

The Artistic Turn

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1 Introduction

We¹ are living in an increasingly complex world. How are we able to cope with this complexity and the difficulties that arise from it? Can philosophy and art, classified as the two utmost useless and pointless disciplines, have any (positive) influence on the urgent and pressing problems at hand? And, related to this, if the two have more than just their uselessness in common, how, then, are philosophy and art related?

In this article, I will argue that although ‘useless’ disciplines such as philosophy and art have no direct influence on our complex world, they are nonetheless the most important ones, because those working within them practice their insights in an *indirect* way. Indirect influence may take a little longer, but the impact is much stronger, affecting our thinking and our attitudes from within, as it were.

This indirect approach has everything to do with the sort of questions philosophers and artists occupy themselves with. I will show how both address, albeit each in their own way, fundamental questions, and thereby make use of thought experiments.

Intuition and imagination play a decisive part in the creative processes that are involved in thought experiments and thinking. It is argued that we all are able to learn a ‘delayed unconscious thinking’ that leads to an artistic attitude; one that will activate an artistic turn.

2 Big and Fundamental Questions

Two kinds of ‘big questions’ preoccupy our minds and lives. The first one belongs to the category of questions which could, at least in principle, be answered by science. These ‘Big Questions’, for example ones concerned with high energy particle physics, are these days addressed

by ‘Big Science’, i.e. the organisation of large numbers of scientists bringing different bodies of expertise to a common research project (Longino, 1990). Such complex questions are usually sliced up into a number of sub-questions, which require multiple forms of expertise and are pursued by separate research teams. Eventually, the outcome of the variously researched sub-questions can be put together in order to finally answer the initial Big Question. As a result, contemporary Big Science is often interdisciplinary.

The second class of big questions cannot be answered by science – neither by Big Science nor by small-scale ordinary science. In addition, it is wrong to claim that they can be answered conclusively. These questions come before any (scientific) inquiry, and tend to pop up throughout history time and again, albeit during each period in a different context. These questions, which we will never be able to answer decisively, could be qualified as fundamental, because they originate from our own lives and our wonder at the world.

These ‘Fundamental Questions’ are not about science, art, language or thought itself; yet, they are crucially important to consider, because these questions are tied up with what we are as human beings, living our lives in the ways we do. They are the ones that teach us something about ourselves, about what we value and what we find important. Since these (cultural) values vary throughout our human history, the methods used in trying to answer them may well be different in each era. This could mean that the various outcomes together might give us an adequate overview of the concept of the human being. In any case, the point is that Fundamental Questions are not questions in search of an answer, but questions in search for meaning.

Both types of big questions have their part in our complex world as well as in our personal lives, but the second, fundamental type is especially suited to be addressed by philosophy and art as opposed to science. It is exactly because we cannot answer these questions conclusively that they need to be pursued in a different way than that which science propagates.

How do philosophy and art manage to tackle a Fundamental Question? It turns out, that the most consistent method in the course of time has been the use of thought experiments. Philosophers and artists start, each in their own way, from thought experiments, using their intuition and their powers of imagination. ‘Suppose that’, ‘What would happen if’ or ‘Imagine’ often mark the beginning of such inquiries. These thought experiments can reveal hidden assumptions and bring them to the fore. They show us validity (not truth) or meaning without an exact or full description and with that shed new light on Fundamental Questions. One example of

this type of question would be the question as to whether human beings can have a language only they themselves understand.

For the philosopher, mere thinking will do the job, but the artist needs to transform her findings into works of art. Artworks present unexpected and surprising results — weird, bizarre, eccentric, off the wall, totally beyond scope, etc. — and thereby open up closed manners of thought and behaviour. Art might point us in a different direction or provide us with an interesting new perspective.

Both thinker and maker reply to the issue at hand in an indirect way: the philosopher through clarifying or obscuring (which in turn clarifies other matters), the artist in showing a new direction or a surprisingly different perspective, and with that, presenting the question in a totally different light. What marks them both is their fascination, which appears in each in a specific form, with taking a meta-view.

In what follows, I will first discuss the thought experiment merely as a philosophical tool. Subsequently, I will discuss the artistic process, with the aid of psychological insights, in order to show how the benefits of both philosophy and art lead to a new way of dealing with Fundamental Questions and, by consequence, with our tremendously complex world.

3 Thought Experiments

Of all the disciplines, philosophy is the utmost economical: a swivel chair² and a lucid frame of mind is all it takes. The philosopher sits, swivels and follows a train of thought, which is connected to a question. This train of thought might end in a thought experiment: an example or counterexample that gives possibility, which in turn is tested on its plausibility, validity or consistency.

