

INCOMMENSURABILITY AND OTHERNESS

CAN WE COMMUNICATE ACROSS BOUNDARIES?

A Philosophical Overview

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There is always so much one does not understand. But it does not matter. Because some little thing, something quite unimportant, will show. So clearly. One is almost blinded by it.

Patrick White (*Riders in the Chariot*)

Overview

The problem

Plato and Aristotle

Kant and Hegel

Kuhn and Lyotard

Maturana, Varela and Luhmann

Levinas and Derrida

Boundaries and Limits

What can we say about the communication between systems?

THE PROBLEM

How do we understand the relationship between

a system and its environment
between different systems
between the Self and the Other

Traditionally there has to be an objective “measure” for communication between systems, otherwise we will have relativism, solipsism or incommensurability (a related set of terms)

PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

Plato

A proper understanding of the world of ideas provides pure and objective knowledge

(This can be called the metaphysics of presence)

Aristotle

Understanding is the result of a *process* taking place in the real world

Knowledge is the result of experience and education. This is measured in terms of the contingent (internal) criteria accepted by a specific community

(Here we have an important advance, but also the seeds of the notion of incommensurability)

KANT AND HEGEL

Kant

Transcendental rationality defines what it is to be human
Objective criteria for knowledge are presupposed, but “otherness” is defined out of the system, and therefore it is ultimately empty

Hegel

Knowledge is the result of a dialectical process which plays itself out in time

Eventually everything will be incorporated within the system – all “otherness” will be absorbed

This is a convergent process (as opposed to the negative dialectics of Adorno) which leads to a totalising system

KUHN AND LYOTARD

Kuhn

Different paradigms use different languages which are not translatable into each other

Lyotard

In a dispute between different groups, we are ultimately reduced to a position where the problem cannot be stated in a common language –
The Differend

Both ultimately argue for incommensurability

MATURANA, VARELA AND LUHMANN

The notion of “autopoiesis” describes an important characteristic of systems which maintain themselves (i.e. living systems)

Luhmann transposes the biological models of Maturana to social systems which are “operationally closed”

Although there is a kind of interaction between a system and its environment, information is *a/ways* interpreted purely on the terms of the receiving system.

Luhmann’s operational closure implies informational closure, and thus leads to a form of solipsism.

LEVINAS AND DERRIDA

Otherness and Ethics

Levinas

Interaction with the Other always takes place in terms of the representations present in the Self
This will violate otherness, and thus real Otherness has to be absolute.

Derrida

The trace of the other is present in the self
There is always already interaction, but never pure or complete interaction
The self is constituted *in interaction* with the other
The self is thus not transparent, even to itself – there is otherness *inside* the system.

Deconstruction introduces a strategy of thinking which moves us beyond the dichotomy between objective criteria and incommensurability

BOUNDARIES AND LIMITS

Luhmann confuses boundaries with limits

Systems have boundaries, our knowledge has limits

Systems must have boundaries, but they are constituted through *interaction*, not in isolation

The problem of incommensurability is the result of a false premise (i.e. that the absence of objective measures imply relativism)

WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT THE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SYSTEMS?

Communication is always already there

Communication is never pure or complete

(These statements are simultaneously true)

The message itself need not be complex, complexity arises in the interpretation

We have to acknowledge the impurity of the communication, both on the sending and receiving sides – there is an *ethics* of communication rather than a *method* for communication

This does not imply that we are reduced to only “muddling through” – the fact that a claim is provisional and limited does not imply that it is either weak, vague or relativistic

In our interaction with the other (person, system, organisation) we should be firm and clear, and, at the same time, modest