Rules, Regularities, Randomness

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Chapter 14

Episodic problems

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In a recent paper, Stokhof (2021), I formulated some thoughts about the possible role(s) of philosophy. I started from the observation that much of modern philosophy – in the analytical tradition but also, increasingly, in other traditions – is almost exclusively concerned with concepts and conceptual analysis, with current 'conceptual engineering' as a very prominent instance. The main factor driving that development is the increasing influence of science on the way in which we view the world and ourselves. The results of science and technology pervade our everyday lives in ways that even in recent history would have stricken many as fiction, science fiction to be sure. But even more pervasive is the underlying picture of what the world is like – material, governed by strict laws – and of what we are like – material as well, and governed by material principles: survival, utility maximisation. Even much of the pseudo-science that some cling to, feeds on that picture – misunderstood, sure, but influential nonetheless.

What place is left for philosophy if science shapes and drives us in such a profound and inescapable way? As a way of knowing, it has relinquished its claim to a domain of its own a long time ago. There is no separate reality that is the subject matter of philosophy. There is not even a distinct set of questions about reality that only philosophy can answer. Rather, philosophy has associated itself with science in an uneasy alliance. Philosophy as conceptual analysis is a necessary prolegomenon to science, according to some, or just a clarifying afterthought, according to others. The distinction seems to be more a matter of temperament than that it is based on a factual difference of opinion. Philosophy's subject matter are concepts, those used by science, but also those used in everyday life. With regard to the latter, more often than not philosophy sets as its goal to show that these are based on mistaken, i.e., non-scientific, views that need correction, if not eradication.

Although analytic philosophy is especially prone to this, other philosophical traditions display similar tendencies. In the paper I mentioned Foucauldian archeology and genealogy as examples. In the work of Pierre Hadot we can find further support. In his *What is Ancient Philosophy?* ((Hadot, 2002, p. 261)) Hadot states the following claim:

> The dominance of Idealism over all university philosophy, from Hegel to the rise of existentialism and subsequently the vogue of structuralism, has done much to foster the idea that the only true philosophy must be theoretical and systematic.
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> Such, it seems to me, are the historical factors that have led to the conception of philosophy as pure theory.

'Pure theory' in this tradition is, of course, not exactly the same as conceptual analysis in the analytic tradition, but there is a common core: a move away from the everyday, a philosophy that is modelled on the example of science, resulting in an intellectual endeavour that is struggling to maintain its identity confronted as it is with the ever-extending reach, and successes, of science.

The result is that professional philosophers risk what Hadot calls 'intellectual and moral perdition', and he quotes Jacques Bouveresse's description ((Bouveresse, 1973, p. 74), which I quote from Hadot) of what lies in wait for them (*ibid*.):

> In a sense, there is no servitude more intolerable than that which constrains a man professionally to have an opinion in cases in which he may not necessarily have the least qualification. What is at issue here, from Wittgenstein's point of view, is not by any means the philosopher's 'wisdom' – that is, the stock of theoretical knowledge he has at his disposition – but the personal price he has had to pay for what he believes he is able to think and say. [...] In the last analysis, a philosophy can be nothing other than the expression of an exemplary human experience.

Hadot argues for the need to do philosophy based on 'a choice for a certain way of life', which enables the philosopher to conceive (*ibid*., p. 270):

> [...] of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world.

This conception of philosophy, Hadot illustrates with references to the works of Montaigne, Descartes, Kant and others, among whom, remarkably, we also find Wittgenstein (*ibid*., p. 273):

> For instance, we know from one of Wittgenstein's letters that his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, which is apparently, and indeed

truly is, a theory of the proposition, is nevertheless fundamentally a book of ethics in which 'what pertains to ethics' is not said but shown. Wittgenstein elaborates his theory of the proposition in order to justify this silence concerning ethics, which is foreseen and deliberate from the beginning of the book. What motivates the Tractatus is the will to lead the reader to a certain kind of life, and a certain attitude, which, moreover, is fully analogous to the existential options of ancient philosophy: 'to live within the present,' without regretting, fearing, or hoping for anything.

This conception of 'philosophy as a way of life' weds, we could say, theoretical reflection with 'care of the self', but not as two distinct and independent partners. Theoretical reflection is not an end in itself. It is not something that produces a particular kind of 'philosophical' knowledge, it is a tool. Philosophy serves first and foremost to transform our way of seeing things, things that are important to us in a practical manner.