Philosophers (as well as scientists) agree that there is a crucial role to be granted for thought experiments³. Famous examples include Einstein's Elevator⁴, Schrödinger's Cat, Wittgenstein's Beetle-in-a-Box, Putnam's Twin Earth and Gettier cases.

Generally, the thought experiment is presented in the form of a diagram or a short imaginative story, told in the present tense indicative, using fictive names such as Smith or Mary and preceded by sentences like 'Imagine' or 'Suppose that'. They undeniably constitute arguments, but an important task is preserved for the imagination to justify the premises. Often, thought experiments turn out to be counterfactuals.

Let us, by way of example, take Wittgenstein's Beetle-in-the-Box:

[. . .]Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language?—If so, it would not be used as a name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all; not even as a *something* for the box might even be empty.—No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.[. . .]

(Wittgenstein, PI 293)

The thought experiment refers to the so-called private language argument and, with that, to the Fundamental Question of whether human beings can have a language only they themselves understand, which no one else can make sense of, which cannot be translated into any other language and which is not learnable. The point here is not that the object would be unknowable, but that it is semantically irrelevant⁵.

Our fascination with a thought experiment comes with the possibility of gaining new knowledge without new empirical data. How is this achievable? Mach (1897)⁶ responded to this question by pointing out that we have large quantities of intuitive knowledge, which we have gathered through myriad ways from experience. According to him, experimenting is a basic method of all living creatures and thought experiments are just experiments of a different level. In the centre of a thought experiment lies the 'Gedankenerfahrung', composed of uncontrollable impressions of facts from previous experiences of the world. These facts show us the range and scope of our possibilities.

A typical feature of the thought experiment is that although we are able to think it through, it is impossible for us to physically carry it out due to practical, technological, ethical or financial constraints. In Wittgenstein's example, mentioned above, what would be gained when we would hand out a box with 'a beetle' (what would that 'beetle' have to be?!) to all people — how would we be able to organise it in such a way that it could be checked . . .? We would be baffled. It would simply be impossible! What we can do, however, is to think through the thought

experiment again, construct a different version of the same scenario, develop the scenario or adjust it in time.

Thought experiments are either negative when they refute a theory or positive when they support an existing theory. This is the main reason why we need to know the intentions of the experimenter who conjures up the experiment, so that we are able to decide to which category the experiment belongs: it needs to be judged within the framework of an intended goal.

Since intuitions can also mislead or conflict one another, the thought experiment is not by definition decisive. A strong thought experiment is one that is accepted almost instantly by the whole philosophical community. Think for instance of Gettier's argument that refuted the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief (Gettier, 1963). There are also, however, a host of other less strong cases, some of them not leading to any insight at all.

Furthermore, our intuition does not stop at any point in the process. Intuition triggers the coming into being of a thought experiment, but the moment it is presented to the outside world, the thought experiment also calls on us to use our intuition to think through every step in the story thoroughly, so that we are in the position to properly judge its validity.

All this shows that there always remains some speculative aspect due to underdetermination. Moreover, as we notice in Wittgenstein's example, not every single detail is described: a lot of background knowledge is assumed and quite a few details are left out. That is the reason why the philosopher needs to carefully describe the hypothetical scenario of the thought experiment.

Summarising, for philosophers, a thought experiment is the most important and paradigmatic tool; imagination has a fully-fledged and important task alongside logic. It is a possibility that is tested on its (im)plausibility. We might even speak of a 'method' in which the subtle interaction of logic and imagination provides us with the results.

4 The Creative and Artistic Process

Thus, thought experiments are instruments of the imagination; mental exercises used in order to stimulate and develop our intuitive competence. In this way, intuition can be understood as an equal partner of logic. But what exactly is intuition? Dijksterhuis & Nordgren (2006) offer the following by way of an explanation.

As they argue, we are able to feel something as good or bad without knowing why, where

the feeling comes from or on what it is based. An intuition, therefore, is defined as a gut feeling that is grounded in an earlier unconscious experience. It is a unifying judgment, produced by our unconscious the moment it is ready to decide. In order to do so, it is necessary that it has had access to all relevant information. At the moment, little is known of how exactly the unconscious transmits its information to the conscious and when the unconscious exactly delivers its solutions, but in any case it is clear that it is an active and purposeful process (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006, pp.105ff).

