Approach to reality and to academic writing

I will briefly outline some of the assumptions underlying my approach, and the implications for my style of writing.

Providing practice for theory

Many of the ideas I am presenting here are fairly straightforward. As general ideas, I assume they are almost commonplace among authors with a constructivist perspective. I mention them here not to refine on them theoretically. What I am trying to do, rather, is to translate the general insights into one possible form of practice.

I hope that this endeavour will help the development of the debate by providing an example, an illustration, an attempt at what it might look like if we fully translate constructivist insights into academic practice. I in no way pretend that this attempt embodies perfection, nor that it is the only way in which one might go about trying. Creating (even tentative, even experimental) examples, however, seems to me a very good way to contribute to the development of theory. It also seems to be a good way to contribute to the development of practice, which I suppose is an eventual aim of theory.

Writing, discourse, political action

I am writing this text from what I understand to be a constructivist viewpoint. That constructivist perspective should not only be reflected in my choice of topic, or the way I phrase my questions about political work, but also in the way the text itself is written, in the practice of writing as such.

As I see it, any written text and any act of research and writing is not only placed within, but also contributing to discourse. We are participating in construction; always, anyway. We can't help it. And indeed, we need not help it. There is nothing wrong with co-creating discourse. We are doing it, and my suggestion is to do it openly, consciously, joyfully. We may see it as a resource rather than a flaw or a predicament. Rather than trying to get away from it, or at least creating a semblance of getting away from it, we could also move towards it, embrace it, and consciously live with it. After all, being a co-creator of discourse may not be such a bad role. It includes a possibility of contributing to the shaping of our reality, which is certainly of interest to political actors, and perhaps also to academics, and probably to human beings.

Political action and academic writing, from the constructivist perspective I have now, may not be as far apart as I have thought previously. If social reality consists in large measure of constructs and discourses, then changing these constructs and discourses is also changing social reality. If academic writing changes discourse, and a change in discourse is a change in social reality, which in turn is an essential feature of political work, then academic writing can also be seen as a form of political work.

This perspective, I believe, holds true for all academic writing, not just those parts that declare themselves political, or constructivist, or belong to any particular strand. For example, academic writing that makes a very strong bid for objectivity contributes to the discourse of objectivity and shapes social reality just as strongly as constructivist or relativist writing; it only works in a different direction within the same discourse.

So I understand my writing as a contribution to our joint creation, perpetuation and change of discourse. I wish to engage in that act consciously, deliberately and with a value basis that is strong, subjective and made as transparent as possible.
This has implications for the style and methods that are necessary or helpful.

Subjectivity in writing

For instance, how does one write a text that is explicitly subjective?

The position behind that endeavour is, of course, the idea that the reality we speak about can never be „objective reality" as such, but is always a construct, an assembly of impressions mediated and organised by our sensory organs, our technical tools, our structures of thought, our patterns of expression and interaction.
In order to reflect that position in my writing, I can make a statement to that effect at the beginning of my text, which I am hereby doing. However, I believe that there is more that can be done in this respect.

I am introducing my research question by giving an account of how that question came into my life, and what the circumstances of my life were at that time. I would like to continue giving this type of account throughout my text. Whenever I am introducing a particular idea or aspect, I will try to relate how that idea came to me, where I have encountered it, what were the circumstances, and also, what was my reaction at the time. For instance, I may have been angry; and then noticed, and then asked myself what that anger is about; and found out, and drawn particular conclusions from it, which result in the way that I have taken up and included the idea in the current text.

Richness of sources

That example also illustrates that I intend to integrate several levels in my account of subjectivity. Our perceptions and ideas about reality are shaped by verbal communication with others, by texts and intellectual exchange; they are shaped by the material conditions we find ourselves in; our physical condition, as well as our emotional and social experiences. I wish to pay attention to all these levels, both because I believe they influence whatever it is that I write; but also because they will form part of our future contribution to the creation of discourse.

Not understanding or interpreting others; speaking for myself

Can we communicate in a meaningful manner by making subjective statements? Yes, we can, I believe. In fact, it appears to be a very easy and effective way of communicating in a meaningful way, to my own surprise. The way I have been socialised has led me to assume that progress in thought and opinion is reached through a verbal communication where each statement answers to the previous one, commenting, contradicting, expanding, and so forth. There should be a to-and-fro of arguments, I thought, where each person should try to understand what the other person has said and then answer back.

