

TIMELY THOUGHTS

A summary of my way of thinking

The main points

Martin Heidegger once said that a philosopher has only one question – if he (or she) has any at all. Well, who knows? Anyhow, it is meaningful to ask about the underlying concern in a philosopher's work, irrespectively of whether it should be described as only one or as a plural concern. And the response, the philosophical "answer", could certainly take different paths, even when the question is singular, since the world in which we live is characterized by plurality and differentiation, in a way that easily asks for an equally plural and differentiated response.

And what about oneself? For others to give an answer. But one is allowed to try, to do it oneself. It could then be seen as a step in one's critical or reconstructive self-reflection. Therefore I allow myself to present a few reflections on what has moved me, philosophically, and on the main points in my way of responding, my way of thinking – as I see it.

At first, an *existential wonderment* – I assume. The wonderment of being, being oneself in this world of ours. Add to that an awareness of *crisis*, culturally and politically – what used to be called *nihilism*, as the internal crisis of the modern world. This implies skepticism – not as a position, but as an attitude and way of thinking: being fundamentally and philosophically *skeptical*, self-referentially skeptical.

But then (as in Dante's *Divina Commedia*) the road to hell turns out to be a road towards heaven. In prosaic terms: philosophical skepticism is nourished by philosophical rationalism – or better: taking skepticism seriously leads to an awareness of the delimitations of any possible doubt, and hence to a recognition of unavoidable preconditions for argumentation and also for communication.

And that is where I have ended up: with a *universalist notion of reflective and procedural rationality*, all through a skepsis grounded in an existential awareness and in critical arguments of various kinds. This is no "position", to be mediated and recognized like an empirical proposition, but a philosophical insight at the end of a series of philosophical *learning-processes*. In this context I shall just mention a few of them.

When I woke up, philosophically, I gradually entered two main learning-processes. One of them was rooted in the tension between *logical positivism*, with its strict requirements for argumentative clearness and intellectual sincerity, but also with its philosophical narrowness and rejection of normative and metaphysical questions, and *analytic philosophy*, with its sensitivity to the variety of contexts and the nuances in our use of concepts. It makes a huge difference whether these schools of thought are merely seen as "positions", to be "classified" (and possibly "rejected"), or whether they are taken seriously by time-consuming learning-processes working through the various claims and preconditions. In the latter case there is definitely something to learn, something to acquire – for the sake for shortness, let us say: *argumentative virtues*.

The other main learning-process was rooted in *phenomenology*, with its awareness of the qualitative aspects of life and the world, and its criticism of objectivist interpretations of

Man as an agent, and in *existentialism* in various versions, largely with the same agenda as phenomenology, but (broadly speaking) with stronger emphasis on Man as an existential being and (consequently) with an openness to a literary use of language, but often with an ambivalent or negative view of moral validity-claims and of sober argumentative reason. Again, this should not be treated as “positions”, but taken seriously through learning-processes. As a first indication, what is to be learnt could briefly be called a *self-reflexive virtue*.

In philosophy such learning-processes generally consist in a productive interplay between talking, listening, reading and writing. However, now and then it is also useful to change one’s philosophical environment in order to experience (live) how colleagues, with other specific philosophical and socio-cultural preconditions, do their work in their own environment. Traveling, in this sense, is thus philosophically meaningful in a modern world.

At a young age I went to France – at that time a stronghold of phenomenology and existentialism: Merleau-Ponty at *Collège de France* and Gabriel Marcel with his private gatherings on Friday evening. Ricoeur, Jankélévitch, Jean Wahl and others. Ever since I have kept in touch with French philosophers of my own age, and despite philosophical differences I have kept a peculiar sympathy for their work.

Next I went to Germany, working on Heidegger’s philosophy of truth, in a critical and reconstructive perspective. I met him twice, in a private setting. This encounter did not change my conception of his thinking: A great philosopher, with distinct short-comings – not merely politically (and personally), but also philosophically, due to a disregard for discursive and self-critical reason. However, after this early stay in Germany I have always felt at home among German colleagues, irrespectively of differences in philosophical “upbringing”.

Finally, during the Vietnam War, I went to the United States, as a research assistant for Avrum Stroll and Herbert Marcuse – learning to do things (in philosophy) the American way. At that time there were tens of doctoral students around Marcuse, later many of them got positions at various American universities.

