

Respecting Differences by Idealised Language

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All contributions to the conference connect the issue of interculturality with fundamental epistemological assumptions. What is however exactly the connection between epistemology and interculturality or how does the problem of incommensurability lead to practical problems? After treating these questions I want to answer the question if a new epistemological approach emerges from the contributions.

Incommensurability

Incommensurability is a concept, which is introduced by Kuhn. It can be explained by reference to a famous drawing of Wittgenstein, which can be interpreted in two ways: as a duck and as a rabbit.¹ The same part of the drawing can thus be interpreted as 'ears' and as 'beak'. Kuhn's point in introducing the concept of incommensurability is that it is possible for people to switch from one interpretation to the other, but that it is impossible to *see the line as beak and ears at the same time*.²

Kuhn created a serious problem for Poppers theory about the growth of knowledge. Popper had stated that observation is always observation in the light of theories. A growth of knowledge could according to Popper only be obtained by refuting the generally held theories. Poppers theory is called 'critical rationalism', because he believed that scientists should have a critical attitude towards their theories.

Kuhn stated that a switch of theoretical framework implies that the 'facts' explained by the old theory are 'lost'. Therefore there can be no such thing as a gradually adding up of knowledge. By switching from one theoretical

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1 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* at 309 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a M., 1975/1953).

2 T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* at 150 (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970/1962).

framework to another people can however use the practical results of different perspectives. Maybe they will invent one day a new theoretical framework in which the practical results of different perspectives can be fitted in a unified theoretical framework: the part of the drawing will then not be interpreted as 'beak', neither as 'ears', but as a newly discovered 'fact'.

While Kuhn is referring only to scientific theories, his followers extend his insight to the field of daily practices. They incorrectly use his ideas in the context of the symbolic interactionist (behaviourist) theory of Mead.³

Mead teaches that language is developed as the result of the interaction of a person with his physical and social environment. Participants in a certain practice interact with each other and thus will come to share a language that determines their outlook on the world and informs them about the physical and social consequences of their actions. Daily interactions are thus interpreted as a rational enterprise.

Mead believed that the meaning of words could be shared by a purely empirical observation of the bodily movements with which people react on each other.⁴ His theory was interpreted by contemporary scientists in the context of Poppers adage that observation is always observation in the light of theories. They concluded that people tend to be imprisoned in the shared concepts that determine their outlook on the world.⁵ Practices will only be able to change if the participants are prepared to take a critical stance towards their beliefs. Not being prepared to do so, means dogmatism, parochialism or a lack of flexibility and will end up in sheer backwardness. The application of Kuhns concept of incommensurability in this context leads to the conclusion that participants of different practices will understand the same situation in the context of different frameworks of meaning and will thus belong to different cultures. A new shared practice can only develop between those different cultures if everybody is prepared to participate in a debate in which ones beliefs about 'what is true', 'what is just' and 'what is human' are critically questioned.⁶

The symbolic interactionist theory makes it therefore socially unacceptable for a group to be parochial and to refuse to be a participant in such an open debate.⁷ This creates the problem of multiculturality.

The possibility of *interculturality* stands for the belief that people can fully engage in interactions, while holding on to their own beliefs. In my opinion this entails a refutation of the interactionist theory.

3 More about Meads theory can be found in the contribution of Zijdeveld in this issue.

4 G.H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* at 79 (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974/1934).

5 P.L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology* at 110-141 (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1971/1963).

6 The idea of a 'Zwangsfreie Sprechsituation', see Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*, Band 1 at 70-71 (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1981).

7 In stating that 'an actualisation of the principles of the Enlightenment will do the job' Pinxten (in this issue at 244) fails to appreciate that during the last decades the civic values have been moulded to serve this open debate, in which as much as possible traditionally held beliefs are debunked.

A new epistemological approach?

I will now consider the question if the contributions contain arguments for a refutation of the interactionist theory.

Forms of life

To learn to know a tradition means to get confronted with loads of facts (stories, pictures, economical, sociological, juridical information) from different sources that all show their own preoccupations and that all connect their information in a specific way with the tradition at hand. Some people will tell for example that pictures of animals are forbidden in the Islamic tradition, while others show beautiful Islamic decorations of hares.⁸

I think this is what Glenn means when he states that 'tradition is so ubiquitous and free flowing'. Glenn refutes with this statement the idea of a social practice as a framework of meaning, as a coherent whole, or for that matter as 'a game' or 'a form of life'.