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I was rather surprised to find that there may be another way, one where each person speaks for him- or herself, and does not answer to previous statements, at least not directly. The most impressive experience I had of this form of communication was in 12-step self-help groups, modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous. There, people would sit in a circle and speak about their own experience. When one person had finished, there would be no reply, no comment, no advice and no endorsement; there would simply be the next person, speaking about his or her own experience. It was amazing to see how listening to other people speaking about themselves turned out to be more helpful than most direct advice anyone has ever been given. Even though - no, perhaps, precisely because - people were not directly reacting to one another's statements, a most extraordinary degree of helpfulness and relevance had been achieved.

A related question that seems relevant to me in that context is to what extent it is at all possible to understand others, or also, whether that should be our primary endeavour. Speaking for oneself is something that I have come to experience as a huge source of both freedom and respect in self-help groups. It involved a shift of focus, from trying to understand the other to trying to understand myself. I need not find out what the other person should do; if I manage to find out what I wish to do, that will be excellent. It also implied a different perspective on what one is looking or listening for in other people's contributions: the focus is on aspects that might be helpful or inspiring for me. Aspects that seem unhelpful or irrelevant to me are best just left alone; it may be assumed that they can be helpful for someone else. An image used to illustrate that may be the tray of a street vendor: there are many different things on offer; you are invited to look through them, see if there's anything you might like, and leave the rest, so it may find it's way to another customer.

Impressed by the power of the experience of self-help groups, I began to wonder how this approach to communication might also be helpful in academic contexts, not necessarily as a substitute, but certainly as a complement to existing usances.

I am trying to implement some of the conclusions I can see in the research for and the writing of this text. In particular, I am trying to take the perspective suggested for listening to other's contributions for my own use of literature. I aim to look for aspects that seem helpful and inspiring to me; whatever seems unhelpful or irrelevant to me I wish to leave, trusting that there may be other people or other projects where those parts will form a valuable contribution.

With the literature I use, I do not wish to make a claim of having understood the inner processes and the circumstances of the person who wrote them. That is not my focus, either. What I am writing about here is my inner process; which is, of course, and always, influenced by other people; by texts, by talks, by encounters. A text will bring forth certain ideas or images in me; sometimes they will correspond to images the author had at the time of writing, sometimes they will not. I am hoping to find a form of expression here that makes it clear that I do not wish to interpret others, nor make any claim on them, but to express what is going on inside myself.

Likewise, I do not expect others who read this text to strive for an authentic rendering of my inner processes. I share what I can; if readers look to whatever it is they find sparked within themselves (whether or not it corresponds to my, the author's, thoughts and feelings) I feel that would be a very satisfactory approach.

This may also be very much in line with my understanding of this text as making suggestions for viewpoints, not statements of fact. A claim along the lines of "person x thinks this" is closer to a statement of fact, and accordingly one might expect the rules of proof common for facts applied. How do I get to the claim that person x thinks this? I can be expected to quote sections of her writing, explain how I interpret them, perhaps in comparison with existing interpretations by others. This type of argument seems most appropriate to me if I am coming close to making a statement of fact, a claim of presenting what that person really thought.

The more I understand myself as presenting a subjective position, which in addition is a suggestion and not a description, the more the appropriate form of argument shifts, for instance towards selecting what is helpful and inspiring, and going for the broad and loose background that provides this sort of nourishment.

Paradigms and paintings

Another implication that I see as coming with an explicitly subjective approach is a certain ease, or freedom in choosing one's own angle. I am not making any claims to objectivity, nor to universality. I do not feel that what I am saying is prescriptive in an obligatory sense for anyone else. I am offering my experience, and I am making suggestions. For whom these suggestions are relevant and in which way is not for me to decide; it is up to each reader to make that decision for herself or himself. This is also the approach I would like to take myself with respect to the writings of other people, the ideas and experiences they present, the paradigms that they use in their work.

I would like to suggest a metaphor here to illustrate a way of seeing different paradigms or approaches within academia; the metaphor is that of paintings. Some people like Rubens, some Monet, some Miró. The way to move from Rubens to Miró is not by looking for mistakes in Rubens' paintings, correcting them and thus slowly arriving at Miró's style. It doesn't work that way.

There is no need to look for mistakes with Rubens either: there aren't any. It's just his way of painting. If I don't like it, I don't have to look at his paintings, nor do I have to copy his style in my own. I don't have to argue against his style either. I can simply take Monet's picture and hang that on my wall. Or, of course, I take a fresh canvas, and start painting the way I like; inspired by Monet, inspired by Miró, inspired by the weather or by whatever else seems inspiring to me.

