

Letters to Adam K.

re: the law of universal transformation

Dear Adam,

Thanks for your fast and curious reply. You write that you are struck by the remark of Jan Romein who considers Europe as “an exception within the General Human Pattern”. I remember having a similar reaction, reading his idea the first time. In fact, I experienced the statement as mildly exaggerated. Only years later, it was gradually borne in on me that he could be right. Europe’s evolutions harbour such deep antagonisms that we lose easily sight on the uniqueness of her history.

But let me go back to the other questions in your letter. They all deal with the difference between identity in the logical sense and identity in the ontological sense. This is indeed the heart of the matter, and part of a broader question. When I asked Alfred Ayer, the logical positivist, to explain what he considered to be his task as philosopher, his answer was “to try to answer a certain quite specific range of questions that are classified as philosophical questions – and are very much the same questions that, I think, have been asked since the Greeks, mainly about what can be known, how it can be known, what kind of things there are, how they relate to one another...And I hope, in a sense, to finding the truth.” {*Reflexive Water* RW, p.13}

‘What can be known, how it can be known’ is the subject of *epistemology*, while ‘what kind of things there are, how they relate to each other’ belongs to *ontology*. Not to get lost in this terminology, I use the word ‘perception’ as the key to epistemological questions, and ‘reality’ as the key to ontological ones.

Arne Naess answered my question about his task as philosopher a little differently: “I would rather say that to philosophy belong the most profound, the deepest, the most fundamental problems. They will change very little, and they have not changed much over the last two thousand years.” {RW, 14}

So, there we are, Adam. Two philosophers with opposite views on many questions do agree that the question of ‘knowing’ and the question of ‘being’ are the most fundamental ones, and that they did not really change since two thousand years.

The first question that comes to my mind after the distinction between the realm of ‘perception’ and the realm of ‘reality’, is about their interrelationship, viz. which comes first, *if there is a first*. Is it really clever to trust our senses and our inductive way of reasoning inside the world of entities, beings and facts, or is it more clever to reflect first of all on the question, how do we know? The Buddhist way is the last one. Because how to be sure about our knowledge and insight, if we are unconscious of the various ways the mind operates? Only by a profound insight in how the mind really is, do we have access to the deeper layers of all reality: human and non-human. And insight implies the concurrence of experience and understanding in such a way that the knower and the known, subject and object, are no longer strangers to each other.

The dominant European way is the first one: turn to reality with the help of mathematics and sensorial knowledge; follow the road of experimentation and ongoing testing, and you will extract the answers. Prometheus symbolises Europe’s dominant way, by stealing the fire from Zeus to deliver it to the humans on earth. For this act against the supreme ruler, he was severely punished. His liver was eaten night after night by a bird of prey. Prometheus symbolises technological progress.

The Promethean passion for discoveries may be a dominant feature of Europe's culture, it is not the only one. There is an important undercurrent in Europe's history, linked to the alter ego of Prometheus. His name is Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who travels from the earth to the sky and back to the earth to guide the humans in their ongoing transformations. Hermes symbolises the bridge between heaven and earth, and between identity and change, if we interpret the mythic image of heaven and earth into a philosophical and spiritual dimension.

Hermes negates the principle of excluded third... for him there exists always a third possibility. Hermes understands that contradictions occur only in a certain kind of logic, not in the real world, although we are unable to define the meaning of 'real world' when we place the real world outside the world of our mind. By rejecting contradictions and the excluded third, Hermes transforms the meaning of identity. For him, identity is a living form that mutates from one state into another, not different from the butterfly becoming a caterpillar, or the change of a particle under the influence of a measurement. Hermes embodies the opposite pole of the principle of contradiction. He symbolises interaction, transformation and tolerance because nothing on earth and in heaven does exclude another being, even not a goddess, a god or God.

If I am not mistaken, Adam, then we touch here - in the words of Arne Naess - upon one of the most profound, deepest and fundamental problems: that of change and no-change. If reality embodies change and no-change, then the concepts 'difference and identity' become relational concepts, as I stated in my previous letter with 'identity and alterity'. That's to say that they presuppose each other as the two sides of the same coin. From an ontological perspective, everything is changing; from the perspective of the mind, searching for insight into the process of changes, there seem to exist patterns within which these changes occur. Some of these patterns get the status of physical or psychological laws. That status turns an initial blind process, blind from a human perspective, into one that can be understood, if not foreseen. *Change and no-change, difference and identity, do not exclude each other any longer.* One calls the human desire for no-change sometimes the myth of invariance. The ontological question of change and no-change is one of the oldest subjects of European philosophy. Parmenides, about 504-456, defends the no-change position in a beautiful monistic manner:

"One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that It is. In it are many tokens that what is, is uncreated and indestructible, alone, complete, immovable and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it is, all at once, a continuous one." {ToP, 896}

The underlying assumption of Parmenides' no-change position is the idea that being and thought are one: "It is the same thing that can be thought and for the sake of which the thought exists; for you cannot find thought without something that is, to which it is engaged." Therefore, Adam, my question "if there is a first", when asking the question which comes first: the perception or thought, or the real thing, seems justified. We can only think in oppositions by presupposing a deeper layer in which mind and matter are one, before separating from each other.

From here follows that every question we are posing, implies one or more assumptions, and even more so when we are unconscious of the hidden layers of our way of perceiving. Heraclitus whom I already mentioned in my letter *The identity of Europe*, the philosopher of *panta rhei*, asks our attention for the ongoing transformations: "Fire lives the death of earth, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water". Heraclitus sees clearly the interrelationship between change and no-change, not altogether different from Parmenides, when he writes: "It is wise to listen not to me but to my argument, and to confess

that all things are one...Wisdom is one thing. It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things." ToP, 496/7.

And from this perspective, it becomes perhaps understandable why Aristotle can define his principle of identity the way he did, or Plato, his master, the world of timeless ideas.

For us, Adam, it is important to understand why Aristotle's principle of identity may not be projected upon the ontological world. Because if we do, and we do it constantly, we are distorting both its logical, timeless, autonomous function that makes sense in a digital language, and we mislead our intuitive notion of the self, by separating it from the beings to which we belong, into something that we are supposed to be and that we are not.

My best wishes...hope to hear from you

Fons

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