In the aforementioned paper I discussed Wittgenstein's considerations about aspect seeing and aspect change in precisely such a context. The upshot of that discussion was that aspect seeing and aspect change are not meant to discard one way of viewing something in favour of another, 'better' one. Rather they are tools that open up possibilities in a practical context ((Stokhof, 2021, p. 11)):

> The philosopher's engagement ultimately is normative. It is to open up possibilities not just for the sake of it, but in order to be practical. The guiding idea is that in order for there to be meaning, actual or possible, there has to be a practical point. This is key: in the end, philosophy is a matter of seeing *and* acting, of reflection and practical engagement. And the insistence on the latter introduces a moral perspective.

That then led me to the conception of philosophy as 'philosophie pauvre' (*ibid.*, p. 12):

> a modest, hesitating, critically self-reflecting philosophy, one that suggests, asks, observes; not a philosophy that makes claims, defends theses, projects visions. Rather than carving out a highly specialised, exclusively philosophical domain, it seems it is both more modest and more productive to view philosophy as one way of dealing with the episodic, the everyday.

In his as always sharp but constructive comments Michiel raised questions about this conception of philosophy, specifically about the idea that it should be concerned with episodic problems: what exactly characterises an episodic problem? Although the term as such is conveniently vague, at least that is what I thought

at the time, the question is, of course, pertinent. Without a proper delineation of what episodic problems are, the conception of a philosophy that is concerned with such problems remains up in the air. In what follows I will try to come up with an answer. It is a first attempt, and no doubt Michiel will have further questions to expose its weak points (or gaping holes . . .).

Starting point is the connection with Wittgenstein's idea that a language game, or practice, should 'have a point'. This is something that he does not often discuss explicitly, but that clearly informs the way he thinks of the very concept of a language game. It serves a purpose, it has an intentionality, if one wishes to use that term, that distinguishes it from a mere conglomerate of verbal and non-verbal actions. This purpose need not be conceived in utilitarian terms. After all, Wittgenstein mentions, in *Philosophical Investigations*, 23, a wide variety of language games, which often do not have a purpose that can be framed in such terms.

However, that does not mean that any structured ensemble of verbal and non-verbal actions classifies as a language game. Obviously, Wittgenstein construes 'having a point' in a more restricted way. A case that illustrates this is that of philosophy, more particularly, of the kind of philosophy that Wittgenstein opposes. In *Philosophical Investigations*, 38, in his discussion of names and simples, Wittgenstein referring to the idea that demonstratives are perhaps the only genuine names, makes the following observations (italics in original):

> This is connected with the conception of naming as a process that is, so to speak, occult. Naming seems to be a strange connection of a word with an object. – And such a strange connection really obtains, particularly when a philosopher tries to fathom the relation between name and what is named by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name, or even the word "this", innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. And *then* we may indeed imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object. And we can also say the word "this" *to* the object, as it *were* address the object as "this" – a strange use of this word, which perhaps occurs only when philosophising.

Traditional philosophy is an attempt to go beyond how language is actually used. But then 'language goes on holiday', it no longer 'has a point'. The German original of the phrase in question is, perhaps, more telling:

> Denn die philosophischen Probleme entstehen, wenn die Sprache *feiert*.

'Feieren' means 'celebrate', but it also connected with 'Feierabend machen', which denotes the end of the working day, when we quit. So, a more appropriate translation might be:

> For philosophical problems arise when language stops doing its job.

What is important to note is that 'language doing its job' is something specific: it is language being used in the way in which we use it in everyday contexts, with reference to everyday, practical concerns. Wittgenstein would not deny that language is being used in philosophy, intentionally and systematically. Philosophical discussion is not a matter of inarticulate mumbling and grumbling. But, according to Wittgenstein, it does lack a point, being removed as it is from our everyday concerns. That is what is the problem with traditional philosophy on his view.

This interpretation of what 'having a point' comes to ties meaningful language use intrinsically to our everyday concerns and that, at least for Wittgenstein, has a distinct moral dimension. Throughout Wittgenstein's life, the question how to live, how to find the proper moral stance to the challenges that world and life present, has been a central concern. This is quite explicit in Wittgenstein's early writings. And although explicit discussion of it in the later work is scarce, it does seem to have this dimension as well.

However, it is one thing to claim that traditional philosophy lacks sufficient connection with everyday concerns, and that a proper philosophy should. But it is quite another thing to somehow argue, let alone show, that this is indeed the case. From a standard philosophical perspective this would mean that we need to come up with a definition of what 'having a point' exactly is, and then show that traditional philosophy lacks such a point, in contradistinction to other types of intellectual activity. Conceived of in this way, we find ourselves in a bind. For coming up with a definition seems to presuppose exactly the kind of philosophical conceptual analysis that we want to do away with.[1] So what are we to do? Perhaps we can take our clue from Wittgenstein's stance with regard to ethics. That is a complicated story, but one thing is clear: ethics is not concerned with the formulation and philosophical grounding of general moral principles, but with attitude and action. That means that moral education does not consist in teaching rules but is a matter of 'leading by example' and of reference to such examples. Applied to our current problem this means the following. We cannot first define with the means of traditional philosophy what the alternative that does away with it will be: that is self-defeating. But we can do philosophy in a different way, and by doing so show what is wrong with doing philosophy in the traditional way. It seems that this is exactly what Wittgenstein did, or at least,

