

45 pieces on The human condition:

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

by Bart Nooteboom, updated February 2020

## 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 Cioran<sup>1</sup>, 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 17-18<sup>th</sup> century, myth was

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<sup>1</sup> 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, 16<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Bird<sup>ii</sup> 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 Pabst<sup>iii</sup>, 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<sup>iv</sup>). As a result, conduct is increasingly regimented and strangled by an accumulation of control.<sup>v</sup>

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.<sup>vi</sup> 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.<sup>vii</sup>

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.

### 329. Art and hope

published 3-8-1917

Recently, Rudi Fuchs, curator for a sculpture exhibition in Amsterdam, associated art with hope. For art, things are not necessarily as they are, can be different. Art offers new ways in and new ways out. Liberation, escape from stagnation or despair. That intrigued me.

Hope is having a goal, positive and realistic expectations of ways to get there, and confidence in agency, ability to do it. Without the realism hope becomes false, wishful thinking. Hope entails an expectation that 'things will be all right', depending in part on one's own actions, but also on outside forces that one cannot control. This brings the notion of hope close to the notion of trust, as I discussed in item 107 in this blog.

What of that applies to art? The new ways in and new ways out. Escape.

A good illustration is a strophe from a poem by Baudelaire, from the section *Spleen et idéal* of his bundle *Les fleurs du mal* (the flowers of evil). Spleen here is heaviness of spirit, existential

anguish, disgust, boredom, paralysis. The hope lies in escaping from it into the ideal, perfection. The title of the poem is *Elevation*. I first give the French text and then my English translation.

*Derrière les ennuis et les vastes chagrins  
Qui chargent de leur poids l'existence brumeuse,  
Heureux celui qui peut d'une aile vigoureux  
S'élancer vers les champs lumineux et serains.*

Behind the troubles and the vast griefs  
That weigh down misty experience,  
Happy is the one who with a powerful wing  
Can launch himself into fields luminous and serene.

Is this picture of art too pretty? How about the Marquis de Sade, Celine, Dostoyevsky? Do they yield hope? Such art also can be seen as an escape, in liberation from constraints of morality and law. But hope is positive, and how positive are those? How, if at all, can this be seen as escape into an ideal? Dostoyevsky said that without God humanity is irreparably evil. Does art here show hopelessness rather than hope?

Art is creative destruction. Perhaps destruction may need to take place first, to make room and create an incentive for the new. Is that how de Sade may be seen: destroying old morality to make room for a new one?

How about the sublime? Think of a hurricane, thunderstorm, or a forbidding mountain. Those inspire awe, astonishment, respect, fear perhaps, transcend the beautiful, and are beyond human grasp and influence. According to Kant it is beyond art, which would only yield a bad imitation of the sublime in nature. It transcends but cannot be achieved, and then lies beyond hope. Yet it is sometimes applied to art, such as a work of Bach or Beethoven, say.

If hope is required for trust, and art can produce hope, one might expect that art can help trust. However, when producing novelty, new ways in and new ways out, art also yields uncertainty, and can produce broken expectations, yielding broken trust. Given its uncertainty, trust requires courage, and that would seem to apply also to art. Art may be an exercise in courage, and thus may help people in learning to manage trust.

So, apart from the intrinsic value of art, it has value for society in bringing transcendence, Baudelaire's 'elevation', and in developing and exercising hope, courage and trust.

333. The curse of identity

published 16-9-2017

In my treatment of identity in this blog (in item 8) I distinguished between individual and collective or cultural identity. Note that the term 'identity' entails sameness, in being identical to oneself, or identical to others belonging to the same cultural identity.

It is becoming a curse how people take collective identity as the basis for life, and for their outlook on society. The trouble with such identity is that it is exclusive: excluding, judging, discriminating, rejecting those that do not belong to that identity.

The notion of identity steps into the trap of essentialism, which, I have argued in this blog (in item 10), derives from an ‘object bias’ in thought (item 29). That bias bases abstractions such as identity, culture, justice, human nature, good and bad, virtue, etc. on metaphors of objects in time and space.

Particularly catching is the container metaphor: one treats a concept as a box in which something is in or out. Here: you have a certain identity or not, and if you do that is because you partake in some essence belonging exclusively to that identity. You are an Aryan or Jew, white or black, male or female, member of a nation or not. You cannot be in two boxes at the same time, or partly in and partly out.

As I argued earlier in this blog (item 209), an alternative conception of identity might be that of a node in networks that is more or less distant from other nodes, in terms of connections that are shared directly or indirectly, yielding a notion of identities that overlap more or less.

As I argued in item 265, individual identity is formed in interaction with other people, and their being different helps us to escape from prejudice and myopia.

I proposed that human cognition has adopted the object bias as a result of a long evolution where adequate identification of things moving in time and space was a prerequisite for survival. In present society it is working against us, jeopardizing the survival of humanity.

Psychologically, and also as an outcome of evolution, identitarianism arises from, and enhances, the ‘parochial altruism’ that I also discussed in this blog (in item 205). Humans have an instinct for altruism within their group, at the price of suspicion against outsiders.

In the notion of identity, I propose, parochial altruism and the container metaphor form a vicious pair. You belong to a identity or you do not, and if you don’t you are suspect.

We should try to loosen the noose of parochial altruism with cultural means, extending the perceived boundary of the group, to extend the reach of altruism, but we are doing the opposite, in the present re-emergence of nationalism and other forms of identitarianism.

There are several ideas of identity formation. One is that of the autonomous individual, emerging from the Enlightenment and liberalism, as a footloose, cosmopolitan, hedonistic individual from nowhere and anywhere. Another form is that of identifying with some single-issue group: pro- or anti- abortion, white supremacists, black supremacists, gender supremacists, animal rights activists, environmental activists, and so on. A third form is identification with a nation’s mythical ‘blood and soil’. On the whole, then, individualism is either supreme or it is lost in group identity. If you are not black you carry the guilt of slavery, if not a female the guilt of male domination, and so on.

What happened with tolerance, recognition and acceptance of differences of opinion, race and religion, with empathy and solidarity across groups, needed for democracy? That was found in forms of both liberalism and socialism that now both seem to be in eclipse. Now, tolerance of other identities comes to be seen as betrayal of one's own identity.

There is more to identity groups becoming segregated and inimical. I will discuss that in the next item.

### 338. The Other as threat or opportunity?

Published 19-10-17

Here I continue my attempts to understand Žižek.

As discussed in item 336 in this blog, according to Žižek the self is hidden, or 'empty' or 'nonexistent' in his parlance, but people adopt the 'phantasmatic' illusion of an identifiable self, the Lacanian 'objet-a'.

Following Althusser, Žižek claims that to become a subject one needs to be addressed by an other. I agree, from my perspective that the self is constructed from interaction in the world, in particular with other people. However, Lacan, and with him Žižek, does not think the subject is constituted by the address from the other, as Althusser thinks, but that this address contributes to the subjects *illusion* of having an objectifiable self, in and of itself, prior to the address.

Now even if that is an illusion, this leaves open the possibility that in fact the subject is constituted by the address of the other, among other forms of interaction between people. And that is my position: the self is in fact constituted by interaction, but thinks he/she already had this self, and that it is the reason he/she is addressed.

Now, the point here is that Žižek also follows Althusser in seeing this address by the other as a threat: 'what does he/she want from me?' or 'Che vuoi?', as Žižek says. Why assume this as a threat? It is, in my view, to be seen as an opportunity, indeed as necessary to have a self. And why is the address seen as a threat if it is seen as being motivated by the prior identity that the subject (erroneously) thinks it already had? Is it not more plausibly seen as a recognition, even appreciation, an expression of interest?

In this blog, and more extensively in an earlier book<sup>viii</sup>, I argued that to have any idea of a self one needs to look at oneself from the perspective of an other. I used the insight from Maxine Sheets-Johnstone<sup>ix</sup> that being suckled by a mother, in spurts of sucking and resting, exchanging coos and gurgles, babies lay the basis for the alternation, give and take, enunciation and assimilation, of conversation. Babies have an apparently instinctive inclination towards being positively open and expectant towards a stranger, as well as an instinct towards suspicion and aversion. It depends on experience which is confirmed as a more enduring trait. Children jostling and cavorting in the school yard are exploring the boundaries of pain and body, as part of developing a sense of self, and a basis for empathy and morality. This contributes to the development of mirror neurons. In a further development, I used the philosophy of Levinas

extensively, also in this blog, to argue that we need the other to have a chance of achieving some of the highest possible form of freedom, namely that of freedom from prejudice.

Indeed, as Althusser and Žižek claim, there is radical uncertainty concerning what the other wants or will do. To take the opportunity of being inspired by the other, one needs the courage to take the risk involved. That is also indispensable for trust. That, in my view, is the most fundamental reason to consider courage a virtue. It is wise, then, not to fall into blind trust. Trust entails giving room for action to another, but when duped, one can reign in this room. Taking inevitable risk, to grasp the opportunity presented by the other, one is also wise to develop resilience to setbacks, and to maintain some reserve to fall back on in case of loss.

I do admit that this is fraught with obstacle and difficulty. I have argued that there is ‘cognitive distance’ between people, which includes intellectual distance, in understanding and meanings, as well as moral distance, in different ethical beliefs and moral impulses.

Now, Žižek conducts his analysis of the subject for his investigation of ideology, and I find that important. If I understand correctly, the argument is as follows. The fearful address by the other needs to be pacified by ascribing some meaning to it that one shares. In fact, as also argued earlier in this blog, actions are largely determined by subconscious impulse, and reasons are mostly rationalizations post hoc. In human interaction, in society, this rationalization takes the form of ideology. We claim reasons for conduct while in fact choice and action is determined by hidden prejudice and impulse. Now, again if I understand correctly, to pacify the threat of the address by the other, one needs to have a shared ideology.

