

Four pieces on resonance

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449. Acceleration

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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 itⁱ. 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 in, 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.

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’.ⁱⁱ 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.

Suppose you ask yourself who you are. There would seem to be two 'I's involved, 'I' and 'me', subject and object, the one who asks the question and the one it is about. How can that be? The eye does not see itself.

You try to identify yourself by properties, aspects, acts, ways you present yourself.

It reminds me of linguistics, the relation between sense and reference, as proposed by Frege, but with a twist. Reference is what an expression refers to, sense is the way in which that is done. 'The way in which something is given, 'die Art des Gegebenseins' according to Frege's German. I gave that the twist: the way in which reference is conducted, by bundling together what one sees. That is how someone else identifies you. Like bundling sticks into a bridge.

You add motives, reasons for what you did, but you are seldom truthful in this, and grope in the dark. Choices are regularly made subconsciously, without you being aware of the reason, and you paint yourself pretty with rationalisations afterwards. You need the impressions of others to face the real reasons.

Thus, you need others to know yourself. That chimes with the role, and the importance, of resonance, discussed in the preceding item in this blog. Talking helps, in forming thoughts about yourself, but you need someone else to challenge and try and correct that. That is the role of a psychiatrist, or a friend or family.

There is no fixed or given self to know. Self is being, becoming. 'Knowing yourself' is Impossible. That would be like swimming without moving. One does not have an identity, but creates one, on the move, as work in progress. Not only discovering but developing yourself.

The question thus is not 'who am I', but 'how do I become', making choices and taking responsibility for them. There are risks involved.

What is the sense of life? Its meaning? As proposed in a previous item in this blog: Pleasure and purpose. Purpose: contributing to something bigger than yourself. Pleasure: utilizing and developing one's talents in the process. With an eye to others, and being open to them, lest you make a contribution that is not a contribution, does not mean anything to anyone. That is the role of 'kairos' in rhetoric, as described in a previous item in this blog. But what, then, is the role of personal conviction and perseverance in it? That is still admirable, and missing the target, getting no response and appreciation, is part of the risk of authenticity. That is where the importance lies of sense, in finding out your potential and purpose in opposition and criticism by others, ensuring kairos.

The good life is not a series of unconnected episodes but a sequential, connected, coherent whole, a development, like a building. Each moment has the freedom of choice in the next step in building oneself.

According to Kierkegaard life has three potential stages or levels. First the aesthetic of experience, consumption, diversion, with which one crams limited life. this yields the acceleration of life discussed before, in item 449 of this blog, which produces boredom, as Schopenhauer also claimed: one always wants more and if ever one is satisfied, this produces

boredom, and alienation: an experience of letting oneself be dragged along in what one does not really want. This is a sign of crisis, which can lead on to what Kierkegaard calls the ethical, as giving purpose and direction to your individual life. This does not relinquish pleasure, but sets a context to it, in purpose. For Kierkegaard there is a third level, of religion, but I do not yet know what to do with that. For the moment I think we do not need it for the good life.

453. Action, resonance, and existence

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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), and 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.

ⁱ Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration*, 2013, Suhrkamp Verlag.

ⁱⁱ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance*, 2016, Cambridge: Polity Press.