

The Quarrel of the Universals

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About mental knots

Before we continue our theoretical and empirical analysis of the nature of the image in CTh, I propose you reflect on this saying of L. Wittgenstein, a major XXth century philosopher.

“Why is philosophy so complicated? It ought to be entirely simple. Philosophy unties the knots in our thinking that we have, in a senseless way, put there. To do this it must make movements that are just as complicated as these knots. Although the result of philosophy is simple, its method cannot be if it is to succeed. The complexity of philosophy is not a complexity of its subject matter, but of our knotted understanding”.

According to Wittgenstein, the result of legitimate philosophical thinking is not a truth discovered but a confusion dissolved. This modern philosopher, as his biographer in the Encyclopedia Britannica wrote, was searching for “*das erlosende Wort*”, the word that unties one’s knotted understanding.

Meaning and Noumenon

In our preceding lecture, we discussed the notions of Noumenon vs. Phenomenon. I mentioned that “Noumenon” alludes to some kind of “essence” which lies in objects or beings, an essence that cannot be caught with machines, microscopes etc. Phenomenon is what appears to our eyes, ears, taste, etc. or through the machines that amplify these senses. We must be careful, however, not to use the notion of noumenon as a convenient cover for our ignorance. Often, during past history, with the advancement of science, what passed for “noumenon” became “phenomenon”. For example, electricity was initially conceived as pure “vital force”, to be later explained as electronic motions or fields. The search for noumenon is a permanent forward motion. As soon as some phenomenon is explained and ceases to be considered as a noumenon, a new search can begin, looking for the essence of the newly understood phenomenon. For instance, now that lightning has been explained as electricity and not the anger of God, a new search may begin on the noumenon of electricity itself. And, who knows, may be we will discover that lightning is the outward manifestation of some emotional relationship between the skies and the earth? In fact, explaining phenomena in their details never satisfies our search for noumenon. Explaining the details of electrical flow during a storm do not answer my questions about the *meaning* of this storm. Events seem to have both an explanation and a meaning. Science deals with the explanations, with the phenomenon, but our heart and minds are thirsty of *meanings*, of noumenon. This search is possibly a pure illusion, as materialists would say, but some of us are built that way, we cannot stop looking for *meaning*.

A summary of preceding lectures

We have also discussed the fact that CTh depended on the creation of “mental objects” or images that are “reproductions” of the objects of the outside world (such as the liver). We saw the role played by memory in this field. Memory allows us to re-present objects we have seen before to our conscience. It can present them in different ways, add to them details, subtract others etc.

We also tried to create a “numinous image” (*numinous*, from noumenon). I.e. we used a “phenomenal situation” (a man filling a balloon with air) and tried to find the “noumenon” of the situation (“the idea of pressure”), an image as naked as possible from details of the everyday world (particularly, the man and the balloon, the two important objects from a phenomenal point of view).

The questions that lie behind this type of exercise can be summarized as such:

- are our mental images faithful reproductions of reality (“icons”)
- do our mental images contain information not present in what our senses reveal?¹

These questions are important. In terms of therapy, these questions can be translated as :

- must our mental images (of the liver) be faithful reproductions of the object (of the liver)
- must our mental images (of the liver) try to reach information different from the one seen, felt, touched or heard?

Asking ourselves these questions, experimenting with the possible answers, is, I believe, a royal way to learn and improve visualization abilities.

First, I propose to review the answers proposed by past thinkers.

The stone and the hose

The question is: what is the status of the mental image of an object in relation to the object itself? Most of the terms of this question, as well as their analysis, are already known to us. Plato and Aristotle dealt extensively with these questions. Our approach to the problem is practical: can we improve our technique by *sticking to* phenomena or “*escaping*” away from them? From a purely empirical point of view, from the point of view of my clinical experience, I do not have a straightforward answer. Sometimes it seems imperative to stick to phenomenal images (such as anatomical data), sometimes, *escaping*, creating a mental image very different from the actual organ, is more efficient. At this stage of development of the technique, I cannot say that in the treatment of such and such diseases or pathologies, anatomical images (copies) have to be used, whilst in others, mental images (of an undefined character) have to be used.

