

Dr. Dirk Pereboom's new book in preparation:

NOËTIC AND PARADIGMATIC PHILOSOPHY

- TWO PHILISOPHICAL APPROACHES TO THE WORLD -

Greek philosophy is the result of the experiment to understand the world as we see it by reason, not by divine revelation, sacred texts, or tradition. It was born around 600 B.C.¹. At that time, the Chinese developed their Confucian and Taoist views of the world based on tradition and the “way” of meditation. In India the Hindu view based on the Veda was born². The people of Israel had their prophets who interpreted the word of their monotheistic God. The Celts had their Druids³. Even the Greeks had their mythology, handed down to us by Hesiod. All these worldviews were in one way or the other the work of belief. But certain Greeks such as Thales (fl. C. 585 B.C.), Anaximander (c.612-545 B.C.), Anaximenes started asking questions that required an answer by reason. They affirmed indirectly that the world we live in is accessible to human reason. For the first time in history, the full dignity of the human mind was asserted. With the Greeks science was born. They wanted to know what is true. Their experiment led to the great philosophies of Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.).

Now truth, saying things as they are, is a relation between what we think and what is. When I say that this tree is green, I tell the truth when by looking at the tree I actually observe it to be green. I say the truth when what I say corresponds to what is. Truth is then a transitive relation of correspondence. Truth is the correspondence of thought to what is.⁴

But if truth is a transitive relation of correspondence, it can go both ways. Instead of the agreement of thought to things, it could also be the agreement of things to thought. In that case, I say true in as far as the thing I am talking about corresponds to my thought of it. When we say Kant is a “true” – real – philosopher, we want to say that Kant corresponds to the idea of a philosopher. The architect, too, makes his vision, his blueprint of the house come true.

If then there are two truths, there should also be two types of philosophy, one type that tries to give an accurate picture of the world based on experience and reason, another type that tries to envisage a world that corresponds to human ideals, a mental world conceived to become true. As the first type of truth requires at its start a description, or contemplation, of what is, I shall call it “noëtic philosophy”, from the Greek “νόησις”, meaning observation,

¹ A time in the history of the world Jaspers calls the “Axial epoch”, i.e. a period when the fundamental views of the world took on a different shape in several of the then existing civilizations.

² Cf. Audi, « Vedas »

³ Jean-Louis Brunaux sees the druids as « Philosophers of the Barbarians ». But he does not define what philosophy is exactly, and he shows only that the Druids were in contact with Pythagoras, or his descendant disciples. But is Pythagoras to be considered a philosopher? Kirk, Raven, and Schofield in their classic work on the Presocratic Philosophers, maintain: “Pythagoras, we must conclude, was a philosopher only to the extent that he was a sage” (p. 238), and: “... the impulse underlying Pythagoreanism was a religious one ...” (p.213)

⁴ Being a basic concept in philosophy, truth has received many interpretations. Medieval philosophy in particular developed quite a theory of truth, but the question is by no means closed and has lately been raised again. It distinguished the truth of beings (veritas essendi) from the truth of propositions (veritas cognoscendi). The veritas essendi is the truth of beings ; it presupposes an ideal model – the idea God has of beings – and is attributed when the being in question resembles this model, when it is a « true human being », etc.. The veritas cognoscendi is the truth of propositions. Our distinction is exclusively on the level of this truth and maintains that either our ideas correspond to the object of our thought, or the object of our thought corresponds to the idea we have of it. For a clear and concise treatment of truth in the history of philosophy, cf Jolivet, passim.

understanding, thought. The second type of truth, things corresponding to our thoughts, leads inevitably to man intervening in the world and fashioning it according to his thoughts. I shall therefore call this type of philosophy “paradigmatic”, from the Greek “παράδειγμα”, model, example. Both types of thought presuppose as an axiom that the world is somehow rational, that the human mind in one way or the other can link up with the world man lives in. If the world were fully irrational so that one day trees would grow up, and another day they would grow down, or one day flower could be baked into bread but another day not, no thought about the world would be possible. There would be an unbridgeable gap between the rationality of the human mind and the irrationality of the world.