Here, I agree: to cross distance, in particular moral distance, one needs some shared ideology. In terms of Wittgenstein’s language games: one must share the appropriate game, depending on the context. The rules of the game have the same role as ideology. They are arbitrary, and could well be different, in a different game, but they must be observed for this particular game to be played.

Now, what if ideologies are in conflict? If address by the other is seen as a threat, then something that does not fit into one’s own rationalization of conduct is castigated. When the address is seen as an opportunity, on the other hand, one may receive it to question one’s ideology, a possible opening to a new game. But that also requires that one rids oneself of the illusion that the adopted ideology is somehow objectively valid and true, and not the dubious rationalisation that in fact it is.

### 340. Levels of freedom revisited

published 9-11-17

Here I revisit the different levels of freedom that I discussed earlier in this blog (item 49), to make a connection with the discussion of Kant and Žižek in the preceding items.

On the lowest level is the freedom as usually seen in ordinary language: the freedom from constraint or interference. One can do what one likes. This is also called *negative freedom*. God gave Adam and Eve the freedom to sin.

Beyond that there are freedoms in the form of access to sources of 'the good life'. First, there, comes the *freedom of Kant*: freedom in the form of being freed from the impulses of lust, desire, addiction or self-interest, in unconditional obedience to 'the Law', the symbolic order, of what it is 'right' to do, untainted by personal urges or interest. I characterized this as follows: not following what one wants but what one thinks one should want. Kant gave humanity the freedom not to sin.

This leads to the problems identified by Kant and discussed at length by Žižek, that such Law is arbitrary, unclear, ambiguous, indeterminate, and contradictory, depending on contexts of action, and therefore cannot be justified in terms of justice and rationality. Also, it originates from grabs of political power, and therefore needs to be hidden. As a result, according to Žižek some illusionary, non-existent ideal 'objet-a', is taken to stand in for it, absconded and dressed up in ideology. The *freedom of Žižek* now is to break free from it. Since Kant defined deviation from the Law as evil, Žižek accepts that this freedom is evil, and most evil, or 'diabolically' evil, as he calls it, when it is not motivated by desire or self-interest, but as a matter of principle, in pursuit of a new symbolic order. I characterized this as a change of what one thinks one should want.

Beyond that, I claimed, on the highest level there is freedom in the form of ability not to exercise one's views and convictions about the good but to change them; not to change or replace the Law, but one's thinking about it. By many, this change of oneself is held to be impossible. I argued that it is possible but for it one needs the opposition from others with their views and convictions. I was inspired to this by Levinas' 'philosophy of the other', so I now call it the *freedom of Levinas*.

My point now is that this latter freedom is the freedom needed to make democracy work.

There still is the issue, a recurrent theme in this blog, how to escape from the symbolic order. For Foucault: how to achieve an authentic life, and he had no answer. For Žižek, a break with it is evil, even 'diabolically' so. I think there is way out.

In my discussions of meaning, I used the difference, proposed by de Saussure, between the established, synchronic order of 'langue', and the creative, open-ended, diachronic process of 'parole', living language use, which yields openness of meaning. I tried to formulate that also in terms of the *hermeneutic circle*.

I now propose that something similar applies more widely, in the 'excess' or 'surplus' that Žižek claimed for the 'objet-a'. If the order cannot be fully specified, it is open, and this yields a possible escape. The indeterminacy of the 'objet-a' is not to be deplored but to be celebrated, whether it concerns our view of objects in the world, our self, or the symbolic order. Imperfection on the move. If this is accepted, exit from the existing order may be odd, quaint, and will certainly cause some isolation, lack of recognition, and loneliness, but it is not diabolical. People should read poetry more.

A Hegelian principle is that one gets to know something best in its failure.

This appeared in my discussion of what I made of Levinas (item 61 in this blog): in order to achieve the highest level of freedom, which is freedom from pre-conceptions and errors, one needs opposition from the other.

It also appears in the Popperian principle of falsification in science. One cannot prove the truth of a proposition on the basis of evidence, but one can falsify it. Criticism of failures in science is needed, in the forum of science, for science to succeed.

It appears in democracy: cumbersome and often inefficient as it is, political opposition is needed to prevent survival of failed policies. In a centralized, non-democratic, authoritarian regime such failure is not recognized or acknowledged, to protect the prestige and position of the regime. The strength of democracy is that it can fail (item 339).

It appears in innovation: the failure of an innovative venture is not waste, but has value in showing what does not work, as a basis for further research and development. Entrepreneurs serve society in their failures.

The necessity arising from failure of what exists is the mother of invention.

Evolution arises from a selection environment that eliminates failures to fit. Humans, however, have a distinctive capacity to deliberately and consciously select or construct a favourable niche, and there failure may fail to succeed.

Similarly, a virtue of markets is that competition ensures that no waste of resources arises from failures that survive.

The present perversions of capitalism serve to clarify why and how capitalism fails, and to understand some of the sources of populism (item 47) and shortcomings of the political left.

The most fruitful failures are those that could not be foreseen, and were in that sense uncertain (as opposed to risky), because they most radically close off existing avenues, to open up new ones.

However, failures need to accumulate, to clarify the boundaries of validity of the old, to build up motivation to drop the old and search for the new, and to give indications of directions for the new. This progressive form of conservatism was recognized in a famous debate in the philosophy of science, between Popper, Kuhn and Feyerabend, in the 1960's, in which Popper consented that instantaneous falsification, at the merest falsification, was not rational.

In ontology and epistemology, the need for outside opposition to success, in order to recognize failure, to motivate and indicate avenues for novelty, is the most convincing argument for objects in the world to exist independently from ideas, as a selection environment for the evolution of ideas.

Žižek argued that strict, universal rules demand too much from people, who are imperfect and are also caught in the vagaries of contingency, so that for the rules to succeed there must be some space for deviance, failure to conform (item 337).

All this is consistent with my argument for 'imperfection on the move' (items 19 and 127).

### 365. System tragedy, populism and conspiracy of the elite published 7-4-1918

In this blog, in items 109, 159, 187, I discussed what I called 'system tragedy'. In many areas of society, such as banking, education, housing corporations, health care, defence, policy makers get entangled in Gordian knots, sticky spaghetti, of partly shared, partly rival interests, roles and positions, interests, self-interest, ideologies, personal ethics, diffusion of responsibilities. As a result, people are compelled to compromise themselves with policies that are against their ethics and sense of justice.

They may like to change the system, or rebel, or quit, but cannot afford to do so until others do so as well. This constitutes prisoners' dilemmas that lock people into what they know is not right. The obvious case is that of banks.

In my discussion of trust I distinguished between trust in competence and trust in intentions. I see system tragedy mostly as a matter of system incompetence rather than bad personal intentions.

In the emerging populism, however, system tragedy is framed as a matter of bad intentions: conspiracy against the people by the ruling elite. Thus it becomes a matter of high political urgency to somehow mitigate system tragedy. How is this to be done?

People should have more character and courage to follow their ethical sense and rebel against the system. But that is easy to say, if the price is being ostracized, isolated, or expelled from the system.

It is known from system theory that strong coupling of disparate parts decreases the adaptability of the system. Therefore, perhaps the system should be decoupled for the sake of ability to change, in dynamic efficiency, even if that yields some loss of static efficiency of scale or complementarity, and an increased need for negotiation between uncoupled parts. Internal, invisible haggling then becomes more visible and subject to public scrutiny.

In the case of the banks: separate the saving and loans activity from the investment and trade in shares.

Many systems, in business and public services, have become entangled out of a perverse drive towards integration, in an excess of mergers and acquisitions while staying apart and collaborating in alliances would yield more flexibility and adaptability.

That is due, in part, to misguided, exaggerated expectations of efficiencies from a large scale, with neglect of its inefficiencies.

But it is due more, I think, to an established mental frame of hierarchy.

Another aspect of system tragedy lies in a separation, a distancing between management and work. That is due, in part, to the need, in a large scale organization, for intermediate layers of hierarchy between the top and the ‘front line’ of the work floor. Here again, a break-up into smaller, more autonomous units is required.

But perhaps most important is the need for a shift towards a mental frame of virtue ethics, also pleaded for elsewhere in this blog, with the classical virtues of reasonableness, courage, moderation, and justice. Reasonableness in seeing the merit of other views. Courage not to become complicit in system failure. Moderation, in not being obsessed with one’s own interest and reward. And justice in maintaining equity, rights, and inclusiveness.

### 367. From tribes to systems and back again                      published 21-4-1918

One form of collaboration is based on mutual dependence, with a shared fate, in long-lasting, highly personalized relationships, with a shared ethic of mutual support and altruism. It can only exist on a small scale.

This functioned in nomadic tribes of hunter-gatherers during much of human evolution, until the settlement in sedentary, growing agricultural communities, some 10,000 years ago.

Such tribes are vulnerable in three ways. One is the risk of infiltration of egotistic opportunists who prey on indigenous altruism, getting the upper hand in evolutionary competition. As a remedy for this, humanity developed ‘parochial altruism’, as discussed earlier in this blog, with altruism within the group and mistrust and discrimination with regard to outsiders coming in.

A second risk is lack of internal variety, of genes, which yields inbreeding, and of skills and cognition needed to yield division of labour and to breed innovation. However, there is evidence that tribes managed to exchange ideas and occasionally people (brides) with other, different tribes, in trade relations, carefully conducted, at arms length.

A third risk is inside domination of the population by a dictator or a small ruling elite that exploits a population that has no opportunity for escape. However, that happens also in larger groups. But, apparently, often in small communities there was a highly democratic political system, with rotation of leadership between members of the community.