Image 1

Image 2

That is an approach I would like to see blossoming within academia as well. Especially when it comes to a change in paradigm or general approach, it may be most helpful to start on a fresh canvas. There is no requirement to start with the existing paintings, or to find fault with them. There may not even be one. The existing paradigms may be perfectly right in their own sense. Still it may be useful for everyone to allow new, different approaches to come into being. They may be right for certain contexts, or for certain people. Or they may just be.

A pluralistic approach, through openness and flexibility, may make a helpful contribution to the dynamic development of academia as a whole. I believe it will also be people-friendly with respect to the individuals involved. And it will probably be humble and cautious, in that most positive way that I see as recommendable in a hugely complex world where none of us can know everything and the outcomes of our actions are always uncertain.
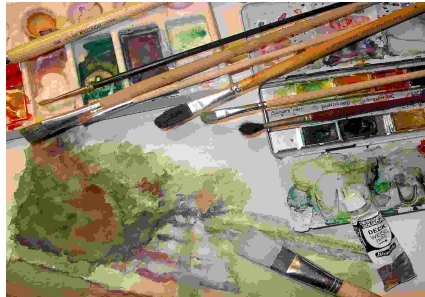

Image 3

The trees and the forest; new facts or new concepts ?

As I see it, I am not presenting new facts to my audience. What I am presenting, or hoping to present, are new viewpoints or new concepts.
That also has implications for what is an appropriate way to progress. New viewpoints or concepts do not need the kind of proof one would expect for the presentation of new facts. What do they need? They need to be made plausible, I would assume. Understandable; or perhaps: imaginable. Anecdotes, metaphors, examples and images may play a much more important role here than in other forms of academic writing.

There are a number of difficulties I can see potentially arising with the presentation of new concepts or ways of seeing.
One is: they may be difficult to see. Especially, of course, if one is expecting to be presented with new facts; and then there aren't any. That there is something else worth looking at may be something I do not notice at that moment, even if my attention is being directed to it.

As an analogy, I would like to use the image of introducing the concept of a "forest" to people who have so far said "many trees".
What does it take to introduce such a concept? It does not take new facts. Everyone agrees already that the trees (and other plants and animals) exist. "Forest" is just a new way of pulling them together into one picture. "Now what good does that do?" one might ask. Perhaps no good at all, for the people living there. They will continue to look at individual trees and it will work perfectly well for all the things they wish to do. Other people, however, may wish to do other things, or, other things may become visible options once the concept of "forest" is introduced, and for some people that will be very helpful. My suggestion is that each person choose the concept he or she wishes to work with. For that to be possible, of course, we need to let the different concepts emerge.

However, the proposition of a new concept, perspective or paradigm can meet with this type of obstacle. Its nature as a paradigm may not be recognised, and therefore it may appear that there's nothing there. Nothing is being said or suggested. Everything that's being said or suggested is known already, or obvious or commonplace. So apparently the person talking, or writing, does not have a point to make.

However, that a new paradigm is not recognised as such does not mean it is not there.

To some extent, this can be helped by pointing to the consequences of the new paradigm. New ways of action that become possible can be outlined, or bits of information that become relevant now but were not so before. It may well be that these new possibilities for action are rejected as impossible by the very same people who before said that there's nothing new in what is being suggested, that everything is known and agreed upon anyway. Of course; if we do not recognise that there is a new paradigm, or a new approach suggested, and we do not enter into it, then we may first say there's nothing to enter into and then make our arguments and objections from precisely the place that we have always been standing at.

While this dynamic is very understandable when looked at theoretically, it can be very confusing if encountered in real life. One may encounter several ways of sweeping an approach off the table: one is to say it's obvious and commonplace, an other is to say it's absurd or impossible. While at first glance these two may seem like opposite objections, they may in reality appear in one and the same conversation; for instance, when the existence and novelty of a suggested approach has not yet been grasped.

The important conclusion to be drawn from this, I believe, is not to fazed by either of these types of remarks when we encounter them. And the other way around: when I meet people who seem to be stating the obvious and/or suggesting something absurd or impossible, I may just wish to keep in mind that perhaps they are speaking from another paradigm or viewpoint, the existence of which I have not yet grasped.

Detail and overview

Another aspect the tree-forest analogy may aptly illustrate is the relation of detail and overview, and the implications arising for the type of academic work I am trying to do.

What does it take to enable me to come up with the idea that there may be a different way of looking at "many trees"? What conditions, or which situation or position would enable me to see that? It might help if I stepped back from the individual trees. Ideally, perhaps, I would fly over the hills and see them all together from above – the concept of "forest" may almost jump out at me in that situation. It is a position which encourages, practically entails, a different viewpoint.