As a teacher at my university in Bergen I used to lecture on the history of Western philosophy. This led to a manuscript on the history of Western thought, with an emphasis on political philosophy, and later also with an emphasis on the philosophy of the sciences, including the humanities and the social sciences. This textbook has been translated into various languages, including Chinese, and in the fall of 2001, after 9/11, it was translated and published in Uzbekistan, initiated by the local Open Society Institute (financed by Soros, inspired by Popper), in support of intellectual modernization.

In my professional work, in numerous discussions with colleagues at home and abroad, I have gradually elaborated a universalist notion of a procedural and reflective rationality, which is sensitive to plurality and situatedness. This is where the various learning-processes finally led me.

As an indication of what this means, the following remark might be helpful: For me, it soon turned out that I shared many of the philosophical interests of the later Frankfurt School, with major figures like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. (I mention the two of them, since reading Habermas without recognizing his older friend and colleague Apel is likely to lead to an inadequate understanding.) In recent years, related to the discussion of the interrelationship between truth and justification with Apel defending the notion of truth as an unavoidable performative precondition and Rorty arguing (or “suggesting”) that we should better do without such a notion, Habermas has criticized both of them, at the same time as he himself has been persistently criticized by Apel. In this debate I argue in favor of a way of thinking that in my view takes care of major insights in Apel philosophy, but without his

more controversial claims (for instance concerning the regulative idea of an ultimate consensus).

I do think that my approach allows for a universalist notion of procedural and reflective rationality that represents an adequate response to skeptical challenges, at the same time as it remains sensitive to plurality and contextuality. I also think that this approach allows for fruitful learning-processes and “applications” in other areas, inside and outside of philosophy proper. I shall briefly mention what I have in mind:

This way of thinking, with its procedural and reflective notion of rationality, does not only allow for argumentation and justification within given conceptual frames, but also for the proposals for new and better concepts – for “redescriptions” and new “vocabularies” (to use Rorty’s terms, referring back to the Heideggerian notion of “world disclosure”). This is the creative and visionary aspect of philosophical work. Though in this respect philosophers are not alone; other persons, be they artists or scientists, may also be creative and original in this sense.

However, once a new conceptual frame has been presented, it is important to discuss its adequacy or inadequacy, its merits and demerits, and in this critical assessment of new “world disclosures” philosophy, as a discursive and rational activity, has an important role to play.

In my philosophical writings I have made a proposal for a flexible and gradualist conception of a person in an ethical sense, relative to other sentient beings – broadly speaking, for the improved concepts of “Man and Nature” – a proposal with eco-political importance. Furthermore, in working with ethical problems related to future scenarios of positive eugenics I have pondered on the role of religious language in the attempt to articulate a notion of “cosmic shame” (Dworkin). Last but not least, my version of a procedural and reflective notion of rationality can itself be seen as such a proposal for a basic redescription, just as my elaboration of “arguments from absurdity” can be seen as a proposal for a redescription of transcendental arguments.

However, when this creative aspect is emphasized we are immediately faced with the question of different literary genres and differences in the way of using language. An essayistic form, possibly with literary style, may thus in some cases be more appropriate than a traditional scholarly prose – more appropriate for trying out vague intuitions and unarticulated ideas. But in such cases we are primarily tied to our own mother-tongue with all its richness of immanent meaning, and for this reason my philosophical essays are mainly written in Norwegian.

In talking about “world disclosure” we readily think in terms of projects directed toward the future, as it were. But there is also a need for looking back, into the past that may have a deeper influence on our thoughts and actions than we realize. Hence there might be a need to reinterpret past events, which is a creative task. But in addition there might also be a need to conceptualize past experiences (or “bring them on concept”, to talk in Hegelian terms). This is not merely the task for philosophers – historians and social scientists are required – but it is also a task for philosophers, focusing on conceptual rather than empirical questions: Conceptual reconstruction of important learning-processes, in a normative perspective, is definitely a philosophical task (in collaboration with relevant scholars).

