

IN ABSURDUM

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On totality

As a child I used to do jigsaw puzzles. I found that it presented me with stimulating challenges. A great number of small pieces, none of them bearing a specific significance in themselves, but together they would form a complete picture – the greater totality. The belief in such a totality is of course a condition of the game, and it's all about finding the pieces confirming one another – and the totality. But jigsaw puzzles are sold in shops, and it's all so terribly predictable. An essential rule of the game is of course that every single piece is unique and irreplaceable. Each piece is already cut out of the big picture, and thus each piece has its unique place in the totality. If a piece is missing, it will clearly be conspicuous by its absence – as a void in the totality.

However, this is not how we experience the world. Here we have no guarantee that every piece is unique and indispensable to the great totality. Quite the contrary, we constantly experience that most pieces can be replaced by others. We do not even know if there is such a thing as a consistent totality – as a plan or a picture we comprehend by putting together the pieces. Instead we construct our own plans and smaller 'totalities' for which we collect the pieces – to confirm that our 'insight' is 'right' or 'acceptable' – for the time being. But all the pieces that we collect, all the knowledge we can accumulate, only confirm that they will fit in where we find a place for them. If we can picture a totality from this, it cannot possibly imply more than our 'limited' understanding.

What always fascinates me are the pieces that do not fit in with our logical and established totalities – on which our society is founded. More specifically, all the pieces that are declared insignificant or invalid. They could be absurd because they contradict our common sense, and thus cannot be bearers of meaning. They don't fit in with our scholarly wisdom and orthodoxy. We are trained to overlook them, ignore them as insignificant or faulty. But can we really ignore them? Can we succeed in pretending that they represent nothing but an ignorance bearing no meaning, or do we wonder what these pieces can tell us? Perhaps they remind us of chaos, of how history has handled heresy in the past, such as what Copernicus or Galileo experienced? And isn't chaos simply what we call the field that lies beyond our understanding – where we can find no logical coherence?

On language

After all, most of what we call knowledge of the world rests in language. For obvious reasons we have difficulty discussing things that lie beyond language. That is, the logic by which we explain and reason is lingual and dependent on the structure and terms of language. And language is not something we are born with either, but something we have constructed, in order to signal, express and describe, among other things. However, this construction is far from perfect. We can easily deceive ourselves – and much seems to indicate that this is precisely what we are constantly doing. Language enables us, effortlessly, to construct statements that sound both reasonable and correct, although this does not necessarily make them correct. One question could be: Was the basic structure of language established before we acquired knowledge?, or is this thing we call knowledge a direct result of the possibilities established from the very beginning, when language was first developed? With language we dissect the world in ever new pieces and create new terms. A great deal of power rests in language. In earlier times it was thought that the world (read: creation) was the product of a superior plan which we could not truly grasp, but it was God's plan. And the Lord moves in mysterious ways. (Jokaim Garff, who recently wrote Søren Kierkegaard's biography, insightfully points out that Kierkegaard does not realise that God (providence) can be language itself. Language will always be superior to its scribe, and this affects grammar and the use of language. (Truls Lie, Morgenbladet 8/11 2002)). 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (John 1:1-14).

However, other thoughts have been thought as well. For instance that one can study the world to discover what it is like and how it works. The belief was that the physical world is subject to laws of nature which are derived from observed phenomena; that the world is a physical, absolute and finite reality that can be measured, weighed, and calculated. We must find out everything about this world, was the idea of certain bright minds. The world has become the way it is only because of circumstances. The world has been flat, and it has been round – it has been encircled by a monstrous serpent and carried by four gigantic elephants – and it has been the centre of the universe. It has also been good as paradise and evil as hell. Despite our changing world-views, it still seems the world hasn't changed much during historical times. Today it is about to become a possible launching pad for those seeking to travel to space to higher civilisations on other planets, in order to escape all the problems we (or the others) have created. Problems such as war, pollution, terrorists, nonconformists and heretics, competitors – or most of all problems from those who are perhaps the most dangerous – the ones who are almost just like ourselves.

However, the Norwegian existentialist philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe pointed out that the only problem in the world is the people. We must put our own houses in order! But no matter how we twist and turn the problems, we still end up in language. And it can be difficult to separate language, thought and understanding. In the first phase of life, that is, *before* we acquire language, we have only the senses bringing us in contact with the world around us. Hearing, smell, taste, touch and not least: Vision. Vision provides us with images and concepts. And thus photography would assume an important position in our culture. And photography would challenge common sense – pictures that draw themselves! But can the photographic images help us to transgress common sense? Many people thought that photographs could lift the veil and show us what we previously could not understand. However, photographs seem to be as enigmatic as nature, and thus they are perhaps not subject to logic and common sense – as we commonly perceive them? However, this is the subject of debate among many bright minds...

On photography

- What we hereby state, is most admirable, but nothing is more incredible than certain truths. ... Art cannot fight this rival, wrote the French art critic *Jules Janin* (1839) on photography after studying the first images of Daguerre.

- When this technique is known, we will no longer accept false presentation, claimed painter *Paul Delaroche* (1839) with such an authority that the Republic of France bought the invention and released it for 'the entire world' (except England!).

- The basic difference between art and photography is that while art, through negation, changes from the pure image of nature to method and again to result, photography stands firmly on the point of view of the image and includes no such negation in itself (Julius Lange, 1862).

- The Lean One (Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*, 1867):

You know they have lately discovered in Paris a way to take portraits by help of the sun.

One can either produce a straightforward picture, or else what is known as a negative one.

In the latter the lights and the shades are reversed, and they're apt to seem ugly to commonplace eyes; but for all that the likeness is latent in them, and all you require is to bring it out.

- A picture says more than a thousand words, the old and wise Chinese used to say, as they were developing a complex written language of pictograms, with many thousand such signs.

- I photograph the world, a reporter said.

- I photograph only what I can see, said another.

- I photograph to see what the world looks like in photography, said a famous artist.

- The pictures must not distort reality, said the master to the apprentice.

- You do not live in reality, said the psychologist, - your pictures are absurd.

- But the world is absurd! the patient explained.

- Photographs don't lie, an acquaintance stated obstinately.

- If photography tells the truth, then film is truth 24 times a minute, another filmmaker argued.

- The camera believes everything, claimed David Robbins.

In absurdum

The absurd lies hidden in our entire logic. The mere expectancy of a logic might be absurd in itself. But still, the absurd is there even if we cannot see it. In a paradoxical manner it can seem that all logic is dependent on the absurd. For the contradiction also involves a confirmation. Then it is the absurd, the meaningless, which yields meaning. And is it possible to imagine anything more meaningful than this? Excepting that merely attempting to write about the absurd becomes absurd in itself.

Credo quia absurdum,

which means:

I believe, because it contradicts reason.

(Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian, c. 200)