

Some Thoughts On A Timely Philosophy

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When he wrote "It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time", Hegel was right : Picasso could copy Raphael, but Raphael could not see the world as Picasso could, since the time has not yet come to see the world this way. One always may copy what has been, but one never could jump ahead of ones time. So what does it mean to "apprehend" the world ? What does it mean to "see" things that are not there and to miss other things that are before our eyes ? To apply this question to our time is what I am trying to do – not as a painter but as a philosopher.

The period from the French Revolution in 1789 through the Great War until its end in 1918 has been called "the long 19th century" (of the Occident). One may add a preparatory phase of "Rousseauism" from 1750 and the event of the "Declaration of Independence" of the newly forming "United States of America" in 1776.

During these some 170 years the "old order" of the Occident, dominated by the churches and by kingdoms and the landed gentry transformed into the "new order" of citizens and the industrial mass society. Rousseauism and Romanticism were essentially "bourgeois" movements, addressing – like the novel – the individual.

A similar transformation from an authoritative order to a world of personal experiences can be seen in the years of Reformation and Pietism, including the work of Descartes and Pascal. Luther, Descartes and Pascal all three replaced "accepted wisdom" by "personal conviction", and the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and of Mannerism showed a deep confusion about the nature of reality, comparable to the confusion of "black romanticism" during the 19th century.

While Hegel (in the wake of Leibniz) and Schelling (in the wake of Spinoza) for the last time tried to defend a "grand order of things", Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard gave up on this idea and called it a big lie and wishful thinking. What was left were the individuals and their personal struggles with a meaningless fate. Even the religious belief of the Christian turned from the assuring Gospel of the Church into an existential venture and wager in the view of Kierkegaard.

Thus while the natural sciences became more and more consistent and plausible during the 19th century, the philosophical outlook lost all coherence, as it had done 200 years before in a famous poem of Donne (1621, "An Anatomie of the World") :

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All iust supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subiect, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
[F]or euery man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kinde, of which he is, but he.
(see <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/donne1.html>)

It is this situation that brought the Occidental philosophy in a crisis, together with all arts and sciences.

The "Great Crisis" of the years around 1900 in the Occident – well before the Great War, which was but an effect, not the cause of the Crisis – caused one of the greatest cultural revolutions in the history of mankind. The very concept of the natural broke down in the Western World. Instead of being made from melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, music was made from sounds and their relations. Instead of being composed from persons and trees and buildings etc., painting was made from colours and fragments of things and their relations. Instead of being made up of solid bodies and fluids, nature was made up from atoms and molecules. Instead of debating figures and numbers, mathematicians now debated point-sets. Social roles as described in the novels of Austen and Goethe turned into confused patchwork personalities seeking themselves in a stream of consciousness as in Woolf and Joyce. Thus the whole world that once had been the glorious Creation of God turned into a mess of confusing fragments.

But now the human mind began to construct new worlds from these fragments as it had constructed the Eiffel-Tower from pieces of steel – bigger by far than all buildings that so far had been established from stone like the Nôtre Dame cathedral. Math and physics, far from being weakened by the new fragmentation, got stronger than ever before and built the A-Bomb and the space stations, that would have been impossible to build with older math and physics.

In this situation, philosophers wiped away the old metaphysics as misleading fancy and got down to the very fragments of all philosophy, the primary evidence of the thoughts and the senses : Logical statements, sensual data, and experiences of cause and effect. From these elements Logical Positivism, Phenomenology, and Pragmatism arose. The world – the philosophical as well as that of the arts and sciences – had to be con-structed, put together, from scratch, i.e., from elements of our sensual and intellectual experiences. Grand metaphysical designs as those of Hegel or Schelling looked as outdated as did those old giant canvases showing battles and heroes and saints and the coronations of sovereigns. All this had become irrelevant. Reality had to be looked at with fresh eyes.

Young Wittgenstein in his "Tractatus" said that the world is made up from simple facts and their descriptions. And his mentor Russell tried to assure, that those descriptions were logically consistent. The Vienna Circle and Carnap tried to drive

all metaphysical cloudiness out of the philosophical talk. What had to be studied – according to Moore and Quine and some others – was the exact connections between our words, and the objects that they related to. Especially all the "grand" words came under scrutiny : Truth, liberty, justice, progress, human dignity – what do we speak about while using those concepts ? What were the elementary thoughts and experiences that made us conceptualize such great concepts that were so often abused in grandiose speeches ?