¹This is a question asked in a context different to philosophy and CTh, for instance, by painters. Classical painting is an imitation, but from the impressionist onwards, reality as seen by the eyes is shunned. A different reality appears.

I shall give a clinical example.

A twenty year old girl, Rachel R., comes to me for acute pain in neck and both arms. She is extremely beautiful. This pain happened a few days after her fiancée let her down. They had planned the marriage, sent invitations, rented the location etc. A few days before, he cancels and says he wants to break away.

She comes to me for treatment.

It is obvious that her status of the abandoned beautiful princess leads to much empathy. I would have felt this empathy whatever her looks and have done so many times, but here, obviously there was an additional dimension, one I could not control. She proved to be a very difficult clinical case. Her pains were very severe and obviously linked to her emotional state.

In her case, anyway, I made innumerable “experiments”.

I remember one of them, relevant to our present lecture.

Generally we associate love affairs with the heart. Being let down by someone allegedly causes heart ache.

We also associate being in love or angry with fire or heat. These are not cold feelings. She was both in love and angry. So I imagined that there was plenty of *fire* in her *heart*. I then visualized that I held a big hose connected to a big reservoir, as if a fireman car was stationing behind me. I then opened the valve literally drowning her heart in water, trying to extinguish the fire. I obviously had said nothing to her.

As I started to aim water at her heart, she reported she felt suddenly awful, she felt overwhelmed. I had to stop. We then let a few minutes pass. I had two questions: first, was this a coincidence? Although it produced a very unpleasant reaction, should I not persist, for her own good?

After a few minutes, when she felt she had recovered. I performed the same visualization. This second attempt had the same effect. I could not continue.

Was this a coincidence? If it was one, the whole story is meaningless and the images used during the treatment had no relevance. The fact that the same visualization produced this coincidence twice, and in *real time* is however intriguing.

If what I did was actually related to what she felt, then several interesting questions appear:

- do images like “broken heart”, “burning anger” or “fiery love” correspond to some reality, i.e. to some *breaking process* in the heart or *intensive heat* emanating from that organ when we fall in love or get let down? Likewise, am I making a correction assumption, one rooted in the physics of water and fire, when I project “cold visualized water” to this objective/subjective *patient-fire*?
- Question: even if I admit that some form of water had been thrown on some form of fire in some form of heart, then, how necessary was the rest of the visualization? Were images like “water coming out under high pressure from a hose”, “washing the heart inside out” specifically effective? Couldn’t I have used any image of “water”? Did she have an adverse reaction because “water” met “fire” in her heart, or simply because I had been able to release tensions in the heart and its surrounding tissues.
- More generally, was the unpleasant reaction due to my specific visualization? Or was it due to the fact that she was in such distress that any form of visualization would have led to this reaction? In other words, was the use of images like

burning heart, water, fire specifically effective? Or was it simply the *contact* with my visualization field that led to the reaction?

In other words, the technique I had used was built on *assumptions* of all kinds about *abstractions* of all kinds. In this lecture, we are trying to better define what I mean by abstractions and the above case was an excellent examples of what these abstractions are about.

Blood, sweat and tears

Let us take a look at a prehistoric wall-painting of animals. The one shown here is from the Grotte Chauvet, recently discovered in France, showing a group of horses, rhinos etc. It is allegedly (according to C 14 dating) the oldest painting discovered so far. This is supposed to have been drawn by “extremely primitive people”. We may see that some of the most evolved techniques in painting are already present: volumes, perspective, movement. As you delve into this picture, an increasing amount of “life” appears. The animals seem to gallop, to look at us, to be frightened. Some seem to be suspended in air, dynamically. From immobility at the beginning, we perceive increased mobility. What was the purpose of these images? Some say pure artistic expression, other say that these drawings were executed as rituals: the animal was drawn as escaping, as being caught, as being frightened hoping that this would happen the next day during the hunt.