In my case, this is what I have done in some of my essays, trying to reconstruct, with more appropriate concepts, some of the critical events in our history, such as the cultural modernization promoted by the playwright and scholar Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754). This is also what I am doing in my current project of reconstructing alternative processes of modernization. My “cognitive interest” has two aspects: (i) an improved understanding of the peculiarities of our national history and (ii) a politically relevant knowledge of possible

varieties of well-adapted modern societies, as a basis for a criticism of a unilinear conception of modernization processes.

During the preceding remarks on redescription and reconstruction I have indicated how my universalist notion of procedure and reflective rationality is open for learning-processes with researchers in other fields and with reasonable persons in society at large (so-called laymen). I say “learning-processes” and not “implications and applications”, since my philosophy, as any living philosophy, is basically personal and pragmatic in the sense of being an activity, a way of thinking and working, not merely a “position” on the semantical level – which does not mean, for sure, that verbal articulation in terms of propositions and statements could be regarded as redundant. Far from it. The point is merely that of emphasizing the pragmatic aspect, not of denying the semantical and propositional aspect.

These are, I assume, remarks that might convey some insight into main points in my way of thinking, as a kind of summary. In what follows I shall pinpoint some special points that might deserve an extended comment.

Some extended comments

Analytic and continental philosophy

A special attempt to overcome some of the differences between analytic and continental philosophy was undertaken in Bergen around 1960, when young philosophers from the two camps came together in seminars on the early Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein. Keeping a common front against the attempt at naturalizing the epistemic subject, and also against the view that everything is contingent, they worked carefully with thought-experiments of chosen examples of human acts, trying to show that there are various constitutive preconditions for these acts. Their conclusion was clear: there are various unavoidable preconditions for human activities (and not merely empirical facts, nor merely interpretive contingency).

It should be added that in post-war Norway Heidegger was politically scandalized as a Nazi collaborator, a view shared by young Norwegian philosophers. Hence, their attempt to read Heidegger in a more sober and analytic manner was an effort of taking care of important philosophical insights, while at the same time separating them from his political backwardness. It was an attempt of combining political responsibility and philosophical reconciliation – an urgent task in post-war Europe.

Example-oriented analyses and self-reflection

As a result of ongoing discussions and mutual learning processes these philosophers found a common ground in a cautious and example-oriented version of a Kantian way of reasoning, but without the Kantian epistemology. Their point of departure was human agency, including speech-acts and discursive activities but also act-inherent insights and “tacit knowledge”. Philosophical self-reflection and conceptual analyses, cautiously carried out by thought-experiments on constitutive elements in various human activities, was their way of trying to combine major virtues in analytic and continental philosophy.

Linguistic-pragmatic turn and transcendental pragmatics

This approach represented a version of the so-called *linguistic-pragmatic turn*, but a version that did not merely represent a change of paradigm – say, from a subject-object position to an intersubjective position, without a change in the way of doing philosophy – nor merely a change from epistemology to contextual hermeneutics, without a notion of context-

transcending validity-claims. It was a move toward a special version of *transcendental pragmatics*, a version that rightly could be called a *transcendental praxeology*.

It was a move away from a primarily position-oriented way of thinking, toward a way of doing philosophy which is sensitive to the nuances in our use of concepts in different activities, at the same time as it includes a concern for validity-claims in our activities and speech-acts, particularly in serious discussions and in strict self-reflection. Arguments were conceived as self-related validity-claims, that is, in a first-person perspective. Hence, sides were taken in support of philosophers like Apel and Habermas (against philosophers like Rorty), as to the self-reflective questions of truth-claims and discursive rationality.

As in transcendental pragmatics, the main concern was an overcoming of philosophical skepticism. At the same time, sides were taken in support of philosophers like late Wittgenstein as to the concern for cautious thought-experiments and example-oriented conceptual analyses.

Arguments from absurdity, and conceptual adequacy

On this background I shall proceed by focusing on two points as to the question of how to philosophize, namely the usage of *arguments from absurdity* and the discussion of *conceptual adequacy* – the former representing example-oriented and reflective thought-experiments by which one breaks or violates some rule or principle, thereby creating some “absurdity”, whereby the *constitutive role* of the broken or violated rule or principle can be illuminated. In short, arguments “from impossibility to necessity”.

These are example-oriented and discursive analyses of the *relative (in-)adequacy* of certain concepts (or “vocabularies”), compared with alternative concepts (in a given setting).

