzsche, one can accept, even rejoice in the demise of absolutes, in what I have called 'imperfection on the move'.

In the light of this, what does it mean to 'defend Enlightenment values', and what is the purpose?

It could mean an even further intensified pursuit of rational design, efficiency, and control, and neo-liberal market ideology, at the expense of what Habermas called 'the life world'. Is that what we want? Isn't this one of the very reasons, or excuses perhaps, why Muslim terrorists turn away from Western culture?

In this blog, and elsewhere, I argued that the most viable notion of rationality, in view of problems with notions of knowledge and truth, consistent with the notion of imperfection on the move, is that of 'being reasonable', engaging in dialogue with people who think differently, to learn from differences in perspective. That form of rationality makes the best, I propose, from the heritage of the Enlightenment, modified with subsequent thought.

None of this entails toleration of terrorism, but it does imply an effort to understand what motivates it, and to face the imperfections of our own ideologies. It is an old military wisdom: understand your enemy. In order to better fight him. But also to see what weaknesses on our own side prod and nourish him. In order to quell his growth while improving ourselves.

There is a usual opposition between liberal individualism and communitarianism. Here I argue for a position in between: liberal communitarianism.

Colin Birdⁱⁱ argued that the apparent unity of liberal individualism is a myth. In fact there are two fundamentally different brands: the ‘aggregative service view’ and the ‘associative expressive view’. The service view is utilitarian, looking only at outcomes in terms of utility, regardless of goals or intentions, and the expressivist view is Kantian, deontological, i.e. looks at intentions and goals.

The service view assumes a variety of autonomous agents with a multiplicity of values. It is the task of the state only to provide conditions for the realization of those values, not to interfere with them in any way. For example: the state supplies schooling, and it is up to people to make use of it. Mainstream economists adhere to this view, though mostly implicitly. Here freedom is purely negative: freedom from outside interference.

The expressivist view assumes an ideal individual that should seek to realize corresponding ideal, universal values. It is a task of the state to provide conditions for realizing those values, even if the individual is not aware of them. If people do not utilize schooling because they are not aware of their potential, they are to be made aware. Here freedom is positive: providing access to self-realization.

Both views run into problems. The problem with the service view is that different values or utilities cannot easily be aggregated and often conflict. To safeguard religion one may have to limit freedom of expression. And vice versa. The problem with the expressivist view is this: who determines what the ideal individual is? During the French revolution, the Jacobins and Robespierre enforced their view of the free citizen, with ‘virtuous’ terror.

The communitarian view, in contrast with both liberal views, takes as its point of departure the social constitution of the human being, as argued at length in this blog. Like the liberal service view it adopts a view of diverse individuality, rather than the universal ideal of the expressivist liberal view. Like the expressivist liberal view it recognizes that individual values may have to be shaped to some extent by education or other forms of guidance. However that is a social, not a political activity.

The problem with communitarianism is that it can fall into the view that there is some collective spirit, rooted in history and expressed in myth, a shared cultural identity inculcated into individuals, which takes over their autonomy, yielding totalitarianism. We see that in forms of nationalism. Colin Bird, who pleads for a form of expressive individualism, also asks, quite rightly, ‘which community’? The family, municipality, nation, race, or what? If it does not fall into totalitarianism, communitarianism falls into relativism. He also notes that social constitution is not always a good thing. One may be misformed into perversity. Hence, according to Bird, the need to adopt and defend the notion of an ideal individual.

One can avoid those problems, up to a point, with the constructivist view of individual identity argued for in this blog. As Colin Bird noted it is an error to think that non-liberal or anti-liberal thought must be non-individualistic. There is an individualistic form of communitarianism, as follows. The individual constructs its mental and spiritual identity on the basis of its unique genetic endowment, from action in specific social, economic and cultural environments, in individual life history. The answer to the question ‘Which community’ is: all of them are part of the environment that provides the ‘input’ of the construction of the self. The self is not autonomous in its social formation but it builds some degree of autonomy, or at least individuality, in its construction of the self. The role of the state includes concern with the means and conditions for such development.

Concerning the underlying ethics, it is neither utilitarian, as in the liberal service view, nor deontological, universalist, as in the liberal expressivist view. In this blog I have proposed virtue ethics as an alternative to both.

