

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-bounded, 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 than 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 following questions appear on the blackboard:

Petra: Isn't gluing the school gate just mean or tasteless?

Marjolein: Who glued the school gate?

Paul: 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, discuss 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 description of Spoon, several students add things like: acting tough, he wants to exaggerate, maybe 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 distinction 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 discussion continues with the discovery of the difference 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 discussion 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 boaster, 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 remark. Immediately the students support this remark. "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 description?" 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 attention.

"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 boasters 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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