I shall now add a few remarks on possible “applications and implications” of this way of philosophizing, in terms of a modified version of transcendental pragmatics:

Concepts: in doctrine or in usage?

To the twin-question “what is a concept? where are the concepts located?” we may answer that concepts are situated in general and comprehensive *doctrines*, on a high level of abstraction, or we may answer that they are situated in various *usages*, in concrete situations. In the former case, concepts should be discussed and clarified on the basis of theoretical positions and texts, in the latter they should be discussed and clarified on the basis of specific examples and thought-experiments. In philosophy, both are needed.

Hence it is beneficial to pay attention to different ways of working philosophically with concepts. In so doing it is philosophically important to be sensitive to possible ambiguities and other shortcomings in one’s own language. This need for a reflective and self-critical sensitivity of one’s own conceptual preconditions includes a reflective awareness at various levels of abstraction, as well as case-oriented analyses of implicit nuances or unrecognized confusions.

Example-oriented thought-experiments and the plurality of break-downs

What is here called “arguments from absurdity” are structurally the same as the “meaning critical” (*sinnkritische*) way of reasoning in Apel’s transcendental pragmatics. But in Apel the argument is restricted to strict self-reflection, and “absurdity” (*Sinnlosigkeit*) is paradigmatically a performative self-referential contradiction. In analytic philosophy, on the other hand, “arguments from absurdity” (also called “informal *reductio ad absurdum*-arguments”, as in Gilbert Ryle) are applied on a much wider scale, such as “category mistakes” and “contextual inconsistencies”.

It should be recalled that in the first paper three points are made about this point: (i) Discussions of category mistakes (like “seven is green”) and contextual inconsistencies (like

“the king of France is bald”) have shown that there is a *third epistemic category* that is different from empirical truth or falsity as well as from formal (positive or negative) analyticity. (ii) This third category is based on the use of thought-experiments whereby some rule or principle is denied or violated, producing some break-down of meaning, and thereby the status of the broken rule or principle, as a *meaning-constitutive precondition*, is indicated. (iii) By analyzing different cases in this way we realize that there is a *plurality of break-downs*, more or less severe, as it were – from “strong” empirical falsity to what is totally meaningless.

In this paper the same case-sensitive way of reasoning is also applied to various examples of what is said to represent strict transcendental-pragmatic preconditions in Apel’s writings. Also in these cases, in the core of transcendental pragmatics, our analyses unveil a need for more nuances.

An extended use of arguments from absurdity

All in all, this analytic and case-oriented way of using “arguments from absurdity” has a two-fold implication: (i) a more nuanced conception of strict self-reflective arguments, at the core of transcendental pragmatics, and (ii) a wider use of such arguments, opening for conceptual analyses (of the “geography of our ideas”) on a broad scale, beyond the realm of strict self-reflective arguments.

So far we have commented upon this more nuanced and flexible use of “arguments from absurdity”. I shall now comment upon the use of similar arguments concerning “conceptual adequacy”, especially in its negative and cautious version, namely concerning the relative *in-adequacy* of a given set of concepts, that is, relative to some other set of concepts that are more adequate in the given situation.

Arguments from relative conceptual in-adequacy

A meaningful usage of concepts is a precondition for meaningful propositions and meaningful imperatives, that is, both for possible truth and possible moral validity. Arguments from absurdity, in terms of category mistakes, make such preconditions explicit. However, a meaningful use of concepts, in meaningful propositions and normative utterances, may still be *more or less adequate* (that is, for the case under consideration).

Two examples may serve to make the point: (i) Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action* can be read as an extensive argumentation in favor of the view that a conceptual frame merely containing instrumental and strategic notions is *relatively less adequate* than a conceptual frame that also includes communicative and discursive notions (when we want to understand modern societies). (ii) When university students describe themselves as “customers”, shopping courses and grades, what they say is certainly understandable. But we may argue that students are also citizens and members of a political community; they are *Bildungsbürger*, to be formed and educated as members of a cultural community; and they are unique and mortal human beings (in a Kierkegaardian sense). A self-understanding merely in terms of economic concepts is in this sense *relatively less adequate* than a self-understanding that also involves some of these other concepts.