I grant that there remains a problem of indoctrination of individuals by the institutional environment they are in, to the point that even victims of it take it for proper and justified, as shown by Michel Foucault, with his work on prisons, clinics, and mental institutions, and power exerted in knowledge systems. In this blog I have discussed the notion of ‘system tragedy’. It is a serious issue how one may escape from such binds. The liberal expressivist will claim that for it one needs some universal ideal of human individuality. I would rather reserve it for the striving of the individual, who may tap from a variety of sources to seek its own ideal. In that, being a communitarian, I am more liberal than the liberal expressivist.

283. What answer to populism?

published 1-10-2016

There is a pressing need to give an answer to the rising populist revolt, in Western countries. There are legitimate grievances behind it, and when left unanswered, they make society vulnerable to a takeover by demagogues that destroys justice and democracy, and is beginning to reek of a new brew of fascism. So, what can we learn from populism?

In my view, this revolt has the following grounds.

First, the lower paid and educated classes feel that they have suffered more setbacks than benefits from globalized trade, in large contrast to the increase of income, wealth and power of higher paid and educated classes. This injustice is not addressed, and seems to be excused as the inevitable side-effects of the blessings of free trade.

Second, people are angry that multinational firms successfully press national governments for extending advantages (in taxes, exceptions to regulation, e.g. for protection of the environment, energy subsidies, premiums for locating businesses, etc.), on the threat of locating activities elsewhere. In particular, the EU is seen as being there for the sake of markets rather than for justice for the people. This also contributes to distrust of markets and free trade.

Third, people feel that they have no grip, no influence on what is going on, and consequently lose their faith in democracy. They also feel a loss of social coherence and shared cultural identity. This provides a breeding ground for renewed nationalism.

To address these grievances, I have three proposals.

First, concerning the inequality of benefits from global trade between the lower and the higher paid and educated, the lesson is not, in my view, to abolish international trade, but to compensate for the inequality of its effects.

Second, build countervailing power regarding multinationals who take nations hostage. There are also other issues that require bundling in supranational integration, as in the EU: concerning foreign policy, defence, refugees, the environment, security (anti-terrorism), and international crime.

Here also lies an opportunity for the EU to regain acceptance and allegiance by proving it is there not only for the market but for the people. The going of this will be tough, against present ill feeling against the EU, partly as a result of its one-sided focus on facilitating markets. The EU is already making moves in this direction, in its policies concerning banking and taxes.

Third, as I proposed in the preceding item in this blog, utilize present opportunities from technology and higher levels of education to decentralize many decisions and designs in policy and projects to the local level of communities, in towns or city quarters, for local debate on ethics and morality, in closer, more personal contacts for building trust and mutual understanding and tolerance in collaboration.

These proposals entail that the grasp of nations becomes less, in a surrender of competencies to on the one hand supranational collaboration, as in the EU, and on the other hand decentralization of initiatives within nations to localities.

A complication is that release to local initiatives will not only profit from local variety but will also generate inequality of outcomes. Maintaining a demand of strict equality everywhere will kill variety and space for local initiative. A second complication is that release to local initiative may generate local clientism and corruption, with power concentrating in local bobo's and their entourage.

Here, there remain tasks on the national level, not only for issues and projects that transcend localities (jurisdiction, security, transportation,), but for preventing excessive inequalities and local clientism.

All this is needed as an answer to the present populist revolt in Western countries.

Present culture wars in Western societies, with shouting matches between nationalists and cosmopolitans, 'elites' and 'commoners' or 'grass roots', highly and low-educated, free traders and protectionists, are due, in large part, I think, to an unwillingness and inability to engage in uttering and absorbing constructive criticism. At the same time there is an urge towards expression and self-assertion. Together, they have disastrous effects of polarization, with mutual indifference, or intolerance and escalation of negative conflict.

Conflict can be creative but that demands the effort and ability to engage in giving and accepting, appreciating, constructive criticism, based on openness and curiosity, aimed at mutual understanding. Those may be based on Christian virtues of faith in the positive potential of people, hope of its realization, and love for the give and take of relationships. It may also be based on traditional, cardinal values of reflection, courage, moderation and justice. We seem to have lost all of those, somehow.

What is happening?

First, young generations, not having suffered the horrors of war, racism and nationalism, have grown up in a safe, protective environment, robbing themselves of the need to deal with hardship that builds strength and resilience.