Conditions changed in the emergence of large agricultural communities. Relations became less direct and more impersonal, in the emergence of legal systems and hierarchies, with a divergence between those levels, and between socio-economic groups, and the emergence of classes, which brought inter-group rivalry into society.

However, it also brought scale advantages of specialization and shared resources, more internal diversity, and more mobility between inside groups than had been the case between outside groups.

The personalized tribal order eroded. I quote from Stoelhorst & Richerson (2013)<sup>x</sup>: ‘Modern organizations are cultural work-arounds that build on tribal instincts that originally evolved to sustain cooperation on a much smaller scale’.

Perhaps present populism can, in part, be seen as a revolt from such tribal instincts, against depersonalized, elite-governed, centralized bureaucratic societies that yield what before, in this blog, I called ‘system tragedy’.

The challenge is to find a middle between the two: between small, closed, inward turned tribes, and large, anonymized systems.

One solution is what in network theory is called ‘small worlds’. There, small scale communities with strong internal ties, in combination with weak ties with other such communities. This allows for tribal-like coherence as well as variety from exchange and contacts. As I indicated above, there is evidence that ancient tribes engaged in such structures.

For advantages of collaboration between groups that are diverse in competence they need not integrate into larger wholes. In fact, staying apart, in more or less durable alliances, is more productive, more flexible, and better at reserving and feeding diversity. It also gives more opportunity for smaller scale communities that fit better with our tribal genes.

However, wave after wave of mergers and acquisitions between firms have overruled that potential, with the urge to profit from economies and politics of scale to meet challenges and opportunities from wider markets, in globalization. Economies of scale are a familiar phenomenon. By politics of scale I mean the opportunities for global firms to press governments for advantages, under the threat of taking their employment and investment elsewhere. For the ‘platform’ organizations, such as Facebook, Google, Amazon, etc., a new advantage of large scale is that information on choices made in consumption, voting and contacts yields more combinative value, for selling the data for targeted advertising, with the number and range of data, to the point that these organizations build monopolies.

In the process, the advantages of large scale are paraded and the disadvantages are downplayed or hidden.

Now, the clamour of populism demands more influence of citizens on government. That may be achieved by decentralization of decision making to local communities, such as municipalities, which is now under way. People are also gradually forming small communities to share housing, a windmill, a bank of solar cells and a vegetable garden. Also, increasingly young people are surrendering employment opportunities to offer their own services of many kinds independently. Some large firms offer far-going independence to divisions.

So, in the long run, society seems to have been moving first from tribes to centralized systems, and then, via system tragedy, back to tribal forms again.

### 376. Will humanity survive its cultural evolution?

Published 23-6-2018

It has become customary to say that the biological evolution of humanity has been overtaken by its cultural evolution, and to applaud that: we are making our own destiny, and things move faster. I wonder. I doubt that humanity will survive that evolution.

There are two problems with the claim.

The first point is whether cultural development really is like evolution. The logic of evolution is based on the three factors of variety, selection by a 'selection environment', and transmission. In biology there is a distinction between 'interactors', the carriers of genes, which may or may not survive selection, and 'selectors', the genes that are carried and transmitted by the carriers that survive.

What are the equivalents in cultural evolution? The equivalents of genes, the selectors, are ideas, it is claimed, called 'memes' (derived from the word 'memory'). They survive and proliferate according to the interest they generate. What are the interactors: the carriers of ideas? Not only their inventors but also the people or institutions that adopt them? When ideas do not survive, the carriers still do, and may learn from it and come up with other ideas. They do not necessarily cease to exist. And the ideas may be picked up later, even after the death of its generators. That often happens.

Transmission takes place by communication, through different media. In the process they are interpreted and thereby distorted, and thus get mixed up with the process of the generation of novel ideas. The equivalent of that in biological evolution is copying errors of genes, which do happen, but not as systematically as interpretative variation in communication.

More importantly, the selection environment must be independent from the units that are selected, the interactors. In other words, there should be little *co-evolution*, where the interactors can affect their selection environment, create their own selection. In nature that does happen, for example in symbiosis, but there also this is much more limited than in culture.

In the economy the selection environment is supposed to be markets. But in marketing producers affect the choices of consumers. Large multinationals put pressure on government to give in to their demand in rules and regulations, such as taxes, competition policy, and protection of the environment, on the threat of moving their business abroad when not satisfied. Politicians create new political movements. New media are created. Scientists who cannot get their papers published in existing journals create their own, new journals. In democracies, laws, regulations and other institutions are adapted to the will of the people.

What is to a considerable extent autonomous in the present selection environment, is technical development. It is governed by what sells and what is technologically possible. That is very

difficult to contain within the constraints of ethical considerations. Market considerations mostly win. Part of that problem is the one of *externalities*: what is preferred by individual consumers and firms often does not align with what is good for the collective.

The second point is that the outcome of evolution, any evolution, is not necessarily 'good'. Evolution does not necessarily produce improvement. That depends on the selection environment. In cultural evolution, now satisfaction of desire is the dominant selection mechanism, at the expense of other values. If tolerance and justice are in the way of individual material and emotional satisfaction, then for electoral reasons they are held back.

In the present culture expression, hypes and emotions determine what survives and proliferates, at the expense of reason, facts, knowledge and public interest. Fake news wins. The environment, which was the old election environment, is not part of market mechanisms. The future, and future generations, are subservient to the present.

In this way humanity cannot survive, and will succumb to its own evolution.

The symptoms are becoming increasingly clear. Increasing inequality, injustice, racism, nationalism, egotism and narcissism, and blind, compulsive consumerism. Wars will lead to correction, in a renewed experience of shared hardship, or to ruin.

378. The good life: is it enough?

Published 7-7-2018

In this blog I have argued for acceptance, even enjoyment, of imperfection, while keeping it moving, in development of the self, without God or a hereafter, other than what one leaves behind after one's death. I argued for a good life in contributing to that hereafter, accepting that it is enough and can be a joy if in the process one makes the best possible use of one's talents. Of course, this depends on conditions. For people in disasters of war there may be no access to a good life.

Is that really enough?

Dostoyevsky proposed that without God humans fall into a moral abyss.

It is claimed that without a God people grasp at some superstition to replace it. Some other absolute, universal and unchanging, Žižek's object-a, perhaps, dressed up and veiled in ideology.

In neo-liberal ideology, the market is the substitute missionary superstition, held to apply always and everywhere.

Or a scientist's Platonic ideal of objective truth, the dream of reason.

So, is there some hidden superstition in my view of 'imperfection on the move'. Or is it not really adequate for satisfying the human craving for significance?

As discussed in his blog, my answer to Dostoyevsky is as follows: I propose debatable ethics, an Aristotelian virtue ethics, with commitment to *phronesis*, practical wisdom. With the virtues of being reasonable, courage, moderation, and justice, mastering the art of trust.

My answer to Plato is truth as warranted assertibility: the exercise of logic, search and respect for facts, and practical workability.

My answer to liberalism is that yes, we need markets, but they are imperfect and have moral limits, require restraint by regulation, and a test against virtues.

One may hope that after death the movement of imperfection continues, in new ways, conducted by new generations. One needs hope not in a passive sense of waiting to see, but in an active sense of having a goal, seeing ways to achieve them, and confidence in one's ability to do so. This needs courage, to face the uncertainties involved.

So, without a God, I do maintain the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love in the form of what Gabriel Marcel called 'brotherhood', and love in the form of *philia*.

In 'being in the world', the individual forms itself in interaction with that world. For imperfection to be on the move, one should grasp the opportunity of opposition by others, to escape from one's prejudices. That requires empathy, the ability to understand the position of others and what moves them.

It requires openness to surprise, the willingness and ability, the resilience, to absorb disappointments.

### 344. Disasters of illusory perfection

Democracy is a mess. Much criticism of it is understandable and justified, given the many mishaps, inconsistencies, errors, and major and minor injustices. However, criticism overshoots when obsessed with the illusion of perfection, in consistent, rational, intelligent design. That is like demanding a leopard to change its spots.

Democracy can work only in its imperfection. It is wrought from compromises between largely irreconcilable political ideologies, and that is how it should be. Ideals get lost in translation. This inevitably yields outcomes no one can reliably predict, and many will not like. The drive for perfection, without errors and inconsistencies, in rational design, can only be satisfied by dropping ideologies, which leads an inscrutable technocracy, as has been happening in Europe, or by imposing a single master ideology, which leads to authoritarianism.

Criticism is crucial but can only contribute to imperfection on the move, in 'bricolage', as Levi-Straus called it.

A first paradox is this. On the one hand democracies entail rival ideologies, but on the other hand one must allow for imperfections in their compromises, which requires a non-dogmatic adherence to one's ideology.

A second paradox is this. On the one hand democracies require transparency of motives, but often ideals are paraded as reasons while in fact the reasons lie in electoral concerns. Policies must sell to voters, to ensure the next electoral victory, but this must be hidden in ideological rhetoric.

Ideologies that win in the tug of democracy often produce uninformed, wrongheaded decisions that go foul, producing economic hardship or horrors of war, but this must be hidden in twists of historical facts.

In organization science there is the notion of 'espoused theory' and 'theory in use'. The first is the ideological lore, the second what actually happens to serve hidden interests. There is something similar in politics: espoused policy and policy in use.

Take, for an illustration, the recent financial crisis in Greece. The then minister of economic affairs, Yanis Varoufakis, rationally argued, quite correctly, that a substantial part of the Greek debt had to be cancelled in order to give Greece some basis for economic growth, needed to repay any debt. The IMF agreed with him, but the Eurogroup of EU finance ministers did not. In the corridors, Varoufakis was told he was right but should not push his argument and should conform.

