

OF HOLLOW MEN AND WITTY BEES, or:
ANNA WIERZBICKA MEETS JAMES OF OCKHAM

by
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"He tore off the veil that covers the true nature of objects, thus to reveal the identity behind the illusory appearances, *the one behind the many*, as Plato and Shelley had put it."
(Henri Peyre, speaking of Baudelaire; 1964: 9)

We need to acknowledge, and honor, an unknown figure in the history of philosophy: Occam's brother James.

It is not generally known that the famous thinker, whose dictum *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter rationem* has gone the rounds of philosophy manuals and introductions for the past six centuries or so, had a much less known, not to say obscure, but nevertheless every bit as brilliant, brother, whose words and thoughts seem to have fallen by the wayside of history.

But what is it that should have made William's brother immortal? What was it that he said that constitutes his claim to fame?

The hapless pilgrim's story

As far as we can reconstruct, William's brother (who, by the way, was called James) was working on a manuscript some time around the year 1350. While on a combined study and pilgrim's tour to Santiago de Compostela (a suitable and important endeavor for someone of his name), James and his party are reported to have been robbed and killed by Basque highwaymen on the way back from the shrine, somewhere around the pass of Roncesvalles, famous also for other historical events. James' belongings were scattered and no trace has ever been found of them. Neither was his body ever retrieved, and we may safely assume that some *bestia pessima* was instrumental in its recycling (as it supposedly had happened, according to Reuben's account, to the Biblical Joseph; *Gen.* 37).

An oral tradition, however, stemming from James' companions on the outward trip to Compostela, and piously conserved in the

annals of the Augustinian abbey at Roncesvalles, where also the pilgrims' remains reportedly were taken after the incident, has it that James, all the way to and from Compostela, should have kept uttering the following sentence, which he chanted like a classical Buddhist *mantram* (*avant* – or should I say: *après?* – *la lettre*):

entia non sunt resecanda praeter rationem.

It is this extremely useful, nay absolutely necessary, addition to his famous sibling's half-truth that should have made James every bit as famous as William, to say the least.

Why James rather than William? And: Why Anna?

The fact of the matter is that for all William's panache, and in spite of his success in topping our philosophical citation indices (his words being quoted by famous men, and lately also women, for centuries to come) with the celebrated 'Occam's Razor', as it is often called, the operation of this salubrious device has had some highly undesirable side-effects, often expressed in another metaphoric picture: the discarding of the baby along with the used bath-water. These side-effects counterbalance, indeed often pervert, the extremely well-advertised advantages of maintaining minimal flatulence and bloating in our thought canal by means of merciless verbal surgery.

One of the principal ways in which Occam's razor should be complemented by the other Occam's conservation formula (which I suggest to call 'Occam's Fiber') is by saving the non-said (or the 'not yet said', as Bakhtin would have it; Morson & Emerson 1990: 137) from being thrown out together with the said, and especially the too-much said.

I am thinking of the minimalist type of explanation that sees salvation in reduction – if not *ad absurdum*, at least *ad nihilum*. If an explanation can be found which minimally fits the phenomena that have been observed, then we should not ask for more. Such questions are not only detrimental to scientific endeavor but outright childish and dangerous to the asker, as in the celebrated case of Oliver Twist; a view that is supported by otherwise unsubstantiated opinions proffered by certain North-American linguists such as the late Martin Joos and Robert A. Hall Jr., who have remarked on the

eternal 'child in us', asking inappropriate questions and (like Oliver Twist) always begging for more.

But what about Anna, you will ask. Well, simply this: She has always been the embarrassing child in the linguistic kindergarten, never content with pat explanations or doctrinaire arguments, regardless of whose authority or name they bore (names withheld by publishers' request). With her naughty insistence on having an answer to her seemingly naïve questions (or a second helping of the facts), she has out-Twist'ed both Occams, in the positive as well as in the negative dimensions. And speaking of that, what about

The facts, the true facts, and ...?

Restricting oneself to stating the facts, the plain facts, and nothing but the facts, as it is often stipulated by scientists in the best of Perry Mason'esque courtroom fashions, is a risky business, to say the least. For: What *is* a fact, and how do we know that the facts we have observed, are the only, or even the most important, ones?

Take the case of physics. When Rutherford, in the first decade of our soon-to-be-finished century, set forth his famous model of the atom (later to be perfected by Niels Bohr, who took most of the credit), the scientific community enthusiastically embraced their ideas. From that moment on, it was no longer possible to have any doubts about theirs being *the* explanation of the ways things worked. Not only could all our knowledge about atoms and their behavior be accounted for in a reasonable and elegant way, but certain facts that hitherto had resisted all theoretical speculation, could now be assigned a sensible interpretation.