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1. The problem appears to be related to the kind of self-reference that plagues philosophy in many guises (radical scepticism, radical relativism, but also their counterparts) and that is arguably connected to its absolute character.

what he tried to do.[2] Wittgenstein did indeed oppose traditional philosophy, but he also engaged in a different type of philosophy, one that is supposed to show, rather than prove, that it is the more meaningful activity.

Notice that the movement of our argument here is circular: in order to understand what this particular kind of philosophy is, we already need to have a grasp of what it is. Or, to put it differently, we cannot convince someone that this is the right way of viewing the matter when they do not already see the difference that we are after. But that is okay: it just means that the insight we are after is not something that is internal to philosophy. It has to come from outside, from a moral stance on what matters in life. In order to bring about such a change in perspective, we need, not an argument, but an aspect change, a different way of looking at what we are doing, and why. Some more discussion of how aspect seeing and aspect change can be used to bring such changes about can be found in the earlier paper.

In the present context we can say that what is at the core of the aspect change that is needed is a turn from viewing a problem as a conceptual one to looking at it as an episodic problem. Or perhaps it is better say that we are looking for a change in how we see a problem, i.e., we need to move from a conceptual way of looking at a problem to the realisation that it is connected with what concerns us practically, i.e., an awareness of the matter in question 'having a point'. If we do that, we are looking at the problem as 'episodic'. So, episodic problems are not a class of problems of their own, distinct from another class of problems, viz., conceptual ones. The distinction is not one that can be characterised in terms of content, rather, it is a matter of function, of how we view things.

But doesn't the association of 'episodic' with 'practical' imply that episodic problems are limited, and that the abstract and theoretical problems that are at the core of philosophy as conceptual analysis are ruled out? On the contrary, the functional nature of the opposition shows that this does not necessarily follow. Taking an episodic attitude towards a problem does not rule out that abstract and theoretical elements are involved. It does mean that these, too, are approached in a particular way, and that might make a difference for how we deal with them. Starting point as well as end point of our investigation should be grounded in practical concerns. But that does not rule out that abstract and theoretical considerations enter into the picture as well.

Let me finish with a first, very concise attempt to illustrate this with an example. It concerns AI. The question how/when/why to treat AI as akin to/on a par with human intelligence is one of the most central philosophical questions

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2.   This touches on the debate on the nature of Wittgenstein's (later) philosophy, in particular its therapeutic function. According to some, this is the *only* function of Wittgenstein's writings. Obviously, the interpretation that I am using here, does not agree. However, a proper defence of that needs to await a different occasion.

surrounding AI. It has received a lot of attention and many different answers have been proposed. Obviously, it represents something that is intellectually challenging and important. However, despite all the intellectual efforts that have gone into it, the matter is far from satisfactorily resolved. Why is that? The suggestion here is that asking the question in the standard philosophical way, as a question about concepts, human intelligence and artificial intelligence, that needs to be answered by analysis and argument, is the wrong way of approaching it. What is needed, it seems, is a change in perspective. The question is not: Are artificial systems intelligent like humans? That is a purely conceptual way of phrasing it. Rather, it makes more sense to address the matter from the point of view of its importance to us: When will we treat artificial systems as intelligent? In much the same way that the humanity of others is a matter of attitude, as Wittgenstein indicated in *Philosophical Investigations*, 420, II iv, 19, AI and our relation to it is a matter of attitude as well. When we grow up with AI in ways that are sufficiently similar to the ways in which we grow up with humans, the attitudes we have towards them, AI and humans, will be the same. If we look at the initial question from this episodic point of view, our considerations may still touch on abstract and theoretical questions. But the perspective from which we address them and the role that is played by the answers that we come up with, is fundamentally different. One such more abstract consideration revolves around the fact that there are, of course, lots of intermediate cases. AI can play many different roles in our lives that range from pure, tool-like functionality to something that invokes a 'human-like' stance. What is crucial is that these differences do not correlate one-to-one with conceptual differences. And that is why the conceptual way of viewing the question falls short.

These considerations are just a first attempt to get clear what the episodic nature of a 'philosophie pauvre' might entail. Much more detail needs to be added, of course, as well as further justification. But I hope the above goes some way to addressing the concerns that Michiel has voiced, and that by doing it has given him further reason to continue our ongoing discussion about it.