Conform to what? A rational reason for the EU was to set an example to prevent other countries for also hiving off their debt onto the citizens of the EU. After all, that is also what the banks had done, and efforts were now made to prevent that in the future as well. Was that the real reason? The result was that not the Greek banks were saved but the Banks in Germany and the Netherlands that held the claims on the Greek banks. Was that the result from pressure from those banks? Perhaps. I suspect that the real reason rather was fear of the rising populist sentiment in the Netherlands and Germany 'not to give away any more money to the lazy Greeks'. This is devious and dishonest, and highly unjust to the Greek population that bore the hardship of the consequences. Yet, there is political purpose involved beyond electoral self-interest. Emerging populism had to be pacified to avoid the disaster of it taking over.

This illustrates how different rationalities and expediencies may be in conflict that cannot be resolved to the benefit of all.

The point now is that this is happening all the time. It is too easy to simply blame it on 'conspiracies of the elite' to their own advantage. There is that too, no doubt, but the main problem is that of 'system tragedy'. This gives no reason to give up criticism, but that criticism must see through the imperfection of the system to be effective, to make the imperfection move, knowing that perfection is unattainable. The task of critics and the media is, I think, to see through the espoused policies and expose the policies in use, and bring those out into the open for debate.

Another illustration is the refugee crisis in the Middle East. It has been claimed, correctly I think, that a major cause of it was Western military intervention in Iraq and Syria, that were secular countries, tolerating different faiths (though with tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims). The interventions led to wars, and the emergence of ISIS, which yielded calamitous numbers of deaths and floods of refugees. Religious tolerance disappeared (and the rift between Sunni and Shi'ite deepened). True, but what is the implication? Does this yield an argument for unlimited absorption of refugees by western countries? It does, and it might even be feasible, but the political reality, here again, is the populist disgust of refugees. Even Angela Merkel had to renege on her exceptionally courageous aim for unlimited entry.

In financial markets consumers are told that success in the past yields no guarantee for the future. In politics failures in the past yield no guarantee for redress in the future. Instead, the blame is covered up. Criticism is needed to prevent this and bring it into the open, to move imperfection, for lessons to be learned, and to achieve the best possible redress. Moral arguments of responsibility will not win the day, but they may limit the losses.

### 383. Silly simplicity

published 11-8-2018

Many concepts that play an important role in public debate are ambiguous: they have a variety of meanings, and often it is not clear which is at issue. Think of God, democracy, justice, power, liberalism, identity, trust, love, truth, meaning, good and bad, culture, beauty, art, causality, change, freedom, and more. Discussants bash each other in disagreement, thinking they are talking about the same thing while they are not. These are slips of simplification, of reducing many-sided concepts to simple, reductive caricatures.

Take atheism, for example. That depends on what meaning you assign to God. Some people say Spinoza was not an atheist because he was passionate in recognizing God as the primary principle from which all else flows, the top axiom of the mathematical system of his *Ethics*, written, as Spinoza said, 'more geometrico', in the manner of geometry, with axioms from which successive theorems are derived. He protested against being seen as an atheist, and being punished for it. Yet he was an atheist in not recognizing a personal, providential, loving, caring God, and that was the operative meaning of God to Spinoza's contemporaries.

Take liberalism. I am a liberal in being in favour, for want of something better, of a liberal parliamentary democracy with freedoms of expression, religion, association, and election, and the separation of powers. I am not a liberal in favouring laissez faire markets. I do not adopt the utility ethics of liberalism. And then, arguing the shortcomings of markets I run the risk of being called illiberal.

Take democracy. Authoritarian leaders call their states democracies because the leaders were chosen in elections that were free, more or less. But democracy requires more: the features of liberal constitutional democracy specified above. But those are never perfect. How democratic is it if leaders can only be elected at great cost, for which they need sponsorship from business, whose interests they then have to protect? Currently there is spreading complaint in European democracies, in populist movements, that ruling elites have distanced themselves from the lives

and interests of the people. The claim next is that representative democracy has outlived itself, and forms of more direct democracy should be used, such as a referendum, where the will of the majority is imposed without debate on the rights of minorities.

Take power. People complain about ‘people in power’ in a democracy and at the same time cry out for more effective leaders who have the power to make decisions where inept democracies are caught in indecision. Behind this lies the confusion between negative power, limiting or restraining choice, and positive power, offering new options and more room for choice. The authoritarian leader projects himself as offering the second while falling back on the first, in his imperfection, which yields mistakes that with his power he can hide.

Take trust. Some see it as control, constraining opportunities or incentives for doing harm, while others see it precisely as something going beyond control, motivating people to do right not because they have no alternative or need the reward, but because they want to, on the basis of ethical or moral conviction, social customs and connections, or friendship.

As I argue elsewhere (in item 29 of this blog), this wrong-headed perspective on universals is part of what I call the ‘object bias’ in human thought: universals are treated as if they were specific particulars, like objects moving in time and space, with a well-defined identity across contexts. In fact, they are objects of a different kind, with meanings depending on time and place.

### 392. Greed and urge to manifestation                      published 13-10-2018

Theories of capitalism usually depart from the assumption of greed: the urge towards profit and income. People are driven to pursue them to survive, in a job or in a market, under the regime of competition, in shareholder capitalism.

But perhaps more important than greed and survival is the urge to manifest oneself: to ‘make a difference’, to be noticed, acquire attention or power. Salaries are not only sources of income but also signals of success in a power game.

The philosopher Plato spoke of reason as a charioteer that tries to reign in two horses: one of *eros*, desire, and one of *thymos*, the urge to self-manifestation. The philosopher Spinoza called it *conatus*. The philosopher Nietzsche claimed that the urge to power is stronger than the urge towards survival.

One can appreciate that: it is also the urge of ambition, to ‘make something of your life’, and to ‘make a contribution to society’. That is also, more than profit, a drive for independent entrepreneurs. And they feel wronged when set aside as mere money grabbers.

An outcome of a mountain of research on happiness is that happiness consists of a combination of ‘pleasure and purpose’, in giving ‘sense’ to life. That concerns something bigger than yourself, or *transcendence*. That can be vertical, towards a God or heaven, but also horizontal,

towards society. Not one's own immortality but a contribution to what you leave behind at death. And if in that you make the best use of your talents, that can be pleasurable.

Then the drive to manifestation can be a virtue, and virtue ethics makes room for it, provided it is accompanied by, or is held in check, by the charioteer, in virtues of reason, moderation and justice.

However, success often leads to a neglect of such virtues, in self-aggrandisement, a feeling of being superior, elevated, 'beyond the law'.

Money and manifestation are both addictive, not only for managers but also for stars in thirst for applause, and for scientists in search of publication scores and citations.

In capitalism, both greed and the urge for self-manifestation have become institutionalised, ingrained, in business culture, fed by managers having followed courses in economics in which they were told that self-interest rules supreme, as the motor of the economy. It has become an internal ethic that drives careers, salaries, and bonuses.

When confronted with increasingly vociferous critique from society, the inmates of these institutions honestly feel treated unfairly: they are only doing what society needs. Even supervisory boards of firms, having the task to correct management, go along, because those boards are recruited from the wider population of managers of other firms, sharing the same internal ethics and habits of thought.

So, part of the change needed is to compose such boards differently, with people not only from other firms, and not only as representatives of shareholders, but also from other groups of 'stakeholders', such as employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, and society at large, in particular with a view to the longer term future, in the interests of future generations and the environment.

### 397. Power, dependence, control and trust published 17-11-2018

Economists shy away from discussions of power, because power should not play a role in supposedly anonymous market forces. Economists do talk of market power as a disturbance of markets by monopolies, oligopolies and firms erecting entry barriers to markets. That is to be fought by competition authorities. But power is more widespread. Power creates dependence. But it can also be positive. Even monopoly can be beneficial.

I use the (customary) definition of power as having influence on the choices of others. It can be positive, in an extension of options for choice, and freedom of choosing from them, or negative, in reducing them.

If for choice one is dependent upon another, than he/she has power over you. One can avoid or reduce that by avoiding him/her or by creating counter-power, by constraining the actions of the other. Trust is leaving room for conduct for others, control is constraining it. Control can result

in a vicious circle of accumulating mutual constraint. A danger looms of excessive oversight and control.

What forms and sources of dependence are there? One is that the other has a unique offer, with few adequate alternatives. That is the power of monopoly. Or there is no way out, no exit: you are locked in. That is the power of enforcement. Or there are incentives to submit to power, for the sake of income, position, protection or prestige.

How to deal with power?

One can fight negative power by constraining the room for power play, and punishing it by means of contracts, legal coercion. However, the specification of activities, rights and duties constrains action, and can act as a straightjacket that inhibits innovation. Contracts are also costly and may be difficult to enforce, particularly if it is difficult to monitor the partner's conduct.

One can also exert direct hierarchical control by taking over the partner, becoming his/her boss. That is a cop-out: one does not face the challenge of collaboration between independent partners.

One can also employ a reputation mechanism, where the partner will not cheat for fear of losing his reputation. Or one can use a hostage, in the form of some commercially sensitive information one has of the partner, with the threat, often implicit, not pronounced, to divulge it when the partner misbehaves. The hostage may also take the form of a package of shares that one has in the partner's business that one can sell to someone with the intent of a hostile take-over of the partner.

There are also more constructive, benevolent ways of dealing with power.

In relations of collaboration there is the following 'paradox of specific investments'. To create unique novelties, in innovation, connecting each other's competences, one typically needs 'specific investments', dedicated to the relation, that have no use elsewhere. That makes dependent: if the relation breaks, the investment is rendered useless. If the investment is asymmetric, mostly on one side in the relationship, dependence is one-sided. On the other hand, if the investment makes you special, offering something unique, that gives countervailing power. A monopoly, in fact. This can generate a race not to the bottom but to the top: partners keep investing in themselves to maintain a unique offer.