Cognitive improvement

These are tricky questions, whether they are seen from the perspective of a possible common ground or from the perspective of a hermeneutic “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer). But we *may* argue by describing examples and analyzing thought-experiments and by reflecting on the philosophical experience obtained through these activities. Hence we *may* talk in terms of “understanding *better*”, not only of “understanding differently” (*Andersverstehen*). Hence we may talk in *melioristic* terms, of improvement and of positive learning-processes – even

though our approach, as in the case of arguments from absurdity, is indirect in the sense that it proceeds by focusing on what is seen as “less adequate”. This “negative” approach is chosen since it often makes sense to argue for the *insufficiency* of a given set of concepts, here and now – for instance by pointing at the *lack* of some kind of expertise in an industrial or military project – without pretending to know what should count as the final and perfect selection of disciplinary perspectives (which would include the paradox of predicting future innovations).

Implications and applications: self-critical criticism of science and of ideology

An implication of self-reflective “arguments from absurdity” is a rejection of skepticism and irrationalism. This is a vital point in a globalized world, torn between various kinds of regressive fundamentalism and cultural relativism. The implication of “arguments from conceptual inadequacy”, and of a wider use of “arguments from absurdity”, is a self-critical criticism of the sciences and humanities (*Wissenschaftskritik*) and of ideologies (*Ideologiekritik*). These are vital tasks in modern societies.

It goes without saying: a precondition for applying these arguments – criticism of the sciences and the humanities and criticism of ideologies and politics – is a solid substantial knowledge of what is going on in these fields.

Three cases

In order to elucidate our point we shall briefly refer to three cases of such criticism, directed against scientists and scholars who go beyond the strict definition of their own discipline – for the sake of simplicity I call them “economism”, “biologism”, and “contextualism”:

In the case of “economism” notions from economical models of human motivation and behavior are used as if they were the ontologically correct ones. And with this strong and erroneous claim they are used in a wide range of contexts, besides those related to transactions on the market. In this case arguments from *relative conceptual inadequacy* may serve as a basic criticism.

In the case of “biologism” we envisage a similar conceptual inadequacy. But in addition there is a claim that even human reason, with its performative validity-claims, may be explained biologically. Hence, a further criticism is that of *self-referential inconsistency*, in other words, the strict version of an argument from absurdity.

In the case of “contextualism” – when the various cultural studies, with cultural relativism as their methodological principle and without the intellectual resources of normative philosophical thinking, are assumed to give an extended and adequate understanding of socio-cultural phenomena and of basic normative questions in our societies – in this case we have critical arguments of *relative conceptual inadequacy* as well as critical arguments of *self-referential inconsistency*.

There is a lesson to be learnt from these reflections: Whenever scientists or scholars take part in public debates, they ought to tell their audience how their own professional perspectives may influence what they are saying about the issue under discussion and how other professional perspectives might have given another picture of that which is discussed.

Power and perspectivism

The political influence of the various disciplines is certainly dependent on the power structure in a society, related to economical and institutional factors. But this constellation can also be analyzed epistemically, since the power to influence the way we think is a decisive factor for what we do and do not do, and also because the way we think (or do not think) is decisive for our power (or powerlessness).

Some aspects of the *criticism of the sciences and the humanities* were discussed in the second and third paper. We shall now take a brief look at *criticism of ideology*, a theme mentioned in the fifth paper.

False consciousness

When “criticism of ideology” is conceived as an unveiling of “false consciousness”, be it in terms of implicit class interests, unconscious motives, or existential alienation, the crux is that of justifying the underlying notion of a “true consciousness”, which means that this kind of criticism has to be self-reflectively critical in order to avoid naive and dogmatic illusions. This challenge taken into account, it does make a difference whether such “criticism of ideology” has gone through self-critical learning-processes. In short, such learning-processes represent a precondition for a mature modern culture.

Perspectivism and restricted conceptual vision

However, due to the perspectivistic nature of the sciences and the humanities, and thereby to the danger of an undue influence of some particular perspective, overshadowing other perspectives that are equally relevant, the sciences and the humanities may often function “ideologically”. Hence there is a need for a criticism of ideology in terms of a “criticism of the sciences and the humanities”.