This has fed risk avoidance, in an obsession with safety and control. That has produced excessive control mechanisms in many realms of work, which stifle professional initiative, kill intrinsic motivation of work, and narrow room for improvisation and for catering to variety of taste and circumstance.

Second, postmodern philosophy has generated, mostly as a result of misunderstanding, an excessive, perverse relativism, according to which any view is as good as any other. Opinions are as good as arguments, and everyone has a right to his or her own. There is no common ground for debate, and criticism is seen as intolerant, offensive, power play.

The misunderstanding is this. I accept relativism in the form of renouncing absolute objectivity and truth, accepting that one's views, and even observations, are biased by forms of thought, based on one's biological and cultural inheritance, and formed along one's individual path of life. However, the resulting difference in ideas and views, in what earlier in the blog I called 'cognitive distance', form a reason not for abandoning debate, but, on the contrary, for engaging in it. Precisely because our views are biased, the only chance we have at correcting them lies in looking at other, conflicting views. As I argued at several places in this blog, one needs opposition from others to achieve freedom from one's prejudices and errors.

In contrast with this, an ethic has arisen where respect is seen as avoiding criticism, rather than valuing opposition. People congregate with whom they agree, cuddling their conformity.

Third, there is a romantic urge for individual self-expression, authenticity. In combination with unwillingness and inability to voice and absorb criticism constructively, this becomes a noisy celebration of narcissism.

At some schools, students are bedded in safety, in a pact of mutual non-aggression. Trust is seen as softness, conflict avoidance. Instead, students should be educated to voice and absorb constructive criticism. It is precisely because there is trust that one can tell each other 'the truth'. Returning to the cardinal virtues: one should learn to listen and reflect on what is said, what to say, and how to say it. Have the courage to take the risk of giving and evoking criticism. To be moderate and modest in one's claims, and just in judgement.

This issue is connected with the notion of cognitive distance. To recall: cognition here is a wide notion, including knowledge as well as moral views concerning the conduct of relationships. Distance is bothersome, makes collaboration difficult, but also yields the potential for learning. Ability to cross cognitive distance enhances learning by interaction. It is good for society as well as the individual.

One can make a distinction between distance in substantive knowledge and moral/ relational distance. The latter is more difficult to cross than the former. Constructive conflict is best served by reducing moral distance, in order to better cross distance in knowledge. Dealing with each other while disagreeing.

287. The crisis of liberalism

published 29-10-1916

There are various forms of liberalism. Loosely, it means liberty of choice for the individual. But what kind of liberty? Choice of what? What does it mean for an individual? The cardinal present form of liberalism consists, I think, of the following principles.

First, autonomy of the individual (as opposed to its social constitution).

Second, a focus on negative freedom; lack of interference with the individual. This stands in contrast with positive freedom, to pursue one's view of the good life, on the basis of corresponding values, virtues, and competencies. In liberalism that is left up to the individual, free from public meddling.

That has indeed been liberating, with its contribution to momentous achievements such as human rights, legality, ownership rights, police monopoly of violence, equality under the law, being innocent until proven guilty, independent judiciary, and different forms of emancipation.

Third, the assumption and ideal of rationality driving human action and public policy.

Fourth, a reduction of human nature to the drive of self-interest, even at the expense of others. Other human features that might keep this back, oriented at relationships rather than autonomous agents, such as benevolence, care, trust, empathy, and altruism, are not regarded as being part of human nature, and are felt to be 'wishy-washy', intangible, not satisfying rational requirements of objectivity, logical rigour, and measurability.

And then there are markets. Their miracle is that through self-interest they promote maximum material welfare. Without that, liberal self-interest would not have been palatable.

As noted by Milbank and Pabstⁱⁱⁱ, while values and virtues, as instruments for positive freedom, are seen as up to individuals, beyond the pale of politics, the potential for vice, in excessive self-interest at the cost of others, is a public matter, since it limits negative freedom. Containing the hazards of self-interest then becomes the only moral task of government. No appeal can be made to virtues since those are outside public discourse, and are too vague, various and ‘irrational’ to have any bite. Only imposition of control is left.

This idea goes back to Hobbes’ idea of the need for a ‘Leviathan’ to contain the ‘war of all against all’.