If there is a noëtic and a paradigmatic type of philosophy, it stands to reason to expect two traditions in the history of philosophy.

In Greek philosophy, the first known thinker to initiate noëtic thought was Heraclitus. Paradigmatic thought started with Parmenides (500 appr.- appr. 400 B. C.), and it culminated in the philosophy of Plato. The Platonic tradition held firm during the Middle Ages. In modern times, it started again on a new basis with Descartes (1596- 1650) to culminate in the philosophy of Hegel, who brought it to its perfection. Noëtic thought was represented in Greece in particular by Heraclitus (~VI - ~V century B.C.) and culminated in the grand enterprise of Aristotle. It was rediscovered during the Middle Ages in the theology of Thomas of Aquinas (1224/1225 – 1274), but then more or less disappeared from the scene. In recent times some Existentialists, such as Heidegger (1889 – 1976) and especially Jaspers (1883 – 1969) developed their thoughts on a noëtic basis⁵.

This dual tradition in philosophy led, and still leads, many thinkers to oppose one to the other, Aristotelians refuting followers of Plato, and vice versa. But if one understands that there are two truths, one should also see that the two approaches to truth are complementary. Whereas noëtic philosophy helps us better understand the world, our society, our existence, paradigmatic philosophy shows us all the possibilities of creative thought and its laws. It led to the discovery of the modern sciences thus enabling man to fashion the world according to his own vision. For man to develop the full potentiality of his mind and the management of his world, he needs the co-operation of both. Noëtic thought by itself helps us understand life and thus lead a life with greater depth, but without paradigmatic thought it leads to a static barren world deprived of human innovation. Paradigmatic thought as such adapts the world to our needs and our desires, but without noëtic thought it loses contact with reality and creates monsters that in the end prove to be destructive.

In order to detect this noëtic and paradigmatic tradition in philosophy, one should distinguish the structure of these two types of thought. It is by their structure that one can distinguish the two philosophies and determine whether a given thinker belongs to one or the other tradition, just as it is by their inner structure that one can discover the use and function of a building, whatever the facade may be.

⁵ Other Existentialists, such as Sartre, resolutely adhere to paradigmatic thought.

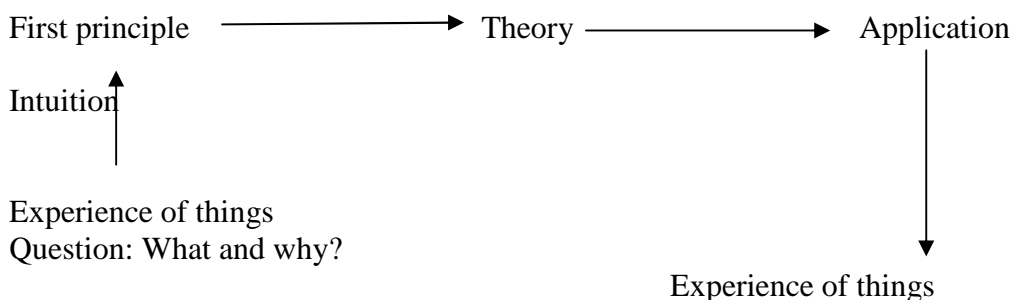
The Structure of Noëtic thought.

All thought has its source in experience. Without any observation whatsoever, human thought can have no content. Even our most fictional visions still deal with things or situations we have observed, even if they transform them into a different world.

Thought starts when it asks questions of the things we observe. Noëtic thought asks the question children pose so often of the “what” and the “why”. ”What is this thing?” or “Why is this?” Of course, when philosophers pose those questions, they do not look for immediate answers or definitions. They do not ask what this particular animal is, or why trains move. They want to know what it means to be an animal, what is the difference between animals and things, or what movement is, and why it is. They are looking for the essence of things and for ultimate causes. They want to understand what ‘animality’ is, or what is the cause that accounts for all movement in the world.