A striking case is that of the dominant position of the concepts and forms of thought stemming from economic neo-liberalism. But all in all there is a general need for *Fachkritik*, for a criticism of the sciences and the humanities.

At this point we may also remind ourselves of the tendency of an epistemic overburdening in differentiated and technology-based societies, due to the danger of unforeseen and detrimental consequences of many of our projects. One catchword is ecological problem, another is the military strategy based on preemptive strike for the sake of a liberal democracy. The wars in the Balkans and in Iraq illustrate the latter point: In order to know when, where, and how to intervene, and what to do once one is there, and when and how to leave, one needs knowledge and insight from a large scale of scientific and scholarly disciplines (and one needs to be able to evaluate and combine these various kinds of knowledge and insights properly, and in addition there is a need for morally and legally responsible discretion and decision making). In short, technological possibilities may easily give rise to an *epistemic overburdening*. Therefore, here again a reflective and competent “criticism of the sciences and the humanities” is required, as part and parcel of a “criticism of ideology”.

Normative justification and the dilemma of unilateralism

Finally, there is a need for *normative* justification and responsibility, not only for epistemic justification and responsibility. But apparently there are different views when it comes to basic normative questions: There are religious believers and non-believers, liberals and communitarians, and different moral theories. What counts as responsibility will then depend on these diverging views, and hence the decisive question is whether we can justify some basic norms as universally valid, despite this apparent diversity.

Such a normative justification is different from an *empirical* report about normative principles and values that actually are shared by the majority in some main cultures and belief systems. And such a justification cannot be given by *any particular* cultural tradition or belief system or metaphysical theory, since they all, in various ways, are questioned in modern pluralistic societies – not only questioned as a matter of fact, but by rational arguments.

These skeptical arguments taken into account, one may argue that a possible justification of universally valid norms has to be conceived as a justification of *meta-norms*

for the regulation of a sustainable cohabitation on Earth, not primarily as a justification for substantial ethical values. And this justification should ideally speaking take the form of an enlightened and free discussion among everybody concerned.

This is a “heavy” claim, which was especially addressed in the fifth paper. At this point we restrict ourselves to underline the negative version of this claim: A justification of universally valid norms should not explicitly and unnecessarily *exclude* any group of people from participating, which means that universally valid norms cannot be justified unilaterally.

Transcendental pragmatics, once more

At the end the question of “criticism of ideology” leads us into basic moral questions. Here we have to face skeptical arguments, for instance in terms of cultural relativism. And this is exactly the challenge that the defenders of self-reflective and discursive pragmatics intend to overcome. To do so they talk in terms of *ideal presuppositions*, that is, in terms of preconditions that *cannot be denied* without self-reflective contradiction, or preconditions for which there are *no alternative* – in other words, in terms of various versions of the argument from absurdity.

For moral philosophy there are two decisive points: (i) As serious participants in a genuine discussion we have to recognize the force of better arguments and we have to recognize other participants as reasonable and fallible, like ourselves. Consequently, basic irrationalism and ethnocentrism are ruled out. (ii) The basic norms that all those who are concerned *could have* agreed upon in a rational discussion count as normatively valid.

The hard problems of the “hard cases”

Here we restrict ourselves to a few comments: The point mentioned above (point [ii]) is well taken for the situation where all those who are concerned can participate as free and equal persons, and thus listen to each other and learn through real role-taking. But then we have the “hard cases” and future generations and all those who are “concerned” without ever being able to participate. Hence the notion of a rational agreement has to be reconsidered.

There is another problem: Should this point be understood merely in terms of agreement, as something *purely intersubjective*, without any reference to *that* which they agree upon? (What could it mean to “agree” if one does not agree upon something?) Here the answer runs as follows: They agree on basic (meta-)norms for regulating conflicts and on interpretations of their needs and interests. But then the question of the relative in-adequacy of certain conceptual systems becomes relevant (and thereby the same is true for a criticism of the relevant sciences and humanities): These are questions that in principle can be decided rationally, at least negatively as to conceptual *in-adequacies* and disciplinary *one-sidedness*. (For example, an interpretation of needs and interests that *neglects* concepts of communication and merely operates with instrumental and strategic concepts, is *less* adequate than one that *includes* concepts of communicative action and rationality.) In such cases we may expect agreement, because some claims are more reasonable than others. (It is not the other way round, that some claims are reasonable *because* they are agreed upon.)