To be rational and without regard to individual values, motives, talents, experience and conditions, control has to be bureaucratic, uniform and impersonal (one thinks of Weber here), imposed by the state (or in name of the state^{iv}). As a result, conduct is increasingly regimented and strangled by an accumulation of control.^v

Efficiency is objective and measurable, as minimum monetary cost, while value is subjective and hence unwieldy, if it goes beyond mere exchange value, expressed in price. This reduction of value to exchange goes by the name of ‘commodification’.

As a result, in the realm of rational policy efficiency always wins. If quality is to play a role, it is to be fixed in objectified, quantifiable, standards of skill, process or outcome, which contributes to the accumulation of stifling control.

As noted by Milbank and Pabst, taken together, this explains the puzzling phenomenon, in present society, of an alliance between market ideology, demanding maximum negative freedom for self-interested conduct, with centralized control of such conduct, to limit threats to negative freedom. Socialist ideals of a strong state can thus ally with liberal ideals of negative freedom. A requirement for this was only that socialism drop its old ideals of upholding social justice beyond the decrees of laws, in humane conduct, protecting the weak, and guiding and ‘uplifting’ the populace with education and culture.

This results not only in a reduced scope for positive freedom, for the pursuit of a flourishing life, but, ironically, even of negative freedom, in that limitation of scope. And so liberalism swallows its own tail.

309. Being involved, in knowledge, nature, and organization published 1-4-2017

It is an old idea and ideal of knowledge, starting with the ancient Greeks and continuing into modern Western philosophy, with René Descartes, to see knowledge as contemplation of an eternal truth. That contemplation is also the root meaning of the word ‘theory’. The knowing subject is a spectator, standing outside the object that is contemplated.

This spectator theory of knowledge has had far ranging implications, spilling over beyond theory of knowledge and science, into views of nature, and of organizations, in management.

In Western philosophy of knowledge it yielded the claim of objective knowledge, and the Cartesian duality of mind and body, and in theory of meaning, with meaning seen as reference to something. Concerning knowledge, the problem then was how cognition is able to grasp reality without being part of it, immersed in it. That yielded the split between idealism, where reality is seen as conceived mentally, and realism, where mind is seen as an inscription in the brain of reality by means of elementary perception.

A better position, in my view, arose in American pragmatist philosophy, some 100 years ago (with Peirce, James, and Dewey), adopted in different ways by continental philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Its view, which I adopt, is the constructivist one that cognitive structures guide action but are also formed in it. Not a static view of contemplation but a process view of involvement. One tries to assimilate perception and experience in existing mental structures, but when fit fails, the mind accommodates to the misfits, in some way, elaborated earlier in this blog. In this way, the knowing subject is involved in the object, and vice versa.

This creates a problem of truth, since knowledge now is a mental construction. In pragmatist philosophy, objective truth is replaced by the notion of ‘warranted assertibility’, where ‘working’ in practice is an important criterion of ‘truth’ or ‘warrant’. Meanings of words depend on use, in ‘language games’, as Wittgenstein proposed. Truth is not a given outcome but a process of dialogue.

The implication is that while scientists should to their utmost to be objective and detached, they cannot fully succeed, and they should recognize that even their thought is involved in premises, disciplinary perspectives and methods, and value judgements, implicit or explicit, in choices and the framing of research questions. To mend this, scientists need to be involved in application of their results, and the ‘stakeholders’ associated with it need to be involved in the formulation of goals and the application of research.

Concerning nature, the outside view, separating man from his environment, has led to an instrumental, manipulative practice, increasingly destructive of the environment. This is connected with the dominant value and virtue of utility in liberal, Western thought, which neglects the intrinsic value of nature, and virtues of care. Instead, dealing with nature should be based on a feeling of being involved in nature,

In management theory and practice, the outside view sees people as instruments, neglecting the intrinsic value of human relationships, and virtues of justice. Economic theory of organization has been governed by the idea that a ‘principal’ (a nicer word than ‘boss’) governs an ‘agent’ (a nicer word than ‘labourer’), sets the goals and targets that the agent must achieve. Supervision is seen as control, measuring performance against pre-set standards.

The absurd situation then arises that people are employed, as professionals, in present ‘knowledge society’, because they have knowledge and skills that management does not have

and yet management, as the ‘principal’, has the pretence of being able to judge what the professionals do.