However, as the subsequent development of physics has shown, Rutherford-Bohr was not the last word in (sub-)atomic matters. True to his philosophical bent, Bohr would certainly have objected to any reductionist explanation of the atom, or to a generalizing, reductionist interpretation of his own model. And while it is true that the facts, as we knew them at the time of Bohr's theorizing, were more or less completely accounted for by his theory, there were still things such as quarks and other mysterious minimal entities floating around in the inner reaches of the sub-atomic universe, about which neither Bohr nor his theory had anything to say – for obvious reasons. It would take theoretical physicists several decades to

formulate, and prove, hypotheses about the existence of such particles in a proper way, and there is no point in maintaining that Bohr's theory, in its minimalist severity, was perfect or that it constituted (like Hegel's speculations in philosophy) the end of all theorizing in physics.

Two pitfalls and how to avoid them

Scientific thinking should avoid getting caught in either of two extremes: that of believing that everything can be explained by a single theory (the famous case of 'unified science', the pipe dream of Neo-positivists such as Neurath, Schlick, and Carnap) and the belief that no theory is ever good enough when it comes to explaining a particular phenomenon down to its last, minute detail. As any physicist will tell you over drinks, predicting anything accurately for even such relatively common physical phenomena as a breaking wave or tomorrow's weather would involve so many complicated functions that no earthly computer, not even the most sophisticated monster of a number cruncher, could hold and process all the differential equations necessary for computing those functions.

In a way (that is: within their proper contexts), one can agree that both the above statements do make some sense. However, when taken to their extremes, they degenerate into rather sterile exercises of methodology. By contrast, an open, and open-minded, theoretical approach should instead take stock of, and account for, what *can* be explained by a particular theory, without making further, 'excessive' (in the strict sense of the term) claims on things that strictly fall outside, 'exceed', the theory.

We may not be able to prove the existence of angels or discover all the universals of language, but it certainly would be a difficult task to prove scientifically that they can *not* exist, or can *not* be found. *That* can only be done in what I above termed a 'reductionist' approach, such as by stating that the whole matter of angels or universals is a question of bad syntax or faulty semantics, as it was already advocated seven centuries ago by the nominalists with their *flatus vocis* approach, or more recently by the (Neo-) positivists, people like Rudolf Carnap or his famous predecessor Bertrand Russell. Such statements, claims, and explanations make sense only in a particular universe of reality and/or thought – a universe that is

the antipode, in every sense, of the world inhabited by our *Festschrift*. Agnosticism and theology both have their dogmatic variants, and none of the two can claim preference over the other, and none should be used to beat your adversaries over the head.

Even if an hypothesis, or a theory, is fully able to explain what I see as a 'fact', we should still leave open the possibility that there is more 'between heaven and earth' than is dreamt of in any particular philosophical or scientific approach. A *shallow* interpretation of the human mind, or of human behavior may have its attraction in that it poses few prerequisites to thought, and thus can get by with a minimalist assumption of truth and a rigorously defined need for proofs; on the other hand, it risks being 'shallow' in another sense, that which T.S. Elliot had in mind when he defined his 'hollow men', speaking with 'dried voices', as 'shape without form', 'gestures without motion' (1925).

Sind die Bienen...

The above quote is usually associated with the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the famous German systemic biologist (1902-1972), who once wrote an article with the (perhaps intentionally facetious) title: '*Sind die Bienen Reflexmaschinen?*' ('Are bees just mechanical contraptions, steered by reflexes?')

The question was posed at a time when the mechanistic explanation of life-related phenomena was at its height in the late twenties-early thirties; that is to say, in the heyday of Neo-positivism. But the question has another, more general aspect.

If we content ourselves with living by our reflexes, that will be the only life we have. And if we reduce our thinking to that prescribed by 'unified science', to the exclusion of what is proscribed as 'metaphysical' or 'romantic', then pretty soon our lives will follow suit, and be reduced to the *unidimensional* option that Herbert Marcuse criticized so severely and successfully in the 'sixties.

Pragmatic implications ... and beyond

The above German quote contains a clearly pragmatic dimension. The way I have explicated the thinking caricatured by Bertalanffy, it

also represents a conceptualization which goes decidedly against the grain of what we have been defined recently as 'cognitive-technological' approach ('CT'; see Gorayska & Mey 1996), viz. an approach that studies technology's impact on (or: its effects in) the user's head. If everything, from language to love to computing, can be reduced to cerebral or medullar-spinal reflexes, then the head (or even the body) might just as well not be there. Such 'thinking' lacks, in the truest sense of the word, an embodiment, a head: 'quiet and meaningless, as wind in dry grass' (Elliot, *ibid.*).