Whatever the reason, we may get a kind of “numinous” (from Noumenon) experience here. Beyond the strokes of charcoal, a lot of life and intentions appear. The purpose of the artist here was to reproduce life and intentions (the life of the animal and the intentions of the hunter). This picture can be qualified as a *hot* picture.

When I treat a liver, should I make pictures of this kind? Am I more effective with a “cold” or a “hot” image of the liver?

I have used a prehistoric wall painting to discuss this question. This interrogation, however, appeared under many masks throughout history. In the realm of drawing, for instance, what should I draw: a copy of the flowers or a feeling extracted from the flowers. This may only be of esthetic relevance in a modern painting, but, for prehistoric painters, it meant probably much more. A *cold picture* - a copy- of bisons was probably considered as ineffective. The same goes for religious pictures. All of these pictures have one point in common: they try to be *effective*. We also try to be effective through images. Which means that we have to *extract* something particular from the cold picture laid in front of us in the anatomy book. The interesting thing is that, confronted with a complex scene or picture, we are able to extract one *main* feeling. We simplify the information, we tune on something specific which can be different every time we look at the same picture. For instance, in the prehistoric picture above, we can identify strongly with the feeling of *fear* in the picture. But which fear? That of the animals who are running away in all directions? Or that of man, who feels awe in front of these powerful beasts? We can read other feelings in that picture: mystical communion between man and beast, sheer beauty of shapes and motions etc. We are able to extract several distinct feelings from this picture.

Our ability to extract a feeling or a concept from a complex situation is related to a particular mental faculty: the ability to make *abstractions* (note the similarity between *abstract* and *extract*).

Let us see two examples:

- I get angry. I feel anger boil in me. I want to hit someone. Another time, I see somebody else get angry, he seems to feel the same things as I felt. He hits someone. I extract from these two situations the notion of “anger”. This feeling has become an abstraction for me, one which can exist even when nobody is angry.
- I see a young white horse, then a tall black horse, then a small, old grey one. I extract what is common to all of them, “Horseness”. I then see, dogs, old, small, young etc. The abstraction “dog” is created. And then, thinking of all these kinds of horses and dogs, I create a higher abstraction, “animal”, since I see the common features of dogs and horses.

I constantly make abstractions of this kind and of the kind described in the case of the broken hearted lady above.

The redness of red

We constantly produce abstractions. They come naturally to us and even impose themselves on us. For instance, our ability to “compare” objects leads to some form of automatic “classification” of reality, full of “abstract” ideas (such as anger, peace, horses and animals). Our mind can be considered as a permanent miner, that constantly “extracts” from the ore of the perceived world similarities or differences and then proceeds to build “abstractions” with this raw material. Our mind seems to build, through abstractions, a kind of statue, one which fixes for all times the nature of the object (anger or horseness).

Are these statues real? Are they pure constructions of our minds, anchors in the storms of ever changing perceptions? For instance, is “redness” something that exists in itself, independently from any red object? Is there an elemental and real quality? Or does it exist only as part of red things?

Translated into CTh issues, the question becomes: should I try to identify “pressure” when I treat how blood pressure, so as to concentrate on it, as opposed to images where a blood vessel is actually distended by some liquid flowing inside.

These assumptions would lead to very different techniques. In other words, the abstractions we use determine the techniques we use.

Let us take a frequently used abstraction for an osteopath. For instance, that of “motion”.

A patient, Ms Smith, comes for “*knee pain when he walks*”. I can treat him whilst he lies down and the abstractions I will make are those of a knee at rest. It then has particular anatomical relationships with the hips, the feet, specific reflex relationships with viscera etc. This treatment may or may not be effective.