In the neo-liberal drive of privatization and liberalization of public services (such as health care), and market-like incentives in services that are still run publicly, this idea of control has also proliferated, in top-down ‘accounting for performance’, according to set protocols. This is done in spite of the scientific literature on ‘communities of practice’, which shows that professional practice is too complex and variable, because context-dependent, to be caught in such protocols.

This type of control turned out to be needed because markets don’t really work when users cannot judge quality of the ‘product’ (as in health care). So what was started from a market ideology of freedom from interference, *laissez faire*, ended up in a baroque rigmarole of control.

There is an alternative form of ‘horizontal’ form of control that entails involvement of the control agency in the object of control, which is involved in the specification and application of controls (see item 75 of this blog).

313. From outcome to process

published 4-5-2017

Earlier in this blog, in item 29, I prosed the hypothesis that there is an ‘object bias’ in thought and language. The idea is that in a long period in the evolution of humans, as hunter-gatherers, thought and language have been biased as a result from the need to deal adequately, for survival, with objects moving in time and space, and human action upon such objects. Think of the sabre-toothed tiger, enemies on the prowl, a lost child, an incoming spear, building a shelter, carrying burden, etc.

Then, when abstracts became needed, those were conceptualized as metaphors in terms of such objects and actions. This is helpful, but sets thought on the wrong foot, since abstractions do not behave like such objects in time and space. A chair when carried from one room to another does not drop a leg or change colour, but the meaning of a word changes when moved from one sentence to another.

One of the results, I propose, is that thought is pre-occupied with substance rather than process, to outcomes rather than the processes by which they may or may not be produced.

One salient example, in my experience, is the preoccupation of economists with optimal outcomes, in equilibria, regardless of how they might be achieved. I was confronted with this while working at a business faculty at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Dealing with organizations one cannot just look at outcomes because it is processes, in particular the ‘primary process’ of production, that is the topic at issue.

This difference in thought yielded one of several fundamental obstacles to integrating two faculties, of business and economics, as it the was my task to accomplish at the time, as director of a research institute. I now think that the preoccupation with outcomes is connected with the object bias.

It is a special case of the preoccupation with substance and with stable absolutes, as an ideal of thought, in Western Philosophy. There were exceptions, such as Heraclitus, who saw the world as flow, in contrast with Parmenides. Aristotle in some of his philosophy was oriented to process, of development towards an end, such as growth in nature, and more generally process as the realization of potential. But there has been a dominance of Platonic thought of a higher reality, beyond the chaos, buzz, complexity and change of the observed world, of stable absolutes.

It is also associated with the outsider, 'spectator' view of the thinking subject, observing the world from without rather than being involved in its process, which I discussed in item 309 of this blog.

I think the object bias bedevils thought in a wide range of notions, including happiness, love, thought, truth, meaning, and trust. The deeply rooted inclination is to see these categories ('seeing' is itself one of the metaphors) in terms of object thinking, in terms of 'having' something, 'being in' something, 'working on' something, 'transporting' it, etc. We are 'in love', 'in trouble', 'grasp' knowledge, 'store' information, 'send' information along communication channels', 'have' a body, and 'have' an identity.

I think understanding can be much improved, and with it our 'grasp' of society, by thinking instead in terms of processes, rather than states or outcomes.

In items 6, 124, and 193 of this blog I discussed love as a process of developing 'eros', passionate, romantic love, into 'philia', loving companionship.

In items 8 and 211 I discussed identity as a process of formation

In item 183 I defined happiness as a process.

In items 104 and 264, I discussed truth as a process of dialogue, debate, trying to establish and test 'warranted assertibility'.

In item 168, I discussed the notion of word as a process.

In items 31,35, and 138 I considered economics and learning as a process of trial and error, akin, up to a point, to evolutionary logic, rather than 'intelligent design', in a 'cycle of invention'.

I noted, in items, 128 and 137, that in Eastern philosophy there is more awareness to process, in Buddhism and Taoism. I noted that my 'cycle of invention' seems akin to the cyclical interaction of Yin and Yang.

318. Escape from routine: how does it work?

published 5-6-2017

Routines, where you operate automatically, unconsciously, are useful. They enable you to think about other things while conducting daily activities. Like talking to someone while driving a car.

