

Commentary 04 on
Karl Jaspers Forum, Target Article 27, 6 June 2000

IN SEARCH OF THE MIND

By Adrian van der Meijden

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

by Paul Jones

2 July 2000

I has been solicited to comment on Adrian's article, which is a non-trivial undertaking, since the very genre of the text ("musings") does not imply any energetic reaction; it rather demands leisurely tasting the product paragraph by paragraph during coffee breaks – which, as it happens, is ideally suited for my present situation, when I cannot afford spending too much time on anything but sheer survival. However, I cannot completely agree with John Mikes, when he says that there is no "composition in the article, a lead-idea which is treated from the various aspects of the text". Well, it is eclectic and random, as implied by the title; however, it produces an integral impression indicating that there is a unifying idea, albeit never explicitly presented: Adrian's article has more in common with belles-lettres than science or philosophy (somehow it reminds me Carroll's "Sylvie and Bruno") – but why should we consider science as the only way of comprehending anything?

What kind of idea could it be? Well, one might try to express it with different means, either verbal or not, and this new product induced by the original text would become a presentation of another facet of the same thing, projecting a social trend onto individual experience.

As I see it, Adrian's text turns around the fundamental hypothesis that the specifically analytical style of thought commonly associated with written (or, in general, formally structured) speech takes its origin in some pre-linguistic cultural phenomena, so that language formation should be considered as contrivance rather than spontaneous development. In particular, this viewpoint implies that any formalization at all (including science) is rooted in some pre-historic schemes, which is why formal systems designed in different cultures of different epochs are so similar to each other.

One might either agree with that view or not, but, definitely, there are certain objective reasons for its existence, which may be worth pondering upon. Personally, I consider it as a preliminary approach to a more general idea, namely, that of the primacy of people's activity over their mentality, which was once known as a corner stone of a philosophical teaching called historical materialism. Indeed, much of the conceptual problems Adrian encounters, and hence eclecticism, are due to the lack of clear understanding as to the nature of those primary structures that made people to "contrive" language and ubiquitous conceptual frames, many examples of which Adrian's article contains. As soon as one accepts that what people think is just another aspect (a reflection) of what they do, everything gets clear and logically consistent, both in the history of humanity and in individual history of a single person: we observe that any conceptual scheme is to be born from a specific activity, reproducing the scheme of that original activity in an activity of a different kind.

To be sure, one is not to treat this principle in a primitive way, as a rigid junction between an act and its reflection in the actor. Everything people do becomes heritage of the society, and it is only through the society that people can receive what they produce (and, in particular, perceive it). Quite often the products of human activity do not return to those who have produced them, and hence the influence of one's mode of life upon one's mentality is not straightforward.

The important psychological implication of the principle of the priority of the activity over the mind is that people can never accept anything unless they have been prepared to accept it by the very organization of their life and work. No thought (including those that seem to be far ahead of the time)

can stick to anybody without a proper social background. The story of Diringer's Amerindian designing a written language provides a typical example: that person was ready to invent it, since his social environment has developed to the stage allowing for writing – otherwise he would have laughed at an idea like that, or even would have killed an advocate of such a nonsense (recall Giordano Bruno's case). There is a reverse side of the medal: a genius can only step up from the ocean of mediocrity, and the annoying crowd of poor writers (artists, scientists, philosophers, workers...) is necessary to fertilize the soil for a great one, whose job is collect the harvest grown by the others. A giant feeds on the everyday work of many dwarfs – the pattern mentioned by Adrian. Understandably, in a better organized society, this paradigm will lose its dominance.

I have to wait for a better time to comment on the specific schemes described in Adrian's article. I certainly did not read all those 100,000 pages he alludes to (Mikes); however, being acquainted with at least 30% of them and having read a comparable heap of complementary literature, I have enough courage (or is it arrogance?) to judge. A list of a few weak points of Adrian's discourse presented below might stimulate further development in this area.

First, there is too much attention to oral or written language, and underestimation of the gesture and other channels of communication. When Adrian says: "...without sound thinking one's praxis can hardly improve," I think of the genetically deaf-and-dumb people who manage, with the help of the society, to grow into conscious beings, and even master oral language and get their PhDs. Gesture language (like ASL) is no worse than oral language for close communication, and it allows development of writing in a similar way. The specific natural conditions of the planet Earth often favored sound communication; eventually, its ubiquity has become a prejudice.

There are indications that a human baby comes to one- and two-word language through a primitive gesture language, which, in its turn, merely reproduces some elements of the baby's activities shared with the grown-ups. Ethological observations and acquaintance with the usage of alternative lexicon in different languages make me think that first oral communication merely accompanied expressive gestures, gradually replacing them; the formation of the both ways of expression was stimulated by people's participation in various joint activities.

The dimension of space-time plays an important role in every human activity – no wonder it gets reflected in our language and thought. It is still difficult for most people to consider more dimensions than 3+1, and it is only recently that the concepts of many-dimensional configuration space of collective motion, the infinite-dimensional Hilbert space of quantum states, or a stratified manifold as an adequate representation for the motion of a strongly coupled system have become a common instrument in physical theory.

Ordering, transforming simultaneous structures into one-dimensional sequences (and, conversely, unfolding sequences in spatially organized pictures) is indeed an important part of any human activity duly represented in language. The ubiquity of ordering has not yet been properly understood and appreciated. I suspect that it reflects certain fundamental aspects of any motion at all; however this is rather to be discussed elsewhere.