Building on Damasio's insights, Dijksterhuis & Nordgren (2006) develop a theory which can be used, they say, in decision-making, impressions and attitudes, problem solving and creativity. The theory differentiates between conscious and unconscious thinking, both having their own characteristics and applicability in various circumstances. Conscious thinking is better when we are dealing with relatively simple choices, while decisions with respect to complex issues should preferably be made through unconscious thinking.

This may sound somewhat odd, but speaks for itself on further consideration. Whenever we think consciously, we direct all our attention to the one specific case at hand. This focus restricts conscious thinking so that it can only take in a fraction of all the available information. As a result, it misses out many other details. At the same time it is, because of this focused attention, very precise and able to follow rules. Unconscious thinking, by contrast, is thinking without attention or with the attention directed to something else so that it has a much higher absorption capacity but is less precise than conscious thinking. In this associative process, the object of thought changes and the outcome depends on a certain amount of time and conformity to regularities.

Put into practice, we can understand why it might be more apt to use our unconscious thought when having to choose from three options for a new house to buy, while in purchasing a new mobile phone an immediate conscious selection could suffice. Conscious thought is good when things are relatively simple and becomes worse as the complexity of the (decision) problem increases. We tend to know this from our everyday life, whenever we give someone the sincere advice to 'sleep on it'. Notice that attention is the crucial factor here: conscious thought is thought with attention, unconscious thought is thought without attention or with attention directed elsewhere (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006, pp.95-6)⁷.

From these observations, Dijksterhuis⁸ presents a 'delayed unconscious thinking' to pro-

vide space for a more substantial role for our intuitions in decision-making. He borrowed this insight from the artistic process, used by (visual) artists to produce new work. I will discuss this artistic process here in short in so far as it applies to this inquiry⁹.

All human beings have everyday creativity at their disposal: the ability to respond to sudden changes, to adapt to altered circumstances and to improve, transform and remodel their lives and surroundings. If this were not the case, we would no longer be here on this earth. Analogous to Dijksterhuis' theory, we can distinguish between a conscious and an unconscious everyday creativity.

Artistic creativity, however, is something that stems from everyday creativity but that cannot be reduced to it. Artists are trained in art schools to detach from the obviousness that is normally taken for granted. This withdrawal is related to an ability we all have: the ability to notice possibilities by means of our imagination. The artist often uses this in a more intense form, associated with a sensibility for ambiguity.

The artist uses a *delayed* dynamic process to question the world and eventually transform the findings into works of art. Firstly, the world is actively set between brackets. In this way, the world is being sidestepped and at the same time stepped through by the artist. Secondly, the wandering in the spheres of the unconscious is something much more passive and floating, leaving all possibilities open to come to the fore, letting them collide and in the end coalesce into something new.

The delay – the time involved from bracketing the world and establishing the floating state of mind up to the moment that one becomes consciously aware of a new connection – is a necessary delay in the process in order for the artist to have the opportunity to clash together and mix up all sorts of knowledge, associations, feelings and experiences and from this to elicit the emergence of connections. In the detached state, associations run free, responding to one another in an unchecked and non-linear fashion, seemingly meaningless.

From this, we can conclude that the artistic process can be characterised as a disorganised dynamic, out of which emerges a self-organisation that eventually takes over again. The result, then, can be something completely new. This shows that artistic creativity is qualitatively different than everyday creativity.

Take the following example: it is well known that the two famous artists Gilbert & George took thousands of pictures of chewing gum, stuck to London's pavements, before it dawned on

them what they were doing and why. They just ‘dived in to the next thing’ up to the moment when they felt able to accept the subject. It may take years for them to find out what exactly they are doing and why they are doing it the way they are. Taking photographs, they emphasise, is the way to assign meaning to themselves and the world (Obrist, 2007, pp.25ff and pp.98ff).

Dijksterhuis translates this artistic process as a ‘delayed unconscious thinking’. Whenever we enter into this mode of thinking, the information needed to make a decision will eventually be ‘stronger’. At that moment we are capable of deciding consciously whether we want to use this delayed unconscious thinking and strategically bring it into action. In this way, Dijksterhuis suggests that such a dynamic process is not restricted to artists but that, at least in principle, all people can make use of it when they are properly trained. This means that every one of us might acquire an *artistic attitude*.

5 Turning the Tables

There are three important similarities to be highlighted between thought experiments and the artistic process involved in the production of art.

