Just Do It: The Transformation of Contemporary Philosophy

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In contemporary philosophical debates the notion of a transformation of philosophy is cropping up with increasing frequency. In Germany, Jürgen Habermas and his followers are pleading a paradigm-shift away from the philosophy of consciousness towards the paradigm of communicative action. In France post-structuralist and postmodernist philosophy have effected a formidable landslide in which the whole tradition of modern philosophy is at stake, especially its logocentric premises and practice. Within the anglo-saxon countries the analytic tradition has lost its dominance, to be replaced by an intriguing mixture of post-structuralist, critical-theoretical and post-analytical fragments. Moreover, these different movements are not separated from each other but are interacting with increasing frequency and intensity, resulting in workshops on Derrida at John Hopkins, courses on Rorty in Berlin and the rediscovery of Adorno in Paris.

One of the most interesting aspects of this transformation process is the new sensitivity for the pragmatic dimension of language and philosophy. Contemporary philosophy is no longer focused on transcendental analyses or on the foundations of rationality, but has discovered the creative, communicative, situated, context-bound, performative, pragmatic character of philosophy itself. The commercial Nike slogan ‘just do it’ reflects in quite another context one of the fundamental new insights debated in post-structuralist, post-analytical and in critical philosophy alike. We do ‘truth’, we make order of the world as a culturally reflected and continually reconstructed order. We are enveloped in the contingencies and the openness connected with this activism and slowly facing up to the violence which is more often then not connected with it.

Of course this transformation also has consequences on the level of teaching philosophy, both to students and to children. One could even say that these forms of ‘doing philosophy’ lend themselves particularly well for experimenting with this transformation, for testing its possible consequences. A fine example of such an experiment is provided by the approach developed by Berrie Heesen, inspired both by the Philosophy for Children movement and by postmodern philosophy, especially Lyotard. Take for example A Smile Smiles. Both in form and in content this activating story illustrates a promising way of not just commenting on philosophical questions but providing children with a linguistic and pragmatic context in which they can experience how analysis, reflection and debate can act as transformers of taken for granted meanings, but also in such a way that the new meanings remain open to philosophy as an activity, to the openness of the contingency allowed to operate on established meanings and preconceptions. In such a set up the teacher has to leave his cathedra and has to give up the certainties of his knowledge and his methods. Openness has to be done, it has an essentially pragmatic, not a propositional-foundational character. An openness opens.
An Exaggerator
For Oneself
REPORT FROM A FIFTH CLASS
DISCUSSING A SMILE SMILES

We read the story A Smile Smiles. I ask which
question they want to discuss today. The follow-
ing questions appear on the blackboard:

Petra: Isn't gluing the school gate just mean or
tasteless?
Marjolein: Who glued the school gate?
Pauw: Why was Spoon gluing the school gate?
Karianne: What kind of boy is Spoon?
Gert-Jan: Isn't putting a drawing pin just silly?
Fleur: Why is Spoon not allowed to see the passport
of his sister?

Next thing I ask is: "What do we do today, dis-
cuss an easy or a difficult question? A difficult
one, a difficult one," is shouted.
"All right, what is the most difficult question
so far?"

After some talking, two questions come out to
be difficult: those of Paul and of Karianne. So we
vote, and Karianne's question is decided to be the
most difficult one.
"Karianne, can you tell us what kind of boy
Spoon is?"

One by one the following answers are given: it
is someone who loves to get into mischief, he is
crazy, someone who loves silly jokes.

After being encouraged to develop a serious de-
scription of Spoon, several students add things
like: acting tough, he wants to exaggerate, may-
be he is in love, a little bold, he is doing things he
thinks are important for himself, someone who
is unknown.

In the meantime I propose to make a distinc-
tion between explanations directly deducted
from the story and those explanations that are
added by students. Spoon might be in love, but
no clue can be found in the story to make this
conclusion. It is purely speculative. Of course,
this distinction is not sharp, but it suffices for
the moment.