Seen in this way, the Phenomenology introduced in a Cartesian way by Husserl, was not that different from the Logical Positivism and Common Language Analysis or from Pragmatism. They all got back to the primary givens of our experiences and asked the same question : "What are we speaking of here, what are we relating to ?"

Exactly as physics got down to the elementary observations and from that arrived at Quantum Mechanics and the Relativity Theories, that all exploded the "common sense" and "natural understanding", without becoming in any way hollow gobbledegook, the new philosophy now got down to the fundamentals of our talking about the world and our conceptualizing of the reality we live in.

The old concept of a human society living in the context of "God's Creation" had been broken down into so many individuals trying to come to terms with a meaningless, merciless universe. Meaning came to be seen as a "social construct", a human invention like that of the Eiffel Tower. Philosophy came to be seen as a study of human "ways of world making", as Nelson Goodman has put it.

Now "world making" is a constructive activity. See the toddler stacking his building bricks and joyfully then destroying his edifice and build a new one. Thus it is not the study of nature "as God has made it". There has been a change from a contemplative philosophy to a philosophy of construction, of the dynamics of building worlds according to mans design. For what is common in modern theories as in those of Darwin and Marx and Freud, in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche ? It's a view of ant-agonistic forces, of hidden struggles, covered by superficial impressions of a grand order of things. Nature according to Darwin, the society in the view of Marx, and the family in the view of Freud, are but battlefields, where individuals fight for their proper place in the world around them, not orders pre-established by God, where individuals live in their places already dispatched to them. This is what Schopenhauer and Nietzsche said too.

This "Heraclitic" feeling of the conflicting forces that keep the society and the billions of individuals going in constant struggle, has replaced the feeling of a great order, and is a characteristic of "continental philosophy" as compared to the "analytic tradition". As a French philosopher put it with utter contempt when speaking of English professors of Empiricism and Logicism : "Those nice, tea sipping scholars have never known any experience worth of knowing, experiences of lust and despair, of sin and grace, of the joy of a victory and the suffering from

a loss and a failure !" But these too are experiences that philosophy has to take into account when assessing the situation of man in the world, in the world of St. Augustine or of Dante, of Shakespeare and Donne, of the great saints and the great villains, of the "Wuthering Heights" or of "Moby Dick" and of "Heart of Darkness" and so many other novels. Philosophy cannot escape these realities and degrade us humans to mere smart apes stacking up heaps of bananas.

For thinking beings as we are, a situation is very much more than the physical circum-stances. The human situation includes longings and hopes and fears, and also feelings of guilt and failure and lost opportunities and the notions of shame and honour and love and the search for justice and truth and goodness and of a better world in the future or in the beyond. These are the things we speak of in case we are seeking advice from a friend or from a psychiatrist or a pastor, or from the books of the wise people from all times and cultures. Instead of calling this rubbish – because it is outside the realm of the sciences – philosophy has to reflect on its concept of humans and not to mistake them for thinking robots that they are not.

For all our culture – all those great works of art and music and poetry, all those temples, cathedrals and castles and great architecture, and all achievements of grand cuisine and grand couture and all the great novels and movies etc. – becomes instantly worth- and meaningless if humans are seen as mere optimizers of health and wealth. To see humans thus is an absurd and a despicable way of seeing them. Thinking humans are always trying to understand their place in the world they live in, and this is never and could not be a question to pose to the natural sciences. They simply won't understand it.

It is not that methods of technical understanding cannot be applied to humans. Of course they can. A zoologist and an MD are used to see humans as animals, as living systems, when studying human anatomy, physiology, pathology, and behaviour. There is nothing objectionable in this approach. But even the doctor takes into account the psychical forces connected with many bodily symptoms when applying a placebo or methods of psychosomatics.

The philosopher has to go further in this direction. He has to ask, what made a Siddharta Gautama or a St. Francis reject a life – that they could have had – of good reputation and wealth, and instead seek a life in utter poverty – without being mad or stupid. They both changed a life in comfort for a much better one – and philosophy has to ask : "In what respect could a life in utter poverty be called 'better' than that which everyone else would prefer ?" This is a deep philosophical problem for philosophical anthropology ! And the core of the answer would be : Because humans are thinking beings, and the natural sciences simply don't understand what thinking is. It is what Kant and Heidegger thought of when writing essays on "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking ?" ("Was heisst es, sich im Denken zu orientieren ?"). This too is "assessing the situation", but in a way that is totally alien to any natural sciences.