First of all, both make use of our imagination. A second similarity is to be found in the practising of the principle of delay, allowing intuition to be the most important factor. These two similarities may well culminate in an artistic attitude towards a third resemblance: addressing Fundamental Questions. Questions such as these are unanswerable in so far as we cannot respond in a conclusive and definite way; yet they are in every historical period always the most important ones that need to be addressed. These questions are not about thinking, language or art itself, but stem from our life and our wonder at the world.

One may well ask, however, how we could benefit from all this? Well . . .

Suppose there exists a Tremendously Complex World (TCW) where a crisis threatens the existence of all its inhabitants. Nobody knows how to cope with the problems at hand so everyone feels stuck to the point of depression. Top conferences and seminars are organised during which experts of all sorts – chief executive officers, captains of industry, government leaders, journalists, etc. – are invited to present their insights into the problems, but all attempts appear to be in vain; worse even: it seems that the harder they try and the more they discuss the further away they drift from a solution.

In the midst of this sinking ship, two groups are left forgotten. The main reason for this neglect is a presupposed uselessness, since they do not *directly* contribute anything to the economic system, which is considered to be the Holy Grail of TCW. Alas ... if only one would learn what power they possess in providing the necessary opening towards the solutions which could save TCW from total disaster! The members of the two forgotten groups are philosophers and artists.

Philosophy and art seem at first glance almost contradictory disciplines: the first relying on arguments and logical reasoning, the second especially sensory-orientated. However, when we take a closer look we may find them to be complementary and, because of this, that they are in fact reinforcing one another.

In times of crises, art can help us find a way through a visionary aspiration. Philosophy, in its turn, directs us to a reflective connection with our traditions. Eventually, the outcome for each of the disciplines is diametrically opposed: the philosopher wants to know how things really stand while the artist presents a surprisingly different perspective on (a part of) reality. But together they are a powerful resource to help decide on how and in which directions the changes should take place.

It should be obvious that it is difficult to give a specific example that could count as an illustration of such an implementation of the delayed unconscious thinking as an artistic attitude. It is an *attitude* rather than a straightforward answer to a question that is at stake here. Maybe this is one of the reasons why the insight has until now been overlooked.

6 Conclusion

In the twentieth century, linguistic philosophy with its emphasis on language dominated. How we speak about the world makes a difference for the way in which we understand the world. Yet there is more than just language. We also have hints, gestures, silences and works of art at our disposal. They help us in a different, sometimes more inclusive way to gain an understanding of the world and ourselves.

Extrapolating, I therefore conclude from the above that we are able to approach complex problems more adequately and effectively through an artistic attitude. This attitude takes our imagination together with the principle of delay as the guideline. Our power for making the necessary changes is incorporated in this attitude. That is not to say that everyone should be-

come an artist or a philosopher, but rather that an artistic-philosophically-oriented community is better equipped to cope with a Tremendously Complex World. It is time for an artistic turn.

Notes

1. This article was first published in 2012 for dutch internet journal BLIND! <https://www.ziedaar.nl/article.php?id=423>
2. I would prefer to replace ‘armchair philosophy’ with ‘swivel chair philosophy’. A swivel chair is a chair with a seat able to be turned on its base to face in almost any direction. It suggests a more active state of thinking than the rather rigid armchair in which one has only a single forward-focused viewpoint.
3. I will not go into a detailed discussion on the history and development of thought experiments, as this would exceed the scope of the article. For an extensive overview and elaboration on the subject, I refer the reader to [Sorensen \(1992\)](#), [Williamson \(2007\)](#), [Häggqvist \(2009\)](#), [Gendler \(2004\)](#) and [De Mey \(2003\)](#), to mention only a few.
4. Notice too that science also makes use of thought experiments. This shows that Big Questions and Fundamental Questions can overlap. I will not, however, go into this subject any further here.
5. Numerous philosophers have discussed the private language argument in detail. More on the subject is to be found, for example, in [Kripke \(1982\)](#), [Mulhall \(2007\)](#) and [Baker & Hacker \(1984\)](#).
6. Pre-Socratic philosophers already made use of thought experiments although they did not use the term as such. It was Mach who first proposed the term ‘experimentalism’ as related to thought experiments in 1897.
7. Of course, matters are slightly more complicated than suggested here, since conscious thought also involves various unconscious processes, and unconscious processes involve in some way or another also conscious thought. It would exceed the topic of this article to elaborate on these issues.
8. Dijksterhuis discussed this extension of the theory in a summer seminar in 2012 on Emotional Rationality.
9. Much more on the subject is to be found, for example, in ([Koestler, 1964](#)), ([Ryle, 1949, 1971a,b](#)), ([Wilde, 2008, 2012](#)).

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