However, that position will also imply that I can not see the condition or each individual tree very well. People tending these trees may, however, point out to me how important that is, and of course they are right. I am also right, however, looking out over the hills and giving birth to the idea of "forest".

Likewise, the type of task we are defining for ourselves in our academic work will have implications for what perspective is most helpful in trying to fulfil it.
If I am trying to come up with new concepts or new paradigms, it may be important to take a step back from detailed questions within one paradigm. If I am busy tending an individual tree, I will be doing something very useful for that tree, but I will not come up with the concept of "forest". One, because I am simply busy; tending a tree is work, and there is only so much time in a day. But secondly, because my head is filled with close-up visions of the bark; it would take a while to get that perspective out of my head and make room for possible new ones.

If in my academic work I am trying to be on the level of concepts and paradigms, it would be nonsensical for me to expect to simultaneously be at the level of detailed discussion of specific questions arising within one particular paradigm. Likewise, if I am trying to make connections between different areas, it would be unproductive for me to expect me to be familiar with each of

the areas to the same degree as intelligent and diligent people focusing entirely on that particular area. That's just not possible. If I – at least implicitly – expect that of myself I will manoeuvre myself into paralysis very quickly.

So, making connections between different areas, as well as working on the level of concepts and paradigms, to my mind calls for steps to encourage overview, including a breadth of vision and a blurring of detail.
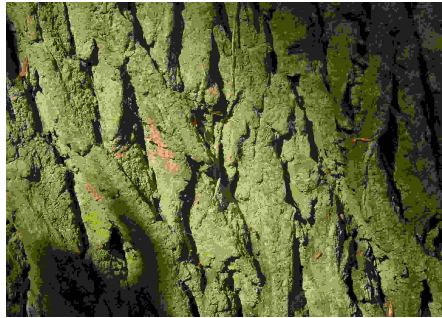

Image 4

Image 5

Precision, coherence, contradictions

So it may not be precision that we are primarily aiming for in this approach, but rather overview. The concept of coherence may also take on a different connotation: it may not be about the elimination of contradictions as much as about the emergence of an overall picture, a sense of general orientation, a feeling that here is a thing that could possibly hold and be in line with our values. It may include the integration of contradictions or their dissolution. Sometimes, my previous sense of contradiction may have come from my pattern of thinking. If, for instance, I have been trying to find a rule that applies to all situations, I may have been vexed to find contradictory cases. However, if I move to a concept where there are several different categories of situations, than having a specific rule for each category is in no way in contradiction with anything.
Many things in this world have several aspects. That is not a contradiction, it is merely complexity, and perhaps changeability. Acknowledging that and mirroring it in our structure of thinking may be a very good idea. Moving from a tendency of thinking in terms of exclusivity (either-or) to terms of inclusivity (and-and) may help in that respect.

Where do ideas come from?

In trying to make some of my underlying assumptions explicit, I have so far pointed out that I see myself in a constructivist framework, working on the level of concepts and paradigms, trying to speak from a recognisably subjective position, including the various levels that influence and indeed make up human beings.

I would now like to say a few words about the origin of ideas as I perceive it, the concept of individuality linked to that, and, again, implications I believe this should have for my academic writing.

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Concept of the individual

The concept of individuality I espouse for myself has undergone a process of substantial change over the last few years. Having grown up in Western Europe, the implicit notion I have held for a long time was that human beings come in the form of individuals; that these individuals have clear boundaries, notably that demarcated by the skin of the body; and that they interact but do not overlap. An appropriate image, perhaps, might be that of billiard balls: each ball exists separately, but the speed and position of the ball may be changed through interaction with others. Identification of the ego in this game is with the individual ball.

A few years ago I have come to be dissatisfied with this approach, or rather, it has begun to dawn on me that this may not be simply the nature of things and the only way to see it. While I felt pretty much a heretic and accordingly daunted at the beginning, by now I am much more comfortable with other versions of imagining individuality and identification.

An approach that has been particularly helpful to me in that respect is Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of Interbeing.

A core passage illustrating this understanding of the nature of being is quoted in the box opposite.

Interbeing
Thich Nhat Hanh
(1988: 37)

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. (...)