Thus we have to differentiate between several sorts of problems : Mathematical problems, chess-problems, practical problems, scientific problems, philosophical problems, religious problems, problems of artistry – to name but some examples.

From this I now turn to three philosophical problems of central importance in our time.

When an ardent admirer of analytic philosophy in a critical review of a book on wisdom wrote "if I had to choose between knowledge and wisdom, I would take knowledge and wisdom be damned !" his remark was just silly. Why ? Solving mathematical problems is VERY different from solving HUMAN problems. So when we ask for a better future, we intend to make it a better future for humans, not for smart robots. Which means, that we have to understand what "a good world for humans to live in" MEANS.

Imagine a world without religion and "deep" philosophy, a world run by mathematicians and engineers and smart robots. We could think of it as of a better world – but better in what sense and for "whom" ? To put it differently : Music, the arts, and literature, or love and beauty and dancing and colourful festivities etc. are NOT NEEDED ! Just for survival a prison cell with a cup of rice every day will do. So everything we most esteem in human living simply IS NOT NEEDED ! This is what mathematicians and engineers and smart robots will never understand as professionals. They simply know of no argument to support "such a nonsense as a good life". This is where our thinking about the future has to start from ! And just add a corollary : Humans are not needed anyway. We only defend our species because even a worm defends its life.

This is not as absurd as it sounds. For many millenia humans have lived in all comfort in utter poverty, in simple huts and with only rags on, feeding on roots and fruits and small animals, but overall happily and content. Thus what we call our modern culture is a form of luxury. So when Rousseau has been asked, whether humanity made progress by the advancement of science, he answered a sounding "NO !". In his opinion – supported by Plato and by the Bible already – much knowledge is making people not better but only spoilt, lazy, and arrogant. This is an age old topos.

Which means, that the real problem of humans is not so much knowledge, but wisdom, or put in a different way : not so much analyzing the world around, but constructing a world that supports what is good in humans. We need to find a new distance from our obsession with "knowing" and instead get a better idea of the task "to construct a good future". What would the concept of "good" come to in such a view ? No science would ever tell us. Only wisdom can help us to understand what it means to be human, to be a responsible thinking being – and not a smart ape, stacking bananas.

The dream of Enlightenment to improve the human condition by removing all evils of life – poverty, illness, violence, fear and ignorance i.a. – was natural and not overall silly. But after removing all obstacles, after clearing the place : What do you see ? What are you confronted to then ? You are confronted to your own liberties ! You have created an empty space – and now you have got to set up a world of your own, to stage a new drama of your invention ! And this is why many people shun the idea of liberty and try to avoid it.

So the idea of "progress to a better future for mankind" is one of the truly BIG problems put to contemporary philosophy.

Part of the notion of "a better future for mankind" is a problem of social philosophy : "What to call social justice ?". This has not been such a big problem when people were used to the concept of "natural order". But after the "death of God", we have to redefine ourselves what the notion of "just society" comes to. We have to justify our intended design of society now. So in this respect we have got a new problem. The opposed "leftist against rightist" political visions, that caused 200 years of struggles from the French Revolution down to the fall of the Soviet Empire was a fight about competing concepts of "just society". Socialisms – including Fascisms – have been seen as varieties of secular humanism opposed to forms of traditional social orders justified by religion. The modern state is legitimized by the needs and wishes of all its citizens, not by some timeless order installed by God or cultural heroes. In philosophical terms the idea of a good society may be formulated by "as much liberty as possible, as much restrictions as needed." But this is only a general guideline. In reality the antagonistic ideas of socialism and liberalism will always fight for the most agreeable compromise.

A third great philosophical problem of our time – and surely the most modern one – after the problems of "progress" and "good society" can be seen in the notion of "perfectibility of man". We cannot exclude from our considerations the new possibilities of genetical, electronical and chemical ways of "human enhancements". Thus a philosopher already has published a book on "What sort of people should there be ?" [1]. There is a whole new "school" of thinking on these topics under the header "Transhumanism" [2]. For the time being this seems to be still somewhat exotic and not the most urgent problem of our time. But in the long run it forces philosophers to think again what it means to be human in view of the possibility of trans-humans or thinking "androids".