Another possibility is to demand shared payment and ownership of the specific investment. Yet another is to make the partner dependent in some other way, by offering some other unique benefit, such as access to a market, a brand name, special knowledge, technology, or a patent, or to some other resource (a lobby, perhaps).

One may also rely on other sources of reliability that are not oriented towards control, such as trust based on ethics or personal bonds of friendship, family, clan, or custom.

With the latter, however, one can get caught in systems of paternalism and enforced loyalty that does not allow for exit, thus imposing another constraint from power. Obligatory bonds limit the variety and freedom of outside contacts needed for learning and innovation.

Sometimes there is no alternative to such personal bonding, as in countries where there is no institutional basis outside personal relationships, such as a legal system to support contracts, reputation systems, or a shared ethic and morality. I found that to apply, for example, for different reasons, to Japan and the Ukraine.

In Japan the reason is a strong tradition of family values, which is now weakening. In the Ukraine the reason is widespread corruption and lack of a reliable legal and democratic order and justice.

### 403. Mimesis and role models

published 24-12-2018

René Girard proposed a theory of ‘mimetic desire’. Desire does not arise from within the individual but from mimicry, imitation of what others do. The closer one is to the other, the stronger this desire is, mixed with envy and grudges when not having equal access.

This leads on to mimetic violence, where rivalry and grudge escalate to the point that the original object of desire is lost from sight, and the grudge itself is imitated, evokes anger that is in turn imitated, and his escalates into mutual violence.

That leads to the need for a scapegoat, often quite arbitrary, to load off the blame onto.

That, in turn, according to Girard, leads on to the elevation of the scapegoat as a divinity, to carry the blame, and to constitute a taboo, to prevent a re-kindling of the violence, and to be pacified with sacrifice and ritual.

And that, Girard argues, is the beginning and the basis of all culture.

I want to give some opposition to all this.

In his early and late work, Girard allowed for a more beneficial view of imitation, which can generate empathy and sensitivity to political problems. I want to support the latter and expand on it.

In my analysis of causality, and its application, at several places in this blog, I adopted Aristotle’s multiple causality, which includes the exemplary cause, a model to be imitated or a role model to be followed (items 96 and 99 in this blog).

For example, as a master of phronesis, Aristotelian practical wisdom, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela served as role models. I noted that since good practice, also in professions, cannot always be captured in closed protocols, since much practice is too rich, i.e. too context-

dependent and variable, an example to be followed may be the only effective form of guidance, leaving some room for personal interpretation of the ideal.

Such leeway for interpretation is not only beneficial for motivation and the intrinsic value of work, but also under conditions of uncertainty where no optimal choice of policy can be established and codified in advance, but room is needed for adapting to what emerges in new options and conditions.

While Girard associates imitation with envy and threat, that is not necessarily so. Similarly, in item 338 I opposed the view, propounded by Žižek and Lacan, of the other in terms of threat rather than also of opportunity. At several places in this blog I argued that opposition from the other helps to escape from one's prejudice, and to learn and grow.

Also, in imitation an innovation realises its potential, becomes established, and there is nothing wrong with that. That is how people get to benefit from the innovation.

Next, imitation with variation is a source of further invention and innovation. I showed that in my 'cycle of invention', in items 31 and 35 in this blog. That arises, in particular, when some existing practice is carried into a new context, in 'generalisation', to be imitated there, but then meets with new challenges, for which the first step is to differentiate the practice, tapping form memory of earlier trials and applications.

There is also an alternative view of the scapegoat, as designated by an authoritarian leader to load off the blame for not fulfilling the promises by which he captured the population.

I do not wish to deny that imitation can also be negative, in envy and rivalry, leading to an escalation of conflict and violence, as Girard argued.

However, in that there is also something else at play, as I argued in item 48 in this blog. That is associated with the idea of a hierarchy of needs (due to Maslow), with at the basis, on the most primary level, the most fundamental, physiological needs of food and sex, and safety and shelter. In that, people are more similar, and hence more rivalrous, than on the 'higher' levels of a need for social recognition and self-realization. There, I proposed, people differ more, and are less rivalrous, less involved in a zero-sum game, more complementary, in opportunities to learn from each other, so that beneficial imitation may be more prevalent.

#### 404. From a new social conservatism to a new socialism published 5-1-2019

I have been wondering whether what I have been writing in this blog adds up to a coherent political ideology. I have recently been triggered in this by an article in the New York Review of Books (20 December 2018), by Mark Lilla on 'Two roads for the new French right'. It brought into focus the rise of Marion Maréchal, niece of Marine le Pen, with a deviation from the latter's National Front, with the contours of a more coherent, intriguing new Christian social conservatism.

Here I summarize that account and then compare it to my views, leading in a direction that is somewhat similar but also quite different, amounting, I think, to a new form of socialism.

With populism on the right, as with Marine le Pen and Donald Trump, this new conservatism shares nationalism and a rejection of globalization, the EU, multiculturalism, and mass immigration. However, it does accept multinational coordination, as long as it leaves national identities and their variety intact.

It is against the EU for its globalized policies and its neoliberal orientation towards the individualistic, egoistic *homo economicus*, its corresponding focus on markets and its neglect of a social orientation, with iniquitous austerity policies.

It harbours, along with a tradition of Christian democracy, and with old-style American Christian ethics, the old, organic view of humanity as communitarian and ‘organic’, and of family values, with a traditional child-bearing role for women, rejecting same-sex marriage. The catholic church has a long term tradition with communitarian values in convents or monasteries, and the protestant church with local, voluntaristic humanitarian projects.

With the green left this new conservatism shares its sense of solidarity with the poor and neglected, as well as a commitment to environmental ideals.

Where do I stand on all this?

With this social conservatism I share the environmentalism and the social view of humanity, rather than the liberal view of the autonomous individual, with, instead, a more organic communitarian view, with a re-invigoration of local communities.

However, together with that I value diversity, multiculturalism, not only between but also within nations. Also I do not wish to return to old family strictures, and do not see why LGBT’ers could not also flourish as members of local communities.

Also, I think that we need the EU for further integration in the areas of foreign policy, defence, immigration, security and financial policy (for equitable taxes, control of banking). However, and here I agree with this social conservatism, we need a more social Europe. I think awareness of this is growing in the EU. That includes less iniquitous austerity policies for countries with failing finance, on the condition of effective, equitable taxes, control of spending and corruption, but also a constraint on lobbies of large firms that yield a race to the social bottom, and a moderation of salaries and bonuses. The purpose, the mission, of business is to satisfy needs in society. The most pressing need now is to save the environment. Business is dragging its feet and thereby fails in its mission.

For this I have pleaded for a shift from utility ethics to a virtue ethics, with the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, moderation and justice.

We cannot do without markets, but there are limits to how far they should go, and there need to be measures against market imperfections.

How, then, does my position compare with socialism? On many points it is similar, except that socialism has let itself be side-tracked, since the 1980's, by neo liberalist ideology, and has become too individualist and consumerist, neglecting social solidarity, community, and the environment.

It seems to me that if the new social conservatism develops, a coalition should be possible between that and a new socialism and Christian democracy, all sharing the social and environmental, and making compromises concerning the EU, on the condition of a revised, socio-economic orientation, replacing neo-liberalism, while preserving multiculturalism and immigration.

416. The thirst for recognition: where does it come from? Published 3-3-2019

In a recent book<sup>xi</sup> Francis Fukuyama traced present identity politics to a fundamental human need for recognition and respect.

I agree that there is this fundamental urge towards recognition and respect, and it is enlightening to look at it as a source of identity politics. However, I think it is an error to identify this with 'thymos' as a fundamental human urge, as Fukuyama does.

The notion of thymos goes back to Plato, for example, who used the image of reason as a charioteer who has to keep in check two wild horses: eros (desire) and thymos.

Thymos is spiritedness, an urge to manifest oneself, in excellence, anger, battle, discovery, heroism. Often this is indeed accompanied with the thirst for fame, recognition, but that is not necessarily so.

Nietzsche is an example of someone who valued thymos in the form of creative destruction, in transcendence of the self, while I am sure that he would despise the urge to gain recognition for it. Thymos can be its own goal and reward, for the intrinsic value of it, in 'making something of oneself', of one's life, not necessarily for the extrinsic value of using it to gain recognition. Also, everyone has the urge to recognition and respect, while not everyone is driven by thymos.

Also, why, then, should the urge for recognition be accompanied by the urge to conform to group expectations and values, in group identity? Doesn't that go against thymos as the urge to distinction?

However that may be, I do grant that the urge for recognition is fundamental and probably quite universal, and if it does not derive from thymos, where does it come from?

I have a proposal for that. Earlier in this blog (item 205), I discussed the notion of 'parochial altruism'. That is the inclination of people, established in much empirical research, to be loyal, solidary, altruistic, with regard to people considered to belong to one's own group, while being

suspicious, distrustful towards outsiders. Here I define altruism as being prepared to sacrifice something to someone else even if one cannot count on an adequate return.

I proposed that parochial altruism is an outcome of evolution. For the survival of a group internal solidarity helps, but genes are in the individual, not the group. The risk of a 'gene for solidarity' is that the group is vulnerable to entry of opportunists without the gene, who prey on the altruism of people in the group, and ultimately compete them away until no-one with the altruistic gene survives. In order to survive, the gene had to be accompanied with a gene for suspicion and fear of outsiders. That, I propose, is the foundation of fear and discrimination of outsiders, xenophobia, particularly of those who are manifestly different, in race, religion, or culture.

Now, if this hypothesis is true, and there is much evidence for it, then in order to survive in the group one should not be seen as an outsider. For that reason an urge has developed towards recognition as a legitimate member of the group, on pain of exclusion. That, I propose, is the source of the urge for recognition, and, I would add, for conformism. It also, I suspect, is 'in the genes', in a package with parochial altruism and xenophobia.