In order therefore to better understand the world we live in, noëtic thought travels from the concrete to the abstract, for it is in the region of the abstract that it hopes to find the principles that govern our world. Aristotle gives us a good example. When asking what a statue is, he answers that it is bronze that has been given a certain form by the sculptor. The bronze is the material the sculptor used to give the statue his form. Aristotle then generalizes by saying that things are made up of form and matter. The definition of things, the ‘what’, must therefore mention the form and matter. Man, for example, is a rational animal. He is an animal just as a dog and a monkey are animals, but his ‘animality’ carries the form of reason⁶. In the same way a statue of Socrates is bronze having received the form of the image of Socrates, and a residence is a building incorporating the form of dwelling.

In schematic form, one could represent noëtic thought in this manner:



In giving us the definition of things, form and matter explain to us what things are, that is to say they explain why things are what they are. Form and matter are the intrinsic causes of things that determine what things are. By discovering form and matter Aristotle discovered at the same time the first causes meant to explain things.

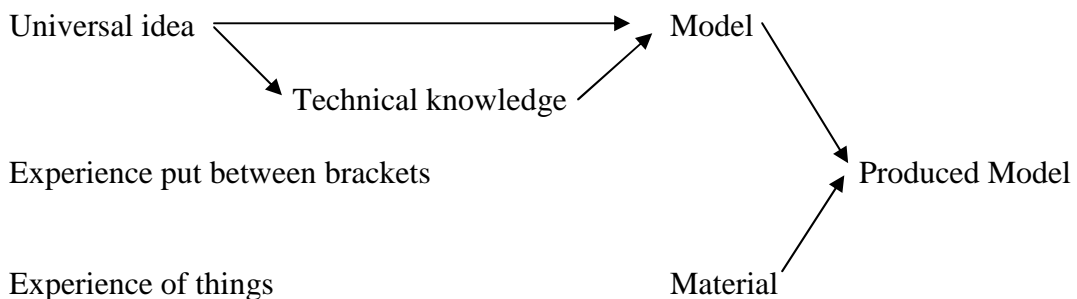
⁶ cf. Philippe, pp. 92 –97.

The Structure of Paradigmatic thought.

Paradigmatic thought also starts with experience and then negates it. The work of an architect is a good example. The architect knows by experience what a building must be to be a family home. But he puts the plans of houses he already knows out of his mind, at the time he wants to conceive a new home. In this sense he partly negates experience, and this gives him a universal vision of what a home has to be for him. He finds this vision in his mind, and he will apply this to the world when building a family home.

Paradigmatic thought implies three concepts: the universal idea of what it means to be a home, the model i.e. a picture of a specific home, and thirdly the material of which the house is made. Between the three, there is a logical relation of contrariness. The particular model (blue print) stands in contrast to the universal idea of a house, their relation is one of contrariness. And both are put together in the actual house built, which is the synthesis. Hegel's logic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis applies exactly to the schema of paradigmatic thought.

In schematic form:



A feature that strikes, is the productiveness of paradigmatic thought. Paradigmatic thought has its production inscribed in it, this in contrast to noëtic thought that only observes, but does not try to transform the world. Paradigmatic truth is a transitive act, in the terms of Aristotle.

If one considers the universal idea as such, which is based on a kind of inspiration, one notices that their main characteristic is beauty. Models thought out by man are always beautiful, and this is exactly their attractiveness; visions of the world based on paradigmatic thought attract because they are beautiful. Marx is a good example; a Marxist world, is a beautiful world based on the co-operation of its different factors.

In conclusion, one may say that noëtic thought reproduces the world in the same way we encounter it, whereas paradigmatic thought transforms the world. A purely noëtic view of the world is static, whereas a paradigmatic world is a world of transformations without limits. In the end, a crazy world without limits. Secondly, a paradigmatic world has as its final value beauty, whereas a noëtic world has as its highest moral value the good.

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