To cope with the complexities of social reality it seems indeed necessary to act inconsistent to switch from perspective or to say one thing and do the other. This is certainly not an irrational attitude, but a consequence of the context-dependent nature of acting. In acting the specific details of the situation count and language is by nature general.⁹ Therefore a full description of the situation is impossible: a host of concepts will be applicable to the same action situation, even concepts that denote opposite things. A rational reconstruction of practices (e.g. by way of using the principle of charity) gives thus a distorted view of such practices.

Bottom-up

Van Brakel states more or less the same as Glenn when he writes:

'Language should not be conceived as a closed system, nor as a subjectively expressive medium, but as the concrete and ceaseless flow of utterance produced in dialogue between speakers in specific social and historical contexts.'¹⁰

Loth asks van Brakel in a footnote to his reply 'how the persistent denial of any unity in language is compatible with the inclusive, holistic approach of forms of life'.¹¹ Van Brakel introduces the possibility of such a rational reconstruction of practices by describing the process of triangulation as a rational

8 See NRC Handelsblad, Wetenschapsbijlage, letter of reader, 10 September 2006.

9 See also Loth in this issue at 191-192.

10 In this issue at 268.

11 In this issue at 289 n. 11.

cognitive process.¹² I agree with Loth that if we do not share a language in daily contacts this means that these contacts can never affirm, neither criticise forms of life. Loth concludes that this is a reason to believe that Van Brakel overstates his case. But what if Van Brakel does not overstate his case in his persistent denial of any unity of language? Could this mean that the mistaken belief that daily practice can produce (bottom up) common conceptual frameworks has led to the crumbling of the existing frameworks and thus to the development of an ethos of immoralism, as described by Zijderfeld?¹³

The neutral observer

As Staat points out, Van Brakel introduces the historian as a neutral observer of first contacts.¹⁴ Yet, following Van Brakel's main thesis, how can inter-subjective statements ever be made if people do not share a language? There is then no possibility to establish as an inter-subjectively accepted 'given' what happens in those contacts, for instance, that the communication was meaningful or that the interaction was pragmatically successful. The question is therefore 'what constitutes inter-subjectivity'? Zijderfeld describes the institutional approach of Durkheim and confronts this approach with the interactionist approach of Luckmann:

'In the symbolic interactions which in fact constitute what is being called 'society' people transcend their individuality, since they take the role of the other, and next internalise that role as part of their Self.'¹⁵

But 'what can it mean to take the role of the other' if people do not speak the same language?

I think the conclusion has to be that one cannot take the role of a concrete other. People can in daily contacts only accommodate to each other. Van Brakel describes this attitude referring to Wittgenstein as an 'attitude towards a soul'.¹⁶ Interculturality boils down here to just getting acquainted to each other. This is an important conclusion and Pinxten as well as Loth plead for it.

The question is however if this is enough. While Glenn, Pinxten and Van Brakel seem to be content with the 'end of ideal languages', Loth states the need of a shared language, while Staat states the need to affirm identities by

12 'Both sides will (have to) assume that the other is having a largely correct picture of the common world.' In this issue at 276.

13 In this issue at 316.

14 In this issue at 300.

15 In this issue at 322.

16 In this issue at 274.

contesting them *before a public*¹⁷ and Pierik stresses the need of a cognitive attitude to survive. I agree with the latter and think this asks for a reconsideration of the institutional approach. The old institutional approach is focused on unity and universal truth. A reconsideration of the institutional approach should keep in mind that general concepts always fall short in reproducing the endless empirical variety. To illustrate this point, I will end this personal reflection with a defence of the use of an ideal language.

Plato's heaven

In descriptive enterprises idealised pictures play an important role. Let me take the example of a flower book. A picture is an idealisation of reality and a drawing is better fitted for expressing such idealisation, than a photograph. It needs a lot of training to be able to understand a certain flower in reality as a specimen of a certain species, symbolised by a certain picture. Glenn thinks that idealised pictures are dangerous. Pierik states that we cannot do without idealised categories, but also would rather get rid of them.

I want to state exactly the opposite: idealised categories prevent the danger of 'real separations' when they are continuously worked upon in a community of researchers that tries to specify the categories more precisely by confronting the categories with real specimens. Such a researcher will be able to see a lot of detail in the world of plants and is very conscious of the rough and speculative nature of descriptive systems.

17 In this issue at 302-303.