Let us imagine that it was not effective. I may attribute the failure to the fact that the pain occurs *when he walks* and not when he lies down. The abstraction I need to make here is much wider. It includes changing relationships between the knee and all the

organs mentioned above, different gravitational relationship with the floor etc. I therefore decide that I should treat him whilst he moves.

This may sound very difficult, for how do I visualize a walking knee i.e., a structure that goes forward, backward, sideways etc.? I have to get at some “essence” of movement, or “abstraction” of all these small movements. I have to find the unity behind all these movements. Something universal to all of them and treat that as if it had some form of independent reality.

So that we have two levels of abstraction here:

- abstraction of the knee at rest, without weight-bearing (lying down)
- abstraction of the knee, weight-bearing and in motion

Other levels of abstraction can be envisaged: abstraction of the knee at rest with cold weather (people that complain of knee pain only when the weather is changing), abstraction of a knee in a person that becomes angry or stressed, something that implies a correlation with the sympathetic nervous system etc.

These are very different visualizations or abstractions. They are built of sub-units (knee, cold, motion, anger) that I can find in many other contexts. I marry them in the particular case of Ms. Smith’s knee. This is a kind of Lego game of abstractions. Now, are these pieces of Lego are real (pieces that exist independently of Ms. Smith’s treatment), or are they tricks used by my mind?

The wider context of this discussion, you remember, is found in Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed that our tendency to make abstractions is simply the reflection of the fact that once, our soul had known the true world, where the true horse (or knee) exists. The contradicting perceptions, when seeing various horses, do not prevent us from understanding (ie connecting with) the existence of an archetypal horse.

This is summed up in this dialogue found in Plato: one of Plato’s critics said “I see horses but no horseness”, to which Plato answered “this is because you have eyes but no intelligence”.

Aristotle was opposed to Plato. He did believe that there was such an abstraction as “horseness” but it could not be separated from each individual horse. There is something common to all horses, and that “commonness” is the abstraction we may make. Aristotle’s understanding of “abstractions” led him to a classification of nature according to the common features found between all the objects that fill our reality.

This discussion turned into one of the most heated and longest philosophical debate in the history of philosophy. It preoccupied the philosophers that span the period between the initial Church Fathers (such as Augustine) until the Renaissance. It has not been solved yet. The question has been known throughout the Middle Ages as the *Quarrel of the Universals*.

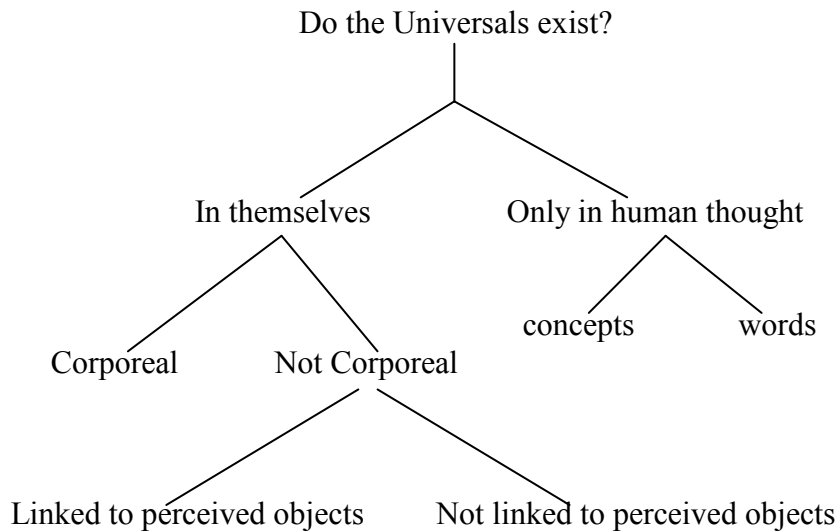
These thinkers had observed that men tend to find common features between objects (or feelings, or objects etc). They turn them into “universal” features (all angry people want to hit, all horses have four legs and make a unique noise, neighing). Are these “universals” real, independently of the particular object? Or are they just mental abstractions, not physically connected to those objects?

