



Beyond Perspective

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Abstract

This short article suggests that as effective as it might be for dealing with technical issues, rational thinking seems totally hopeless for the essential human problems, because it confuses wholeness with totality, i.e. the whole with the sum of the parts. Thus, the source of our difficulties as a species is not the problems themselves, but rather the structure of consciousness from which we attempt to solve them. While this insight is certainly not unknown, what might be new is the recognition that the paradigm we now live in has actually already changed. The dawn of the 20th Century brought with it not only Hermann Minkowski's discovery of spacetime, but also Jean Gebser's discovery of a new structure of consciousness appropriate to it. Gebser saw in the contemporary scientific, philosophical and artistic breakthroughs a consciousness operative beyond three-dimensional perspective, which he described as a-rational and a-perspectival. It is not so much free of space and time as it is free in spacetime. With the discovery of four-dimensionality, humanity now has a new geometric world-space in which to reveal itself to itself from which to address its problems. Instead of knowing oneself as a fixed-point character in a story moving through time, one can know oneself as the field of spacetime itself within which the story occurs. And this allows for being in the presence of wholeness. If we assume that there is a single or at least primary cause for the many, many problems that we as humanity are now facing, then what would it be and how could we successfully address it?

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When I look at the world, whether on the evening news or in my personal circle of acquaintances, I mostly see a complexity so great that almost every attempt to solve a problem seems to create a new one at least as big. Rational thinking, as effective as it might be for dealing with some technical problems, seems totally hopeless for the important human ones. And this leads me immediately to Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous statement about problems:

“The fact that life is problematic shows that the shape of your life does not fit into life's mould. So you must change the way you live and, once your life does fit into the mould, what is problematic will disappear.”

If we take this seriously, then the source of our problems would seem to be the discrepancy between the shape of our lives and the shape of life itself. I think what he means by “life’s mould” is wholeness; however, we live our lives as if life were composed only of parts. In other words, the fundamental blind spot, which prevents us from solving our biggest existential problems, is that we confuse wholeness with totality or the sum of the parts. The source of our difficulties is not the problems themselves, but rather the structure of consciousness from which we attempt to solve them. The rational, linear and dualistic mindset is confronted on all sides by a “Humpty-Dumpty” situation. It perceives a fragmented world, which it is desperately trying to put back together again in order to reach wholeness.

While this paradigm may be useful for splitting atoms or inventing smartphones, it is not too helpful when, for example, attempting to bring about world peace. Everyone may understand that war is insane, but our understanding does not seem to be sufficient. This is because our actions are not derived from our understanding, but rather from the way the world appears to us. And how the world appears to us is given by the paradigm from which we are looking. In other words, what we see depends on where we are looking from and our actions, in turn, depend on what we see. So long as we see only a world of separate objects and we are looking at it all from one of those objects called “me”, which is known as the subject, our actions can only lead to a Humpty-Dumpty futility.

But so much has already been written about the limits of the Newtonian/Cartesian paradigm, what could there possibly be left to say about it. People have been talking about wholeness for a long time and we even often say: “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Furthermore, cognitive science has long recognized the role of perception in the determination of action. What might be new, however, is to appreciate that whether we understand it or not, the paradigm we now live in has actually already changed. This fact may not yet be widely accepted, just as I imagine not everyone living in 1493 accepted that the world was no longer flat, or even knew about it.

Although Albert Einstein is usually considered to be the modern Columbus, I think he has to share that title with Hermann Minkowski. Minkowski was a mathematician, who in fact, was one of Einstein’s teachers at the Polytechnikum in Zurich. In a speech at the 80th Meeting of German Natural Scientists and Physicians in Cologne on September 21, 1908, he famously announced:

Henceforth space by itself and time by itself are doomed to fade away into mere shadows and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.

And with that, Minkowski introduced spacetime to the world and with it a new possibility not only to make sense of the Theory of Special Relativity, but also to begin to see the world we live in as a four-dimensional reality.