Note that the combined urges of recognition and of conformism form an ideal bedding for nationalism and for submission to authoritarianism.

#### 416. Networks, credence and identity

published 6-4-2019

In this blog I used the distinction between specific/individual and general/cultural identity and discussed the relation between them. The crux was that people develop individual identity in interaction with others, in given culture.

I denied that cultural identity entails some essence, some property that all members of a nation share, identically, and all non-members lack.

I proposed to see cultural identity in terms of roles people play and positions they have in different networks of relations. Those can overlap, for different people, and hence are shared more or less. There are, for example, networks of family, neighbourhood, region, job, profession, sport, religion, political affiliation and, yes, also nation or state.

Note that individual identity is not fully determined by relations in networks. The individual retains its identity as an actor operating in such networks. While its development depends on action in networks, the actor has its own constitution that is continuous across those relations.

The network view of cultural identity allows for European next to national identity. Less educated and less globally involved people have fewer network extensions across borders, and hence their identity is more nation-bound.

What, then, remains of national identity? For interaction between people in networks more is needed than the mere structure of those networks. There needs to be a behavioural basis to enable interaction. The task now is, in my view, to specify what is needed for that while allowing

for as much diversity as possible. One thinks, in particular, of the need to have common laws, language and institutions. Some of those will not apply to a nation as a whole but to specific industries or markets. And some will be shared between nations.

What I object to is national identity in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, provenance (land of birth), and ideology or set of ideas, such as the 'Judeo-Christian tradition', or the Enlightenment. Systems of thought are too diverse and mixed for that. Note the division, in Christian heritage, between Catholicism and Protestantism, and rival streams within them. English is a mix of Saxon, French and Latin. European cultures have further sources, next to religion and enlightenment, such as Romanticism, and Roman, Germanic and Keltish, even Arab influences.

Reading Francis Fukuyama's recent book on identity<sup>xii</sup> I came across the notion of 'creedal identity', identity based on a 'creed', apparently going back to Samuel Huntington.<sup>xiii</sup> A creed is a set of opinions and directions for action, or a philosophy of life (so I read in the Oxford Dictionary). It is not the same as 'belief' or 'faith', but something more oriented towards practical conduct. It can follow from a belief, but it can also arise as no more than some pragmatic rules of conduct. For the US, it would include, for example, a work ethic, personal initiative and responsibility, civic and family values.

This is rather broad and vague, and here I want to make it more specific. Again, I aim to make it as sparse as possible, reduced to what is needed to enable relations.

Here, I connect with the discussion, at several places in this blog (items 96, 289), of Aristotelian multiple causality, which I have used as a causality of action.

To recall, the different causes are:

Efficient cause: who are the actors (here: where do they come from, who is recognized as a citizen)

Final cause: with what aims (material, intellectual, spiritual, existential, ..)

Material cause: what are the resources used (land, water, energy, finance, ....)

Formal cause: how (with what knowledge, competence, skill, language, ...)

Conditional cause: under what enabling and constraining conditions (markets, laws and regulations, infrastructure)

Exemplary cause: with what models (role models, symbols, myths, ...)

I need to separate the formal cause into two types: the behavioural, which needs to be widely shared, and the cognitive/spiritual, which can be and preferably is diverse.

I now propose that what is shared, nationally, more or less, lies in the following causes:

The behavioural/formal: what enables human interaction, mostly in morality: trust, honesty, openness, loyalty, empathy, ..

The conditional: climate, laws, regulations, institutions, public services, a constitution, and, for liberal democracies: freedoms of expression, association, religion, voting, and separation of powers (judicial, executive, parliamentary).

The exemplary: some canonical examples of good conduct. Nelson Mandela, Ghandi.

I think every country will be distinct, have its own creedal identity, when scored on these dimensions. However, this still does not constitute an essence that all people within a nation share and outsiders do not. In continental Europe, for example, in a number of countries law is based on Roman law, imposed by Napoleon. Liberal democratic norms are still widely shared, though authoritarianism is eating away at it here and there (Poland, Hungary). Moral principles and moral role models are widely shared.

Within a country there is variety in the following causes of action:

The efficient: the provenance of people, access to citizenship, ..

The material: resources that come in and flow out, in trade

The final: what aims, goals and other values people have

The cognitive/formal: knowledge, competence, skill, morality, ...

In sum, I see important commonalities within nations, but I still do not see any national essence.

I grant that next to this utilitarian approach to culture as enabling relations, culture also has an intrinsic value in giving people a sense of belonging, of community, with local roots. However, I think that is stronger on a regional and local than on a national level. Consider France. I had a house in the department of the Corrèze, south of Limoges, in the region of the Limousin. The department, I learned, yields a strong sense of identity, stronger perhaps than feeling French. At some point there was a policy initiative to abolish the level of the departments, but that yielded an outcry of protest, with this argument of identity.

#### 434. Identity and the meaning of life                      published 2-8-2019

This piece is inspired by an interview with the Flemish psychiatrist Dirk de Wachter<sup>xiv</sup>. In his practice he finds that people often suffer from a sense that their life has little meaning. Mark Fisher used the expression ‘the primordial sense of worthlessness’, Jenny Turner called it ‘the dreadful hole in the place of self-belief’<sup>xv</sup>. Here, I want to connect this with my discussion, in this blog, of identity. I propose that the sense of a lack of meaning goes together with a feeling of a loss of identity.

In item 419 of this blog I proposed that generally, in ontology, the essence of an object, which constitutes its identity, is its capacity to adopt or develop new qualities, during its existence, in interaction with other objects. This potential is open to new relations with new objects, but is also constrained, by its inner composition and coherence of elements, requirements for continued existence (homeostasis of the body), and by conditions in the environment, such as laws of nature and conduct and institutions (laws and regulations, organisations, language, educational facilities, job markets, and access to them), which both enable and constrain further development.

Now, for human beings I would characterise the meaning of life as lying in the development and utilization of that potential, as the essence of oneself. That gives a feeling of making something of one’s life, of ‘going somewhere’, along a unique path of life. Especially when one feels that one is contributing to something beyond or larger than oneself. I proposed this before (in item 183 of this blog, 2015) in my definition of happiness as a combination of ‘sense and purpose’.

Sense in contributing to something beyond oneself, corresponding with the notion of ‘transcendence’, and pleasure in doing that by utilizing one’s potential, developing and celebrating one’s talents.

In not doing that, I propose, one feels a sense of meaninglessness together with a sense of a loss of identity, in disregarding, not using one’s potential, leaving it fallow, or worse: the feeling of having no potential.

Developing and utilizing potential requires effort, commitment, and resilience, the ability to deal with setbacks, disappointments, accepting intervals of unhappiness. De Wachter also noted the lack of acceptance of that.

There are so many distractions that require less effort and yield less risk of disappointment. Here one goes for pleasure, or ease, to the neglect of purpose. This can be in addiction, recreation, seeking comfort in the echo chambers of social media, or idolatry, grasping an idol for an identity by proxy. Recreation turns into lack of creation. Mark Fisher called it ‘depressive hedonia’.<sup>xvi</sup>

Producing, creating, establishing something, together with others, gives direction, purpose, and builds identity.

Concerning idolatry, I have to be careful. Earlier in this blog (item 99, 2013) I was positive about the value of role models, as yielding an ‘exemplary cause’, a leading example, of conduct: letting oneself be inspired by an iconic sportsman, politician, scientist, and the like. The point about that is that it is active, not basking in another’s glory, but taking it up as a challenge to develop oneself. In its passive form it surrenders itself to the idol, replaces oneself with it.

The notion of ‘potential’ is a very broad one. What does it entail more concretely? Here I use inspiration from a review of a book by Jules Montague<sup>xvii</sup>

Does memory constitute identity, as many people seem to think? Development potential is certainly formed, in part, by previous experience, but that would have such effects even when not consciously remembered. Also, memory is notoriously misleading, and memories that others have of oneself count as well.

Personal identity is a repertoire of character traits, propensities, talents, views and convictions that constitute potential.

As indicated above, realization and further development of potential requires courage and resilience, the ability to deal with disappointment and failure, and, I would add, curiosity, dedication and commitment, in other words ‘thymos’, spiritedness (see item 420).

Since for people realization and development of potential is to a large extent a product of interaction with others, they require morality, as noted by Montague, since that guides interaction or inhibits it. It requires openness to the other person as a source, as also noted by de Wachter, who was inspired by Levinas (as I was, see items 61 and 62, 2012).

Finally, these features of identity get expressed in habitual conduct, in ‘habitus’, with characteristic gestures and expressions, forming the face of identity. With that, Montague argues, even in Alzheimer not all traces of identity are lost.

### 433. Parochial and kin-based altruism                      published 9-8-2019

Two sources of altruism are the following.

One, the strongest, is that of kinship, based on genetic similarity. The closer genetic similarity is, in parenthood, then siblings, cousins, etc., the greater mutual altruism is. That is a result of evolution: it favours survival and proliferation of one’s genes.

The strong bonding of genes, with appeals to ‘family’, ‘brotherhood’, ‘blood’, and the like, is also borrowed, high-jacked, socially, beyond genetic similarity. Think of motor clubs, soldiers, soccer fans, gangs, etc., based on ‘brotherhood’.

Another source of altruism is ‘parochial altruism’, discussed earlier in this blog (205, 208 in 2015), with in-group solidarity and out-group suspicion and discrimination. Probably, this is also embodied in genes, but more universally, unrelated to family, not restricted to kin, as a basis for ‘group selection’. That works as follows. It is advantageous to people in a group to exercise solidarity, up to a point, next to an instinct for self-preservation. However, genes lie with the individual, not the group, so that there is a threat of opportunistic outsiders invading an altruistic society, and competing away the bearers of any altruistic gene. Thus, to survive, the altruistic inclination must be protected against opportunistic outsiders by a countervailing instinct of suspicion, for detecting and restraining or punishing egotistic invaders.