One medieval philosopher, Albertus Magnus, will formulate the question neatly:

- the universals are *before* the things they exemplify (*ante rem*) as in Plato?
- the universals are *in* the things they exemplify (*in rem* as in Aristotle)?
- the universals are *after* the things they exemplify (*post rem*)?

The third possibility is the one held by the nominalists (in the Middle Ages) and later by most materialists. It claims that universals are just words (or concepts) that are derived from experience, that have no reality whatsoever, independently of the objects.

A diagram of the Quarrel of the Universals



There is no definitive answer to these questions. They are of interest insofar as they allow us to refine and define better our techniques, but they also allow us to recognize, for what they are, mental processes we constantly refer to.

This notion of universals is relevant to us from two points of view: psychological and technical.

- Psychological. We tend to create abstractions which we believe to be “objective truths”, as objective as the objects that inspired us in making them. Once they have become objective to us (considered as real), these “abstractions” (universals) can become very negative; they can “hamper” progress. This has happened very often in history. For instance, in the XIXth century, the possibility to compress air in a closed tank was compared to the action of squeezing a sponge. As if air contained a substance that is squeezed out when you compress it, very much like water is squeezed out of a sponge, explaining why the sponge becomes smaller. There is something common to these two actions, a physical substance has reduced its volume, but they are in fact very different. Our minds are most likely full of these abstractions, i.e., preconceived ideas on some natural phenomena. These abstractions become fixed landmarks in our mental representation of the world and will affect all our analogies and techniques. Remember: a visualization works in so far as it is as close as possible to how reality seems to work. Starting with the wrong premises will lead to an ineffective treatment. We must therefore search for the abstractions that have become “universals” in us, i.e., abstractions thought to exist as independent, real psychological objects. For instance, the idea that we can

visualize motion as a continuous process, or visualize in three dimensions are abstractions most of you held before I showed you they were wrong.

You probably thought that man is perfectly able to *see* objects *move in three dimensions* in their mind. This belief was a psychological object, i.e., a certainty, a universal. How many of these abstractions lurk in our minds?

- Technical. Let us think about how universals “exist”. Do they exist in their most extreme form (Platonic) or in more intermediate forms (Aristotle)? How do I visualize a universal? I can visualize a liver from the picture of a book, but as soon as I close my eyes, I have to make a series of abstractions (i.e., maintain only certain aspects of the liver, aspects which seem essential to me). What criteria must be used for this selection of “universal liver features”? So far, personally, I have proceeded on a trial and error basis, noting that some features seem much more important than others. But I am far from having explored all the possibilities. Indeed, visualizing universals, if they exist independently, can be very difficult. For instance, how do I visualize *redness* without anything *red* to carry it? Again, this search is valid only if we assume that *redness* exists as such.

Visualization

You first visualize the letters of the word “Anger”. It is a common word, not loaded with any particular feeling. You visualize the letters, one by one. You then try and load that word with actual “anger”. What happens to the letters that are visualized? What happens in your throat?

You then visualize a man. He is immobile. He is a live statue (ie a live man that does *not* move). His color is rather white. His mouth is open. He is angry, very angry. His mouth is open because he is (or he just has) screamed his anger. You now add some redness to him, to his face. Concentrate on making him more and more angry (but he still does not move, no gesticulation). What happens to him, to his general shape? What happens in your throat?

You now remove the image, the word. Leave the feeling of anger. It is not your anger, it is a visualized anger. It is a tool called “anger”.

This is a *Lego* visualization. Step by step building and removing. Yet something common is left behind all the visualized elements (word, man, color etc.). The universal called “anger”.

Think of *ante rem, in rem, post rem*.