It’s probably impossible to put an exact date on the birth of any paradigm, but the Italian poet Petrarch’s account of his ascent of Mont Ventoux has often been cited as heralding the end of the Medieval and the beginning of the Modern periods. Written in about 1350, he describes his ecstatic experience of reaching the summit, gazing at the landscape spread out before him and discovering three-dimensional space. This may sound bizarre to anyone living in the

21st Century for whom it might seem that three-dimensionality has always been a feature of reality. But consider that medieval paintings don't portray three-dimensionality; they depict a flat, two-dimensional world. Petrarch's account already contains the seeds of the Newtonian/Cartesian paradigm precisely because it presents the discovery of perspective. Inherent in perspective is the existence of two points in space: a "vanishing point" on the horizon and a point-of-view in the observer. And with that, the space in between comes into existence as a geometric dimension. Tellingly, in a poetic flourish, Petrarch claims he then opened his copy of St. Augustine's "Confessions" and randomly came upon the following passage:

People are moved to wonder by mountain peaks, by vast waves of the sea, by broad waterfalls on rivers, by the all-embracing extent of the ocean, by the revolutions of the stars. But in themselves they are uninterested.

Petrarch is presenting an inner world discovery, which was revealed through an interaction with the outer world. Inner and outer space become the two poles of the three-dimensional field. The coming into being of perspective (and with it point of view) is one of the chief hallmarks of the mindset of Modernity. From here it is only a matter of time before science will explore the laws of that three-dimensional space (e.g. Newton's laws of gravity), just as literature will explore the inner world of human beings living in that space (e.g. the rise of the novel) and just as philosophy will explore the dualistic and causal relationship between these inner and outer spaces (e.g. Descartes' mind-body separation).

However, though we now live in a Post-Modern paradigm, we are trying to solve our biggest problems as if we still lived in the last paradigm. Michael Michalko, in an article titled "Janusian Thinking", suggests that humanity needs a particular kind of creative thinking to address the myriad of problems facing us; a kind of thinking that can hold two contradictory points of view at the same time—hence the reference to the god, Janus, who had two faces looking in opposite directions. Though Michalko does escape being caught in a single point of view, I believe he does not go far enough. While Modernity was based on the discovery of space, Post-Modernity is based on the discovery of time. The dawn of the 20th Century brought with it not only the discovery of spacetime, but also the discovery of a new structure of consciousness appropriate to it.

One of the greatest almost unknown geniuses of the 20th Century was Jean Gebser, who saw in the contemporary scientific, philosophical and artistic breakthroughs the birth of a new consciousness, which he described as arational and aperspectival. It is a consciousness unattached to any point of view and hence beyond perspective; it is not so much free of space and time as it is free in spacetime. And everywhere it has been revealing itself.

While the consciousness of Modernity was based on a clear Newtonian/Cartesian separation between the inner and outer world-spaces, the findings of Quantum Physics call that separation into question. Picasso drew the human figure in "Les Femmes d'Alger" from so many points of view that the concept of point of view itself is no longer applicable. Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry transcended the subject/object basis of language to create a luminous world appearing unattached to any point of view. Akira Kurosawa made the film, "Rashomon", staging the same event from so many different points of view that the notion of a point of view itself becomes the main character of the story.

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Which brings us back to Minkowski, Wittgenstein and our many, many problems. With the discovery of four-dimensional spacetime, humanity now has a new geometric world-space in which to reveal itself to itself and from which to address its problems. And with this new image of reality, Wittgenstein’s admonition to change the way we live so as to fit the mould of life begins to make more sense. The change required, however, is not on the doing level. It is rather a change of consciousness; a change from identifying with a three-dimensional point of view to knowing oneself as a four-dimensional aperspectival field. That is, instead of knowing oneself as a character in a story moving through time, knowing oneself as the field of spacetime itself within which events occur. This is being in the presence of wholeness.

As for how to do it, there is nothing to do. Or said another way, what does one have to do to live on a round world instead of a flat one?

Opening ourselves to this would be like waking from a nightmare. So perhaps it’s fitting to end with William Blake’s famous couplet:

*... May God us keep
From single vision and Newtons sleep*

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