Agreement on relative conceptual (in)adequacy, as an agreement on values?

Add to this that norms and values are “conceptually constituted” and that conceptual systems – such as the concepts of sociology or those of economy – do open up for certain types of values and norms (in contrast to other types of values or norms). Hence, if there is a rational agreement for some conceptual system, there is also a rational agreement for the kind of norms and values for which that conceptual system opens up. In so far there is a “normative content” that points beyond a purely intersubjective conception of normative agreements. We shall return to this point.

From argumentation to “redescription”?

We have been arguing in favor of an analytically inspired version of self-reflective and discursive pragmatics, focusing on an extended and case-oriented usage of arguments from absurdity and of arguments in terms of conceptual adequacy. This very approach is a self-critical criticism of radical skepticism, but just for that reason it is a target of the kind of “suggestions” and indirect argumentation found in philosophers like Rorty, who try to show that “redescription”, in terms of new “vocabularies”, is the decisive task, and that any attempt at a precise and convincing argumentation is always already captive within some given conceptual system. The message is that of “world disclosure” (*Welterschließung*) through creative projections (*Entwürfe*), without any context-independent rational justification.

Now, the decisive role of “vocabularies” is not to be denied, as we have seen above. But the question is whether such conceptual systems are *beyond* discursive justification and thus *immune* to criticism. This is a view I would reject, on three levels:

Firstly, it is not intelligible to us what a “vocabulary” could look like that did not entail the pragmatic competences of strict self-reflection and of discursive justification. This is an argument from absurdity from within the reflective and discursive activity, a self-referential argument “from above”, as it were.

Secondly, it is not intelligible to us, given the bio-body that we have, how there could be a “vocabulary” that did not entail the kind of act-inherent and “tacit” insight that is pointed out by case-oriented thought-experiments. This is an argument from absurdity related to basic human acts, an argument “from below”, as it were.

Thirdly, it is not intelligible to us that we could never know that some concepts are relatively less adequate than some other concepts, in certain situations. Not that we do not often make mistakes, nor that we are often in doubt, but in the sense that we sometimes do make progress in terms of better insight of this kind. If this were not the case, we could never have learning-processes in terms of getting a richer and better conceptual outlook in some field.

For sure, there are also cases of creative “redescriptions” (of new “vocabularies”) that are *not* subject to the kind of trial and justification that we have alluded to above. Questions of *cultural and existential identity* may to some extent be of this kind – but not always, and that is our point.

From argumentation to “reconstruction”?

We may talk in terms of free and creative projects, pointing into an open future, as it were. But we may also talk in terms of redescribing historical experiences and deconstructing former “vocabularies”, and thus focus on *the past*. Hence, Hegel focuses on former learning-processes and tries to “bring” them “on concept”, in order to gain better insight into the historical formation of mankind.

This is an approach that opens up for a reconstruction of the intellectual and institutional processes of modernization (as in Habermas). These are not “theories” of modernization in an empirical sense, but self-reflective (and hence normatively loaded) conceptualizations of formative learning-processes and institutional differentiations. But in doing so one has to relate oneself to historical and socio-scientific research of various kinds, and not merely rely on philosophical arguments and insights.

Theory of modernization as reconstruction of learning-processes?

Such reconstructive conceptualizations of modernization processes may focus on different levels of universality or particularity – on the one hand, on learning-processes and institutionalizations that are essential for *any* modern society, on the other hand, *special*

learning-processes and institutionalizations that are formative for certain societies in contrast to others. In the latter case we envisage the question of alternative processes of modernization and hence of alternative ways of coping with modern challenges and of being a modern person.

A focus on particular formative experiences is interesting also because it makes us pay attention to underlying differences that which might otherwise be overlooked, not least among intellectuals who tend to focus on general problems, but who still are “situated” – a point that is discussed in the first paper.

It should be added that in *Marco Polo*, a research project for comparative studies of cultural modernization in Europe and East Asia, there is a focus both on what is universal and shared and on what is particular and specific.

“Hard cases” and indirect representation in practical discussions

Nobody should be excluded from practical discussions on questions of importance for their needs and interests. This is a basic norm in pragmatic “discourse theory”. In positive terms: everybody “concerned” should be included in such discussions.