Seen in a world-historic perspective, we may just enter the era of transhumanism and a re-definition of man. Surely no one so far has demonstrated true artificial life or true artificial thinking. But the pace of progress in leading edge technological fields today is fast and accelerating. We cannot exclude that a transhuman species is leaving the labs by the end of the century. So to think what this comes to in our self understanding may not stay a purely scholastic concern.

Compared to the over 3 bn years of life on Earth the over 3000 years from the

Egyptian pyramids are as only 3 mm compared to 3 km ! Thus we humans may now be not at the end, but rather at the beginning of history. Seen in this way we would have been only transitory thinking beings, a mere means of nature to realize "her" potential hidden in natural laws. Nature by "natural" means could never have built a combustion engine or electronic devices and computers or space-ships. But it could build a thinking animal that was bright enough to invent all these things by doing math and physics and many forms of technology.

The driving forces behind all this have been curiosity and inventiveness and the search for meaning by way of religions, sciences and philosophies. But knowing alone did not do it. The creative mind is inventive, is building worlds according to imagination and concerting many brains and hands of so many people to get great works done – be it a pyramid at the Nile or a towering rocket that lets humans ride up to the Moon and back.

Ours is not the natural world that God made anymore. Ours is now a technical world that we have made ourselves like a spaceship. We cannot get off. We are now dependent on electricity and the combustion engines, on electronics and the computers and on bio-technologies – and on the experts that keep things going. Without all that we are doomed. We are now responsible for the well being of this spaceship Earth, for we will flourish or fail together. Such an over-system combined from an organism and technical systems is called a cyborg. Thus I call our current system, consisting of several billions of humans together with techno-systems that we now are dependent on, the "hyper-cyborg" of mankind.

Thus my concluding problem of current philosophy is : How do we see ourselves as responsible teamworking crew of this hyper-cyborg, the spaceship Earth ? How do we assure to always find a good way of solving problems together ? One may call this a technical question and leave it to sociologists and politologists, but it's a philosophical question too, since it asks for a new idea of what the global task of humanity is in our time. Globalization and modernization are weaker concepts than this idea of a hyper-cyborg, which is asking for co-operation, for a global team-working under a new agenda. This is a very different way of approaching the problems of our time when compared to fighting over the notion of human progress or over the left vs right controversy.

Two remarks should be added : We humans are thinking apes with all the genes of our primate emotions and social behaviour left in place. This is dangerous, since A-bombs are not to handle like clubs or spears. Thinking robots – androids – would not need envy nor love or hate or jealousy as we "advanced apes" do. But since they are thinking beings they still may need metaphysical orientation, i.e., a sort of religion. Thus a second remark has to stress exactly this difference of humans and thinking beings : While we humans are thinking beings, the concept of thinking beings does not include any animal genes. I will not enter the vast debate on the nature of thinking here. And I do not speculate.

The theme of this essay reads "Some Thoughts On A Timely Philosophy". I tried to show how far away from the classical mainstream philosophy our current problems now are. But I do not devalue analytical thinking the least. In all its forms – as Logical Empiricism, as Pragmatism and as Phenomenology – it really was a healthy antidote against void metaphysical speculations. But we should not get stuck in those many details that our discourses are made of. We need a balance of the grand view, a new awareness of three big problems that will not go away : "What do we call human progress ?", "What do we call a good society ?", and "How do we see ourselves in the light of Transhumanism and the idea of improving man ?" All three are not scientific but deep philosophical problems – and timely at that.

[1] Jonathan Glover "What sort of people should there be ?" (1984). See <http://www.jonathanglover.co.uk/> and <http://www.jonathanglover.co.uk/books/what-sort-of-people-should-there-be> . On "Perfectibility of Man" see the book by JOHN PASSMORE : <http://www.amazon.com/Perfectibility-Liberty-Fund-Inc-2000/dp/B00B8ST4ZK>

[2] On Transhumanism see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transhumanism> and <http://www.amazon.com/Transhumanist-Reader-Contemporary-Technology-Philosophy/dp/1118334310>

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