But the danger is then that you fail to pay attention when conditions escape from the routine, and attention is required. Then something must shock you into awareness, to take remedial action. How does this work?

One explanation is that of the decision heuristic of ‘availability’: you pay attention to what is emotionally loaded, such as danger, or opportunity. That can be irrational, in neglect of things that are important but emotionally less salient, but it does serve to catapult you into awareness of danger.

I have argued before that while decision heuristics are generally considered to be ‘irrational’, there may well be conditions where they helped to survive under the pressures of selection, in evolution. This may be such a case. Immediate attention under imminent danger overrides prudence.

How does that work in the brain? I recently read about an answer from the philosopher Metzinger, as follows.^{vi} The chance of our becoming aware of the goings on in our brain increases to the extent that neurons fire simultaneously which usually do not. Routines are regular patterns of simultaneous firing. Irregularity, outside a routine, triggers awareness.

But awareness is not yet attention. So, the two ideas may be complementary. First, unusual connections trigger awareness, and the extent to which they are emotionally laden triggers attention.

Does escape from routine arise only then, in danger or opportunity? In creativity, unusual connections arise not from an outside shock, but from within, seemingly autonomously, and surprisingly. ‘Eureka’, the inventor cries. One is aware, but it often springs in serendipity, unforced. But it occurs to the prepared mind, previously stocked with knowledge painstakingly collected and mastered. It is an example of how conscious thought can feed unconscious choice or decision.

How about dreams? There, the craziest connections occur, violating all logic. And during the dream, chaotic as it is, there is some sense of self. When awake, consciousness filters unusual connections, and in that sense routine, established cognition is still in place.

How about the higher awareness that mystics and meditation adepts claim? Apparently they make connections that transcend the self, and customary logic and categorization, to connect with a cosmic whole. This has been studied, with the help of brain imaging, and indeed, during the height of meditative trance there is an unusually large area of simultaneous firing in the brain.

How about simultaneous firing in different brains? That is being studied in brain science as well, and it seems to be possible to achieve, with much concentration and training.

Reductionism is a form of scientism: the idea that natural science is the only respectable form of knowledge, on the basis of experimental facts and rigorous, preferably mathematically formalised argument. Reductionism is analytical: it decomposes phenomena into fundamental elements that together explain the whole.

The opposition claims that ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’. In the formation of the whole something is added that cannot be found in the parts. That is called *emergence*. Aristotle already talked about it.

Emergence is akin to *self-organization*. That arises in nature, as in evolution, where forms do not arise from ‘intelligent design’, but from random trials that are selected out when they do not function well enough to survive and replicate.

More generally, in emergence elements have a potential to unfold properties, in interaction with each other, and develop collective properties, depending on the environment.

The fundamental theoretical argument for the novelty that is added in synthesis is the following. The whole, be it an organ, an organism, a brain, a sentence, an organization, a market, or a society, must achieve some coherent functioning to survive in its environment, which determines what works and what does not, and it must incorporate the conditions for it. As a consequence, not everything comes ‘from inside’, from the components, but also from outside, the functional conditions for survival. In that, the whole reflects the external conditions, which did not lie in the parts.

Emergence arises widely in nature and society, on many levels. Chemistry arises from physics, biology from chemistry, evolution from genes, consciousness from neurons, organizations from people, markets from firms, consumers and institutions, societies from people, communities, culture, language and institutions.

In language, the meaning of a sentence depends on the meanings of words in it, but also, the other way around, word meaning also depends on sentence meaning. Earlier in this blog, I used the *hermeneutic circle* to analyse this (items 36, 252 in this blog). Concepts are embedded in sentences, where they obtain one of several potential meanings, but in the action context they can also acquire a new meaning, which shifts the concept. Here, the outside selection lies in the language community, and in what Wittgenstein called *language games*.

Meanings and ideas arise from action in the world. I proposed (in item 29) that this yields an *object bias* in our conceptualization of abstract notions as if they are like things moving in time and space, and in terms of ‘what you can do with them’ (*affordances*). That also connects with the idea from pragmatist philosophy that truth can be seen as ‘what works’.

Relations are emergent. If individuals develop their perception and ideas, and their judgements, in interaction with their physical and social environment, then the course of relationship is fundamentally uncertain. That means that it is not known beforehand what can happen. One may have expectations about what people may do, but one is regularly caught by surprise. One cannot even reliably predict one’s own responses.