In those cases when this is impossible, the interests and needs of these individuals should be taken care of by some kind of *ombudsman*, who participate in practical discussions on their behalf.

However, when we analyze the various “hard cases”, known from bio-medical ethics, and also the situation of future generations, and compare them with cases of advanced and vulnerable non-humans, we run into the question: *Who* should count as “concerned” in practical discussions of importance for their interests and needs, and by *which* standards should their needs and interests be defended by those who represents their needs and interests in such discussions? In the forth paper such questions are discussed. We shall briefly refer to some of these challenges:

Questionable notions of inclusion and of universal consensus?

When the interests of the “hard cases” and of future generations are taken into consideration by somebody else, there is no mutual *learning-process* and real *role-taking* among these individuals who are “concerned” but who do not participate themselves.

Furthermore, in these cases the regulative idea of a *consensus* becomes highly hypothetical, (i) since those who belong to the “hard cases” *can never* take part in any discussion or any consensus concerning their own needs and interests, and also (ii) because it is hard to justify a sharp distinction between the “hard cases” of humans and the advance cases of vulnerable non-humans – hence the very notion of a consensus becomes unclear since its *extension* is unclear.

When the notions of role-taking and consensus through participation are rendered obsolete in these cases, we have to rely on indirect representation, which again has to rely on a discursive evaluation of the various kinds of knowledge of what would probably be in the best interest of these subjects. These are cases where the argument in favor of a “normative *content*”, based on relative conceptual adequacy, is vital (since this normative standard is not dependent on personal participation and agreement among those concerned).

The following reflections point in the same direction: Due to the development in biotechnology we are confronted with an increasing ability to intervene in the genetics of future individuals. If this is done, we are faced with the situation that our decisions and deeds co-determine the nature of persons who ideally should participate in discursive processes aiming at a consensus among autonomous individuals, as a regulative idea of normative validity. With such interventions we interfere with the independency of these individuals and thereby

with a *precondition* for an ideal consensus. If so, there is a need for a more “content-oriented” normative standard.

New challenges in modern societies

All in all, modern technology and quite a few other aspects of modern societies represent a mixed blessing: We are undoubtedly faced with grave challenges of various kinds, some of them possibly detrimental for the continuation of a humane human life on Earth, others certainly detrimental to our environment and to other species.

Some of these challenges, such as the threat facing various endangered species, seem to transcend the normative and conceptual perspectives as they are found in main moral theories, such as utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, and Aristotelian ethics. The scope of “discourse ethics” could and should be broadened, to include sentient non-humans. But even so, none of these moral theories match well with some of these challenges, such as the painless extinction of various species of animals, or even the idea of a voluntary and painless extinction of humankind.

Still, most of us do have strong moral intuitions concerning the challenges just mentioned. In these cases it may thus be tempting to talk in terms of “cosmic shame” (Ronald Dworkin) or something of that sort. It may be tempting to look for a language articulating some basic respect for life, as vulnerable, but sacred, as it were. In this sense, we may look for a religious language, but without any specific theology.

Summing up

We shall end these introductory remarks on some specific problem in the other paper in this anthology. To recall the main points: I do defend a version of transcendental pragmatics that is *analytic and case-oriented*, but still *self-reflective*. In this sense I defend a flexible use of *arguments from absurdity*, on a broad scale, and also arguments about *relative conceptual inadequacy*. Furthermore, I also defend *self-critical redescriptions* of alternative “vocabularies” as well as *reconstructions* of formative learning-processes. Hence I am in favor of normative reconstructions of cultural *modernization* and of alternative processes of modernization. More generally, I am in favor of including *political philosophy* and the *philosophy of the sciences and the humanities*, not to forget *eco-philosophy* and philosophical *anthropology* of moral discussant as bio-bodily beings, as a basic point related to “discourse theory”.

Finally, my timely thoughts do contain a double criticism of *cultural relativism*, with its underlying skepticism and nihilism, and of *fundamentalism*, be it religious or scientific. The search for a reasonable and viable way between these two positions, is certainly an urgent task in our time.

Could it not be found in a universalist notion of procedural and reflective rationality that is at the same time sensitive to plurality and contextuality? I think it does.