I cannot agree that culture, language and art "seem to spring quite full blown into existence", according to archaeological data. On the contrary, all the data indicate that anything in culture is subject to change and development, from the most primitive to highly diversified forms. It is enough to look at the evolution of stone tools to get the impression. It would be too naive to consider the fascinating cave paintings as the very first traces of art, thence concluding on its contrivance. Okladnikov's works on the evolution of primitive art in Siberia are convincing enough to prove art's development from the rhythmic organization of the production process, and many recent reports (for instance, on dance steps originating from routine activities) support that hypothesis too.

Note, that any associating various manifestations of iconic thinking and magical/religious rites with art can only be done with an extreme caution. The skills of naturalistic painting are not enough to make art, as well as the ability to press the trigger button of a modern automatic camera does not make its owner a master of artistic photography. Art is designed and functions according to its specific laws, and it

always serves a definite (albeit not obvious) social function.

As a side remark, I do not believe that art could be a result of “after dinner daydreaming”, as Adrian suggests. I heavily doubt that our predecessors ever had too much leisure; the primitive economy of the time could hardly allow it. It is much later, in many centuries of development, with the dawn of civilization, that some people become engaged in the arts more than in any other activity; professional art appears even later. Archaic art was a part of the social production process, not a leisure occupation.

The hypothesis if the origin of the written language from the arts deserves thorough consideration. Personally, I find that Adrian’s formulation needs much improvement. Indeed, designing an icon requires certain graphic habits and hence must be prepared by the development of earlier art. Everybody knows that calligraphy was exercised as an art by all the nations of the world on a definite stage of their development (before the universal glory of the printing-press). However, the availability of the forms does not necessarily imply their usage for the specific purpose of imaging speech; historically, there must have been a number of other pre-requisites as well. It seems more likely that first ideograms came in close syncretism with art which then was hardly distinguishable from science, or philosophy, or magic rites. The traces of such a syncretism can be readily found in many later cultures. Thus, the ornamental function of the sacred texts in the decoration of a Moslem house was non-detachable from their “protective” magic. Similarly, a carved roof ridge of a Russian village house was not only an element of decor, but also a rain water drain, and a talisman, and an indicator of the socio-ethnic position of the family...

This leads to an important issue of the standard scheme of any development from syncretism through analysis to synthesis. Adrian does not distinguish synthesis (the unity of distinctions) from syncretism (no distinctions at all), which makes him suspect that “recent ventures in expanding our knowledge simply revert to the earliest foundations of our knowledge”. There is no way back in the development of the human society, and what may seem a historical repetition appears to be a quite different phenomenon at a closer investigation, albeit borrowing certain forms from the past.

In other words, we find something in the past that can serve our present purpose, and we fill it with a new content, suited to format the present ideas. There is no “esoteric” or “lost” supreme knowledge, and we should not overestimate our ancestors’ abilities and achievements. It is not that our intellect “was created and furnished by archaic man and we now in-habit it”; our intellect has made a long way up from the archaic intellect, however we still complain at its imperfection.

I only need to quote from Mikes (TA27 C03):

“No matter, how much I agree with Adrian that the ancestors were not dumber than us, to reach back into deeper antiquity will not provide us with new results. We may understand why and how those ingenious and admirable ideas occurred which we feel today obsolete and surpassed, in search of new worldviews and explanations, possibly without those paradoxes and mystical substitutes for the features then not yet understood.”

Yes, “something with very ancient roots is with us today”. But there are two kinds of such a presence: either it is some rudiments of the primitive life indicating that the humans have not yet gone too far on their way from animals to conscious beings (alas, modern people have yet too much of an animal in them!), or it is a reflection of the universal schemes of activity formed early in the human history and characterizing consciousness as such. Between these past- and future-oriented heritage of the past, one might place the habitual schemes originating from the specific conditions of our life on the Earth, which currently seem to essentially pertain to any activity at all, but are bound to get significantly modified in the future, when we leave the Earth to expand into outer space.

Below, I indicate just a few inconsistencies in Adrian’s text. They do not much influence the general idea, while somewhat spoiling the overall impression.

I would not bet that, as Adrian puts it, “our mind readily recalls similar events and experiences but has problems with differences.” On the contrary, a singularity is much easier to recall, while regular events like each other are extremely hard to recollect (many detective stories develop around this common

psychological feature). The human mind is very sensitive to differences, and it is the principal difficulty in art, science and philosophy to find hidden similarities not easy to observe.

I was somewhat surprised at Adrian's interpretation of Aristotle's *nous poietikos* as "reference to available operations of an equilibrable system" – I doubt that Aristotle could ever have employed a language like that. The phrase "nous poietikos" can be literally translated as "creative mind", or simply "creativity". With that, Aristotle expressed the idea of language organized to reflect the organization of human activity, the ways of making something (see above about historical materialism).

Further, I would not mix Wittgenstein with Democritus. The assertion that "the world consists of atomic facts" is entirely different from "the world consists of atoms"; the former is sheer idealism, while the latter admits the existence of the world on itself.

Finally, being Russian by the origin, I am fairly well acquainted with Russian history; still, I have never heard of the Russian building walls like the Chinese. All we find in the past is simple wooden forts, like those known everywhere in Europe since the most ancient times. To make their cities more protected, early Slavs invited Greek and Italian masters to erect stone walls, thus learning European art of fortification.

There are other issues to discuss in relation to Adrian's article, but one always needs to put the final point. Some of my considerations are well presented by Mikes in his comment. Anyway, I find Adrian's article rather stimulating and objectively useful; personally, I liked it as a good sample of a well-balanced style.

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