The two, kinship and parochial altruism, can reinforce each other, especially in mobilizing the ‘pseudo-kin’ of seeing members of one’s group as family, or ‘of the same blood’.

Mentally, distrust of the foreign is housed in an area of the brain that seats distaste and disgust as a defence against poison. With that, the outsider is not just suspect but disgusting, or poisonous, contagious.

For dealing with the refugee problem, the trick now is to side-track these mechanisms.

Pseudo-kinship can be, and already is, mobilized for this, in trying to see outsiders as brothers in humanity, members of the same ‘family of man’. Or creatures of the same God, but then difference in God only exacerbates the problem.

Another approach, discussed earlier (in item 208), is to bring in, as soon as possible, the experience of a shared activity, bringing in refugees into a variety of in-groups, entering employment as soon as possible, becoming members of local communities of life, education, profession, sports club, and culture. Nothing brings people together so much as working, doing things together, being dependent on each other in fulfilling a task.

The worst approach is the present one, of crowding them together in camps, keeping them idle and isolated, not letting them engage in activity until, far too late, they finally get the status of residence. They get frustrated by idleness, strife within their heterogeneous ranks inevitably breaks out, and then the judgement of their maladaptiveness gets comfortably confirmed.

#### 436. Authenticity and identity

published 17-8-2019

There is much talk of authenticity<sup>xviii</sup>, and it is confused. Sometimes it refers to the nationalist concept of being a ‘true’... (English, French, German, Dutch ...) person, at other times it refers to an opposite notion of standing out as an individual, being different from others, unique. This reflects the same confusion as that concerning identity: personal vs. collective/cultural identity, which I discussed elsewhere in this blog. In both cases the connotation is being ‘true’, not fake, not posed but genuine. So ‘genuine’ should also be distinguished from ‘authentic’.

To avoid the contradiction, I propose to accept only the latter, personal authenticity, as the meaning of authenticity. You are the ‘author’ of your own identity. There is no collective authorship, and conformance to collective identity or ‘authority’ is the opposite of authenticity, surrendering your authorship to authority.

This is Nietzschean authenticity, doing things no-one else is doing or has done, transcending the common.

However, this matter is not so simple. Personal identity builds on interaction with others and requires some commonality. The philosopher Wittgenstein said: there can be no private language. If I lived on an uninhabited island, hit my toe on a stone and called it ‘clink’, and hit a stone again and call it ‘clunk’, there is no one present to correct me, to point out my inconsistency. My assignment of meanings to words can fly off in all directions. If I utter something I believe it, or I would not have uttered it. Like having a pain: you have it and cannot doubt it. It is odd to say ‘I think I have a pain’.

Earlier in this blog I contrasted Nietzsche and Levinas (item 63, 2012). According to Nietzsche one can transcend oneself by oneself, like the Baron of Munchhausen pulling himself out of a swamp by his bootstraps. According to Levinas one needs opposition from others to have a chance of being freed from one’s prejudices.

Rousseau at first celebrated the individual acting according to his nature, freeing herself from the suffocation and distortion of collective culture. Later he made the radical turn to the opposite, commanding the self to submit to the collective will. Heidegger at first pleaded a turn away from the collective (‘Das Man’), and later submitted to the lure of Nazi national identity.

So, difficult as it may be, one has to balance authenticity and conformity. How can this be done?

Business makes a profit out of this dilemma and the inherent ambiguity of authenticity and identity. They make us believe that we are authentic if we buy their brand (of shoe, pants, dress

...), with symbols of conduct associated with the brand. Then one can feel authentic without the trouble and ostracism of going against the norm. Clever people then give that a personal flavour by adding or changing something (colour of shoestrings, a crazy shawl with the dress).

Foucault struggled with the problem, as he identified a number of institutions (prisons, laboratories, insane asylums) that impose their order on thinking and conduct, to the point that even the victims of the system acknowledged that this is the way it should be. Towards the end of his work the best he could offer for authenticity was the maxim: 'Create your life like a work of art'.

Yes, but how does one do that? I offer the following idea, inspired by the distinction that Ferdinand de Saussure made, in linguistics, between 'langue' and 'parole'.<sup>xix</sup> Langue is living, individual language, evolving in time ('diachronically'), with idiosyncratic meanings that do not quite overlap with the intersubjective order of langue, at any moment ('synchronically'), in langue.

This makes language ambiguous, to some extent, allowing for partly deviant clouds of individual meaning around what is generally accepted. That ambiguity is a good thing. It gives some leeway to hide in the shadows, in the periphery of order, to tinker with one's deviance, for the sake of authenticity.

#### 438. Forms of populism: the case of Macron      published 30-8-2019

Populism is varied, takes different forms. Its most distinctive characteristic is that it opposes 'the' elite in defense of 'the' people.

Increasingly, ambitious leaders see an opportunity to profit from this. They then claim to address the people directly, skirting the ruling elites, to create a personal bond and claiming to represent the people directly. They can go to the extreme of skirting parliament, dressing it down or even abolishing it, as superfluous since the leader knows his people and caters to them directly.

The irony, of course, is that with this they create a new one-man elite.

Opting for the people, populism tends to slide into nationalism, projecting the people as 'one's own', uniquely deserving, with a superior cultural identity, dressed up in historical myths. Personal identity is wrapped up in national cultural identity.

There is a temptation to make excessive promises to the people and when those inevitably fail to be realised, this is loaded off onto some scapegoat. Jews, immigrants, the Islam, foreign races.

Populist leaders project themselves as more capable, efficient and fast in solving problems, making and implementing policy without the delay, the slow pussyfooting, going back and forth, the watered down compromises of parliamentary democracy.

With this pretended direct rapport with the people and his unique ability to rule, the populist leader is authoritarian, issuing decrees rather than consulting the people, or anyone.

There are the obvious cases: Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Orban, Johnson, and in the Netherlands Baudet. How about Macron? Here I base myself on an article in the London Review of Books by Didier Fassin.<sup>xx</sup>

Macron claims to side-track the traditional ruling elites on the left and the right, in a direct address to the people. In that sense already he can be seen as a populist.

In response to the uprising of the ‘yellow vests’, he did, one must grant, try to engage in debate with them, in, to quote Fassin, ‘.. dozens of hours of debates across the country, which he often turned into didactic monologues in front of impatient audiences’. And when the revolt did not subside, Macron resorted to extreme police violence, with unorthodox offensive weapons that seriously harmed many.

On the face of it, Macron does not slide into nationalism, and in fact opposes it, and indeed he also claims to oppose populism. He promotes further European integration, and he is against the ostracism and exclusion of immigrants. However, ‘On several occasions he addressed the theme of identity, championing “patriotism”, the “art of being French” and the “core values” that must be defended in order to achieve a “European renaissance.” He may not be nationalist but he certainly is a chauvinist.

He certainly is authoritarian, issuing decrees, and, Fassin claims, with several measures he ‘diluted the power of the legislature and the judiciary’ ... and ‘he is now installed as a “Jupiterian” (in his coinage) head of state’. He celebrates his elevated position with show and conspicuous consumption.

Distinctive also is Macrons leaning towards a continued neo-liberal economic regime, which he projects as ‘progressive’. Among other things, Macron abolished a wealth tax, re-wrote the labour code to enhance corporate power, ended inflation-indexed pensions, cut housing benefits to the poor, and privatised companies with a state majority holding. Concerning European policy, Didier Fassin sums it up as follows: ‘Macron is interested in the consolidation of the free market, not the expansion of social rights’.

Summing up: One cannot equate Macron with the brand of the more extreme populist leaders, but he certainly has a brand of his own.

#### 444. Two forms of identity politics

published 11-10-2019

From a piece by James Meek, in the London Review of Books (15 august, page 9), I learn that there are two forms of identity politics.

There is an isolationist form, where people withdraw into an outsider, victimised role, of feeling excluded, discriminated against, ridiculed, looked down upon. That can arise from a background

of belief, or identity, in feminism, LHBT, a past of slavery, religion, profession or lack of it, appearance, race, etc.

The second is the totalitarian form, where, overtly or tacitly, a ruling class claims to represent a dominant culture, with an exclusive right, or duty, to rule everyone else, with the claim of representing the 'voice of the people'. The classic Republican definition, Meek tells us, of identity politics is 'privileging one's membership of a minority group over one's responsibility to the nation as a whole'.

Meek shows that before Margaret Thatcher broke it up, in the UK the conservative party held such a stance of a natural position to rule the realm. And now, Meek argues, it is back, with Boris Johnson, impelled forward by Farage, in a sub-majority identity politics of Brexiteers that arrogates the power to impose a no-deal Brexit, even if it takes setting aside parliament.

Boris had to jump on that bandwagon for two reasons. First, to jump in the window of opportunity to realise his dream of becoming prime minister. Second, to prevent Farage from appropriating the electorate that demands Brexit now, without further delay.

One irony is that Brexit was demanded to regain control of national sovereignty, while now the move is contemplated to dodge parliamentary sovereignty.

Another irony is that in its glorification of the nation, this identity politics is isolationist on the global level. Or so it claims, for that is what Brexit voters wanted: a return to good old 'little England'. In fact, however, Boris Johnson harbours a globalist ideology of unfettered international trade without the lamented restrictions imposed by the EU.

While isolationist identity politics demands special treatment, the totalitarian form does the opposite: it demands conformity, subordination to the cultural norms of the dominant ideology.