According to the philosophy of CT, the thoughts that we create to express our views on life reflect back on the embodying, thinking 'devices' that produce those very thoughts, viz., our bodies, our heads. Only in this sense, humans can be termed 'reflexive devices' (or, if you wish, 'reflecting machines', in another sense of Bertalanffy's *Reflexmaschinen*); however, this device, and its reflections, operate in quite different ways than do the bees with their reflexes.

Reflexes in bees are passive: they don't reflect (retro-)actively *back* onto their 'users', nor (pro-)actively *forward* on the tasks to be performed. For this reason, bees continue to operate in the same way, and will not stop doing so, for presumably the remainder of the earth's lifetime, given proper conditions and general affordances. Compare what is said about the common domestic cockroach, which is supposed to have an impressive life history of several hundreds of million years of unchanged operation – but in an activity and with reflexes that are no better than T.S. Elliot's 'rats' feet over broken glass/in our dry cellar' (*ibid.*).

By contrast, we humans are subject not only to evolution, but also to growth. Our reflections result in learning and change. Our thinking provokes new thought, and this new thought is externalized in the tools that we surround ourselves with in our fight for subsistence. If those tools only reflected the immediate need for survival, they would not help us get any further along the dimension of true progress and 'humanization'. The human tool, rather than 'killing its operator' (Marx), helps us create a better, human environment.

Conclusion: WYSIWYG or WYTYB? Find Anna!

There is a well-known principle that operates in the context of computer interfacing. The principle, first enunciated by Doug Engelbart in the early sixties, as a wishful requirement for computer interfacing, states that 'What You See Is What You Get', meaning that one's operations on the computer should be directly reflected in the feedback that one gets from the machine (Engelbart 1962). 'WYSIWYG', the acronym become a household word, represented a major driving force behind such new techniques as the interactive screen, as well as (more indirectly) behind what came to be called 'object-oriented programming'. For all its merits, however, the WYSIWYG slogan is not adapted to every context; it needs to be supplemented by thinking that allows one to go beyond what one 'sees', to 'get' more than what can be verified on the screen.

There is always a hidden dimension in even the simplest operation of language. That hidden dimension is represented by the *user* performing the operation. The user is not simply an onlooker, one who 'sees', or a receiver, one who 'gets', but one who *is* seen, and (in a special sense) *is* 'gotten', not to say 'had', by the technology. An unreflecting use of linguistic technology is just as bad as the unreflected life itself, the life 'without questions' (*o anexétastos bios*) that Plato in his *Theaetetus* judged wasn't worth man's living (*ou biotós anthrópoi*).

To capture this latter dimension and in order to avert the shallow thinking that is its main threat, I want to suggest a complementary formula to that coined by Engelbart. I do this in the spirit of 'Occam's Fiber', with due respect to Brother James, and propose to call my principle: 'What You Think You'll Be', or WYTYB (pronounced: ['witi 'bi:]

I think that this kind of thinking is very much in line with what the recipient of the present Festschrift always has taught us both through her words and writings, and moreover demonstrated in her scientific practice: bee-like in its search for *universalia*, but at the same time very human in its attention to the *particularia* of individual linguistic occurrences. Anna's quest for the universals in human thinking and speaking has carried her beyond the razor's edge, almost into the gaping abyss where all the *paroles de l'être* are only echoes, doubled by the universal *langage du néant* – but she was always saved by her unflinching attention, and attachment to the life-

guarding 'fiber' of human language, in the true spirit of the other Occam.

What this is meant to convey is that the reflecting machines of technological positivism are outsmarted by the representatives of a cognitively oriented linguistics and technology: the 'witty bees' of Anna-esque inspiration. These, *dans l'esprit de leur saison*, 'in the wits of their season' (to paraphrase my favorite poet whose eulogy I have adopted for, and adapted to Anna, in the top quote of my contribution), rather than putting everything into shallow physicalist hives or mechanistically computed 'intelligent rooms' (Brooks 1997), protect the products of their thought activity by creating ingeniously multiple linguistic and cognitive 'cells': places where nutritious thought can be stored and human bees can feed. Doing this in the spirit of their model, they allow for humanized interaction among, and a life-long reflection by, the cells' human inhabitants: cognitively as well as linguistically, but not least in the universalistic spirit of today's *jubilatrix*, Anna Wierzbicka.

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