In groups, social constellations, complexity increases further, in on the one hand mimicry of conduct and on the other hand rivalry and rebellion, in agreement or conflict. As discussed elsewhere in this blog (item 205), it looks like people have both an instinct for survival, by protecting their interests, and an instinct for altruism, at least within one's own group, where one is prepared to make sacrifices at the cost of self-interest, in what is called 'parochial altruism'.

Organizations and institutions can lead to what I have called 'system tragedy' (items 109, 159, 187 in this blog). The culture of an organization, the (international) markets in which it finds itself, and the public institutions of laws and regulations, form expectations, positions, roles, interests, and entanglements between them, which routinely yield outcomes that were not expected or intended, and where guilt cannot easily be attributed to single individuals, who often could not, or did not dare to act otherwise, given their positions. An example is that of 'the banks'.

History is even more complex. If anything is unpredictable it is that. Look at what has happened in just one year, with the rise of populism, the election of Trump, Brexit, and the rise, apparently out of nowhere, of Emmanuel Macron. With each of those one would have been declared a lunatic if one had predicted it. Where does that complexity come from?

In an earlier item in this blog (item 100), concerning the nature of causality, I analysed the emergence of the Dutch United East India Company (VOC) in the 16th-17th century, as a mix of causal factors of different kinds: accidental conditions of climate and geography, entrepreneurial action, eclipse of competitors, technological and organizational innovations, in more or less accidental 'novel combinations', and conditions of war. If any of those factors had been different, or occurred at another moment, nothing or something entirely different might have occurred.

328. Aversion to love's labour loss

published 12-8-2017

Social psychology has discovered 'loss aversion': people go to greater lengths to prevent loss than to achieve gain.

This is being used in incentives to perform. Rather than giving a reward after good performance, according to the logic of loss aversion it is more effective to give the reward in advance (gain frame), on the condition that it will be revoked in case of bad performance (loss frame).

An objection to this may be that effort (work, learning) should be seen as having intrinsic value. But often that just is not the case.

Here, I want to connect this with a previous discussion (item In this blog) of forms of love. I discussed the possible reasons for love in the form of eros, passionate love, needed as a basis for developing into the more robust philia, loving friendship. Why not go straight to the second and avoid the sound and fury of passion?

I speculated that the function of initial eros is to blind one to the risks of dependence, conflict and disappointment that relationships bring. Without the passion we would not so easily take the plunge.

Here I add, as a second possible reason, the effect of loss aversion. Being rewarded at the start, with the bliss of passion, one is more dedicated to the relationship, under the penalty of losing the love when not committing to the relationship and making sacrifices for it, in love's labour being lost.

The alternative of gradually building up a loving relationship to attain loving friendship in the longer run, would, according to the principle of loss aversion, yield less commitment.

There is yet a third possible line of argument. Recently, it has been confirmed, what was really known earlier, that scarcity can have a positive effect. Under the pressure of scarcity, people focus on efforts to deal with it, solving the problem.^{vii}

However, and this is a newer insight, if scarcity persists, focus can turn into dysfunctional obsession. People then get so absorbed by persistent scarcity that they disregard, can no longer cope, with other matters that also matter.

That one can also recognise in love. Feeling a lack of love, one can focus on generating it, or facilitating it, acquiring it. Pay attention, repair damage. But if that does not yield satisfaction, it can degenerate into obsession for attention or cloying serving that hinders rather than helps the growth of love.

Now, to return to the first explanation of eros as blindness to risk, the initial bliss of eros may limit the focus on getting love, but that may make the relationship more relaxed, less forced, less obsessed, less stressed for getting love.

ⁱ There are exceptions: for David Hume 'reason is the slave of the passions'

ⁱⁱ Colin Bird, *the myth of liberal individualism*, Cambridge University Press 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, 'The politics of virtue', London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

^{iv} As in the case of the control of hospitals, in terms of detailed protocols for work, delegated to health insurance companies, after the change of the system in 2008, in the Netherlands

^v That has led me to explore a lighter form of control that leaves more room for trust, called 'horizontal control', discussed elsewhere in this blog.

^{vi} Thomas Metzinger, *The ego tunnel; The science of the mind and the myth of the self*, 2009, New York: Basic Books.