The British case reveals a fundamental threat to democracy, as does the present case of the US. Democracy requires compromise between opposing views. As told by Meek, this is unattractive to the corresponding electorate, who abhor having their ideology, with their perceived identity, diluted, and demotivating for the politicians and policy makers involved, because their ideals and goals need to be transmogrified in the compromise.

Unified, homogenised totalitarianism can parade itself as pure in its principles and unified goals. The electorate is showing a taste for such heroic, 'can-do' mentality, in contrast with the muddling of fragmented democracy, in its bumbling shuffle to and fro. This shows up in the lack of coherence in the opposition, in Britain as well as in the US. This yields a one-sided battle that democracy will lose.

Here is another paradox. Strong government, in imposing its will, in the UK and the US, goes together with a rightist, laissez faire view of surrendering government to markets.

All this is a nail in the coffin of society.

## 449. Acceleration

published 15-11-2019

As a former scholar of innovation, I am concerned with the following question: is innovation always good? Of course it isn't. The Mafia also innovates. And innovation can be compulsive, neurotic, carrying people along while they don't really need or want it. I discussed that in item 439 of this blog, in response to Zygmunt Bauman's book on 'liquid times', which objected to the acceleration in society, of which innovation is part. I argued that according to my 'cycle of discovery', change alternates with stability, during which the pressure and material for change is accumulated. Innovation is not uninterrupted flux.

Hartmut Rosa also developed an argument against what he called the 'acceleration' in society, of technology, society itself, and life in it<sup>xxi</sup>. He explained it as follows: people no longer believe in life after death, and this limited life must be crammed full with as much experience as possible, so that production as well as consumption of goods and experiences, and ever new ones, must be as much as possible, per unit of time. This is accelerated by competition for scarce resources of money, time and attention, and a race to be the first to offer and use something new, and not miss out.

According to Rosa, this yields alienation, defined as voluntarily doing things, going along with the race, while not really wanting it. In consumption, entertainment, production, innovation, a job, increase of speed and efficiency, feeling one has to catch up, or keep up, doing ever more per unit of time. Here, innovation no longer has a goal, of improving life, and becomes an imperative in itself, a goal in itself, of ever more and ever new, at ever lower price, to consume ever more.

But there is more than this compulsion. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a forefather of existentialism saw the self not as a thing one has but a process one is, a process of development. The future is uncertain, you don't know what to expect, and as a result you cannot make complete, determinate plans, and this makes existence a leap, which requires trust and, I would add, courage. You are never completely right, and to see this you need the notion of God, eternity. You cannot look in all directions: looking is looking in one direction, and you cannot see the others. Language cannot say all. God is the ineffable all.

In this, in the development of self, innovation is indispensable, a condition of life, but here it has a goal, a goal of personal development. It is individual, not collective or universal.

This is my ultimate justification of innovation: it is a condition, a feature of life. Earlier, I valued innovation for its Nietzschean excitement, the romance, thrill, the thymos of crossing boundaries into the new. But it is more than that. It is part of being a self, of existence, a becoming of what you can be. Here, innovation is development, related to learning, transformation, discovery. It issues from development and enables it. It is not alienation but going somewhere you want and enjoy.

## 450. Resonance and reality

published 23-11-2019

As an antidote to the alienation that accompanies the acceleration in society (of technology, society itself, life), defined as voluntarily going along with things one does not really want, Hartmut Rosa proposed ‘resonance’.<sup>xxii</sup> Resonance arises in a relation, between people and people, or between people and things, perhaps also between things, where there is mutual influence. Not an echo, not a copy, reproduction of the same, no fusion, but absorption in the one what comes from the other, and assimilation, perhaps transformation.

This notion corresponds with my discussion, at several places in this blog, of the contrast between Nietzsche and Levinas in relations between people. One needs to be open to others, let them exert influence, rather than exerting power over them. One needs opposition from the other, and from things, to achieve the highest form of freedom: freedom to change one’s value orientations, freedom from prejudice. This is no guarantee of objective truth. It can be determined by shared ideology or bias, such as a shared language, but it is better than a one-sided view.

There is a deeper value in this than I discussed before. As argued by Kierkegaard, and others, life, having a self, is being involved in a process, not having a thing, but a process of developing oneself. This derives from the Hegelian thought that one cannot look in all directions at the same time. Seeing anything requires looking in one direction to the exclusion of others. One cannot say or do everything. What works, what is true, fails sooner or later. In their failure one learns about things, so failure is inevitable and to be appreciated, in the interaction between people and things, in work and society. Hegel applied this to the collective, in a march of history, with the dream of ultimate amalgamation into one. But as stressed by Kierkegaard, it applies also, and in particular, to the individual, in his/her development, and is ongoing.

This, I propose, is the deeper meaning of resonance. In philosophy, it cuts even deeper, touching upon the old opposition between realism and idealism. Going back to the old ‘problem of Kant’: we see and conceptualise the world according to our ideas, or ‘categories’ or ‘forms of thought’, so that we (probably) do not see the world ‘as it is in itself’. What, then, is the basis for realism, and of the ‘truth’? As I claimed before, in this blog, truth is giving arguments, but that is always partial, needing arguments from a different perspective for supplementation.

There is an evolutionary argument: We must in some sense adequately conceive of the world, or at least part of it. Otherwise humanity would not have survived. We have the capacity to allow the world to shout ‘no’ if we are mistaken. This does not mean that we always see the world completely and correctly, but we know it partly, in some sense, and we don’t know in how far. The only chance we have of approaching it is to compare it with what other people see and think, and to go ahead and practice that, allowing others and things to ‘shout “no”’.

What part of the world do we see ‘correctly’, then? The part that is most relevant for survival and reproduction. Those are, first of all, things moving in time or space. Abstractions are based on metaphors from that more certain knowledge. These are the ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson), in what earlier in this blog I called the ‘object bias’. Misconceptions of abstractions, such as, for example, those of democracy, happiness, justice, meaning will jeopardise the future survival of humanity.

So, here also, the human being should develop and learn from the world.

#### 453. Action, resonance, and existence      published 13-12-2019

With this piece I want to connect the following streams of thought: philosophical pragmatism (mostly John Dewey), the notions of assimilation and accommodation (Jean Piaget), Symbolic Interactionism (George Herbert Mead, GHM), resonance (Hartmut Rosa), existentialism (Kierkegaard and Heidegger), Object Oriented Ontology (OOO, Tristan Garcia).

Let me start with perhaps the most fundamental: in OOO Garcia characterized objects as having things going in and things coming out. The things going in come from other objects and build potential (Manuel Landa), ability to create phenomena, have effects on other objects. Thus, objects interact. Interaction between people connects with the symbolic interactionism of GHM, the ‘resonance’ of Hartmut Rosa, and my discussion of the contrast between Nietzsche and Levinas ( item 63 in this blog, see also 58 and 60), with the need for openness, opposition of the other to gain the highest form of freedom. Interaction entails having effects on others and undergoing effects from them. Lack of those entails ‘alienation’, says Rosa. Things then are felt to be ‘flat’, in being reified, with a lack of resonance.

According to Kierkegaard ‘the self’ is not a thing but an individual process of ‘being in the world’ (Heidegger took this over from Kierkegaard, it seems), taking actions and responsibility for them, in a leap into the uncertain future, which requires trust. The subject is not given and present in opposition to the world, but develops in action in it. This connects with pragmatism, which also takes action as generative of ideas, and also the hallmark of truth. In this action one allows the world, including other people, ‘to shout “no”’ (Gaston Bachelard) , correcting or falsifying one’s ideas. That is how one learns.

This connects with Jean Piaget’s notions of ‘assimilation’, where one tries to fit in experience, perception, into existing forms of thought, which, if it does not fit, can yield ‘accommodation’, transformation, of those forms of thought (see items 18, 31 and 35 of this blog). That is connected with the fact that resonance can be oppositional, critical, even inimical, in correcting errors and breaking prejudice. As Hegel claimed, one gets to know things in their failure. Resonance is having effect and undergoing it, in mutual effect of subject and object.

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<sup>i</sup> There are exceptions: for David Hume ‘reason is the slave of the passions’

<sup>ii</sup> Colin Bird, *the myth of liberal individualism*, Cambridge University Press 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, ‘The politics of virtue’, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> 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

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas Metzinger, *The ego tunnel; The science of the mind and the myth of the self*, 2009, New York: Basic Books.

<sup>viii</sup> Bart Nooteboom, *Beyond humanism: The flourishing of life, self and other*, 2012, Palgrave-Macmillan.

<sup>ix</sup> Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The roots of morality*, 2008, Penn State U. Press.

<sup>x</sup> J.W, Stoelhorst & P.J. Richerson, ‘A naturalistic theory of economic organization’, *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 2012, p. 554.

<sup>xi</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 2018, *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*, Profile Books.

<sup>xii</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 2018, *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*, London: Profile Books.

<sup>xiii</sup> Samuel Huntington, 2004, *Who we are; The challenges to American national identity*, 2004.

<sup>xiv</sup> In the Volkskrant, 30 March 2019.

<sup>xv</sup> Jenny Turner, 9 May 2019, London review of Books.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvii</sup> By Ellen de Visser, in Volkskrant 30 March 2019, in a review of Jules Montague, ‘Lost and found’, 2019.

<sup>xviii</sup> Among others in a recent Dutch television programme ‘The philosophical quintet’ (Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2019)

<sup>xix</sup> De Saussure, Ferdinand, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris: Payot, 1972.

<sup>xx</sup> Didier Fassin, ‘Macron’s war’, *London Review of books*, 4 July 2019, p. 23-24.

<sup>xxi</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, 2013, Suhrkamp Verlag.

<sup>xxii</sup> Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance*, 2016, Cambridge: Polity Press.