I go on with the next question: "Some say
Spoon is acting bold and that he is a boaster. Do
these two often intertwine?"

The class is baffled a little. Most students are
inclined to call Spoon a exaggerator. But they
quickly have a problem: Spoon is not talking to
anyone about what he has done. So the discus-
sion continues with the discovery of the differ-
ence between being an exaggerator and being a
boaster. The difference is explained as follows:
"A boaster is only saying things, an exaggerator
is also doing it." Now what can we say about
Spoon?

A fine characteristic of a philosophical discus-
sion is the kind of effort to answer a question
about a character of a story. To answer such a
question, it is necessary that we decide how to
use certain concepts. It is not possible to say
something about the relationship between Spoon
and 'being a exaggerator' before we have decided
what we consider to be an exaggerator.

After we have worked ourselves through the
distinction between an exaggerator and a boas-
ter, I hear someone whisper: "He is an exaggerator
for himself."

I pick up this expression, repeat it, and tell the
class that this seems to be a very interesting re-
mark. Immediately the students support this re-
mrk. "Yes, it is a nice description."

Looking back at our discussion, this moment
was the changing point. This new formulation
helps us to go on with our initial question:
"What kind of Boy is Spoon?" It is certainly nice,
to have a fine description, but what does it mean
'to be an exaggerator for oneself'. By the way, it
is remarkable that often a crucial sentence is
made casually.

"Does everybody consider this to be a good de-
scription?" I emphasize my question. If we have
reached agreement, we can move on. There are
always slow thinkers, who use time before they
can agree or disagree. So I support a moment of
silence during the discussion every now and
then.

"Maybe he is, but it is kind of weird."

We get back discussing 'acting bold'. Several
examples of bold behavior are recited. Acting
bold is attracting attention by doing unusual
things.

I ask whether Spoon is attracting attention in
the story. They say he is attracting his own at-
tention.

"When is someone acting bold?"
"If he is strong."
"Is Spoon acting bold?"
Bustle in the classroom. After some buzzing I conclude: "Spoon is an exaggerator for himself, but he is not acting bold."

Do you know an exaggerator for himself, and if so, you might wonder how you know this? Now we get into examples of occurrences. "I know someone at school who always pesters."

"So, is he an exaggerator for himself?"

I decide to straighten things out and put two columns on the blackboard:

**exaggerator for himself**
- If you decide for yourself that you act rather bold

**exaggerator for others**
- Doing something like jumping off a bridge on purpose.
- Walking unusual
- Wearing fancy dress (both boys and girls)
- Hanging behind a bike on a skateboard (for girls)

These are the examples that appear on the blackboard in both columns.

It is peculiar that we hardly find any features of someone who is an exaggerator for himself.

"Why do you think it is so difficult to explain this expression?"

"On the right side, you can show something, but about the left side you cannot know anything. Others cannot know it."

I ask: "Can you know it for yourself? Is it possible for any of you to be an exaggerator for yourself? Is it possible that Spoon is in this class? Can you designate someone?"

With this last challenge we finish the discussion. Time is gone, we did a lot this hour: we read the story and discussed it. At the beginning Spoon was just an extraordinary case, quite weird. Now afterwards it seems possible that he can be one of them. A little metamorphosis occurred. Exaggerators and boosters were seen as people outside class: a feature of the outside world. As such students discussed the case at the beginning. At the end of the hour it is no longer possible to speak about the subject like that.

They discovered something new: an exaggerator for oneself. A description I myself never thought of in advance. It was new for me as well.

Exaggerators can sit next to you without your knowing it.

**NOTES:**

1. The television program The Human Face (Wall to Wall television, 1991) made by Laurie Anderson is very challenging, if you want to work out this question. Among others, it shows experiments that people change feelings by changing their faces. And addressing questions like: 'What does it mean to own our own face?'

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