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it, too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it, too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here, and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You can not point out one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. "To be" is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing.
(...)
Without "non-paper elements," like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.
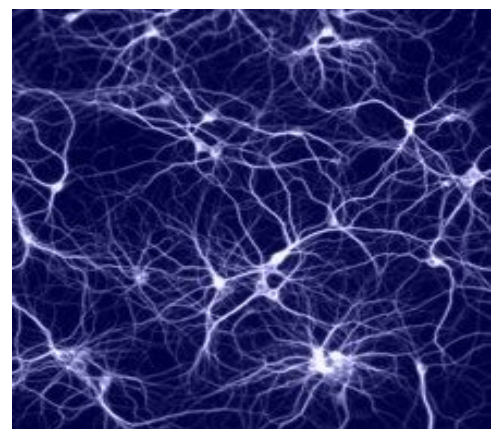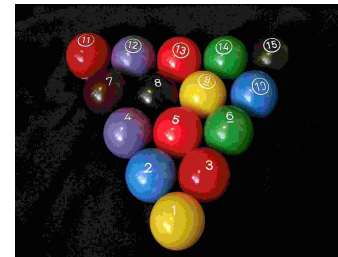

Image 7

The understanding of the individual that emerges for me is thus one where the individual exists, but has no clear outward boundary. Rather, it fades imperceptibly into others, is intermingled with them to the point of being a constituent part of a whole. Identification, in this approach, tends to be with both the individual part and the whole.

A good example to illustrate the fading of one individual into others may be the use of language. When I speak I usually do so in German. That is the language that comes most natural to me; and when I speak, it is clearly me expressing myself, in my very own words. However, these words have not been invented by me. They have been used for hundreds of years by hundreds and thousands of people, each of whom has transformed or validated them by use. So today here is the German language, and I am using it, as it has been passed down to me through the centuries, and through my school teachers and friends and newspapers I've read; and I am now reiterating and changing it and handing it on to generations after me.

My ideas, humanity's ideas

The same holds true for the ideas I express using that language. They are my ideas, and there is little I identify with more than my ideas and my emotions. They are pretty much "I". I also identify with my body, but even less so than with my inner life. What it is of my inner life that I express through my words, be it called thoughts, or ideas, or mental formations, or constructs, is both most intimately and individually mine and something that has been passed on to me by thousands of people. Many of the notions I use can be very clearly tracked through the centuries or even millennia, as can the ways of arguing. They can be found in books I have never read; they have been spoken by people I have never heard. However, I have spoken to people who have read articles by people who have read books by people who have spoken to people, and ideas, notions, mental formations and constructs have been passed on to me through that rich web of human interaction. They are embedded in the structures and technologies I have grown up with, in the established practices that come natural to me, in the physical surroundings I live in. Everything I say, feel and do comes out of that context of human education, communication and creation of meaning, and feeds into it, in as many ways as it has been fed.

What I am driving at is that I perceive the thoughts I have as both most intimately mine, and the common heritage of humankind. Everything I say is born out of everything that has come before and that is around me now.

From that perspective, pinning down exactly "whose idea" something was, or which exact portion of which idea has come from whom exactly, does not seem a productive endeavour to me. It is not really possible to pin down such isolated fractions, but it is not all that important either. The important question that remains is not "Whose idea was it?" but "Is it a good idea? Do I wish to work with it, to integrate it into my thought and my life?".

Dialogue

This brings me to aspects suggested by David Bohm in his text "On Dialogue". Bohm also gives the example of language and thought as being collective (2004:12), and goes on to make suggestions as to how communication and understanding within humanity might be improved.

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One aspect I would like to pick out here is the notion that dialogue in a deep and perhaps most meaningful and productive way becomes possible when we cease to identify with our opinions. What Bohm describes (2004:23) reminds me of what I have first come to know as a suggestion in Buddhist meditation: to notice one's thoughts and emotions. To be aware of them, regard them, perhaps as if they were suspended in the room before me. To look at them without judgement or conclusion; neither identifying with them nor trying to make them go away, just letting them be, come and go, and be aware of this happening. This step towards awareness and away from identification is something Bohm suggests to move into a collective setting, and to meet in groups practising this together. That way, one would not only contemplate one's own thoughts and emotions, but everyone's, all without identification and without rejection. It would not matter very much, then, who brought an idea in, just that it is there now for common contemplation.

If I wish to use an analogous approach in an academic setting, what would that look like? What steps may help in that process? An important prerequisite for improved understanding and the emergence of new ideas will be not to personally identify oneself, or other people, with particular ideas, or at least to do less and less of that. I do indeed feel that this may help enormously to bring ease and flow into academic discussions, and that our debates could easily gain both in depth and in speed and flexibility if rested on such a basis. Certain tools may be utilised to help us move in such a direction, including an appropriate attitude towards quotation and references.

I would like to consider this together with what I have said before, in sympathy with Thich Nhat Hanh's conception of Interbeing, about the lack of clear delineation between my own thought and someone else's, or humanity's. If I wish to embody these approaches in my academic practice, I will need to – practice. It may not always come easy to me, given that I have been socialised within a different paradigm and the different rules that belong to it. I will try to remind myself, and to change also the small rules and little pieces of everyday doings to be in line with the paradigm I wish to move into, so that the rules I now follow will both embody the new principle and help to serve as a reminder to me of that general vision I wish to move towards.

It will mean, for example, that I focus on the ideas, and try not to give too much importance on who they came from. That will need some time and continuing exercise to get into, for the habits, especially of referencing and quoting, I have been socialised into were different ones, and unlearning what by now may have become deep seated beliefs about how things are to be done will need both time and persistence.

Finding appropriate forms of referencing

What form of quotation and referencing is appropriate will largely depend on the type of questions we are asking and the kind of task we are setting ourselves for our academic research. If my question arises from a particular academic text and is intended as a comment on it, then of course it is sensible to quote that text. Likewise, when quoting statistics it is extremely sensible to give the reference for where one can look up the details on how the data has been gathered. Pointing out literature that is not a direct basis, but related, and that may be of interest for further reading is also very helpful.

I will try to find the appropriate form of referencing for the kind of endeavour I am undertaking here. It should support a move in the direction of not personally identifying myself or other people with particular ideas; related to that is the requirement that it should be conducive to an understanding of human thought as characterised by inseparability, interconnectedness or interbeing. Furthermore, it should help me to remain at the level of concepts and paradigms, and encourage making connections between different fields and areas.

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Selection of references

Immaterial human heritage is huge. The world's traditions and contemporary knowledge and wisdom are far more than any individual could possibly consciously hold. On some level, perhaps, we do have all of that in us. Even ancient myths from a far away continent may have found their way into a fairy tale I have heard in my childhood, and that has shaped my unconscious beliefs about the ways of the world. The most complicated mathematics and sophisticated technological innovations are part of my life in the form of my mobile phone, the bridge I walk over, or surgery performed on me. My cells hold the memory of billions of years of evolution. So perhaps one could say that, being part of the web of all things, I am also part of everything that happens and that all the heritage of humanity or of life is within me.

However, on a more practical level, or on the level of conscious awareness and thinking, it is quite clear that I can impossibly know about everything that forms part of human wisdom and knowledge. Even the portion of it that has been written down is still way beyond what any individual can grasp. I inevitably make a selection, leaving the vast majority out and looking only at a very, very small part of the whole.

In essence, that selection is in large measure made for me, by my geographical location, my class, my mother tongue, the geopolitical situation and cultural dominance in the past and present. I largely go with what is common and known among the people I live with. In some aspects I may make different choices; taking a few things in, leaving some others out.

That we have made a selection becomes more noticeable if the selection we make differs from the one most people around us make. However, that does not mean we have been more or less selective, or that we have (or ought to have) made more of an argument about the nature of our selection.

If we wish to read or do things that are not normally included in the canon of people around us, we also have to give ourselves permission to drop some of the components of that existing canon. It is practically impossible to start exploring new areas while still keeping up everything everyone else is doing.

It is worth exploring whether, perhaps somewhere silently, implicitly, I am making that kind of demand on myself: to keep up with the existing canon as well as everyone else, and to only then allow myself to explore other paths. If all new paths have to be in addition, rather than instead of, not many new paths will be tread. This kind of approach may appear to be very open and welcoming to the exploration of new avenues, since there are almost no restrictions as to which new avenues are eligible. There is just this one tiny little rule saying that first you have to know the existing canon; and by the time you do, of course, time is up. So in practice, if I have that kind of expectations of myself, they will be prohibitive. The exploration of new approaches will be impossible if I leave no time and no space for it. And if I fail to notice this dynamic, I may feel that any lack of new avenues was due to my personal inability, rather than to a prohibitive threshold inherent in the approach. The conclusion to be drawn from that insight, I believe, would be to try to be aware of the expectations I have of myself regarding familiarity with existing canon, and to keep in mind that free space is needed in order for new things to be able to come in.

Imprudent use of literature may end up impeding rather than supporting the progress of my work. If I set myself up the wrong way, I may even end up feeling like a humanist impelled to show that what she wishes to say is compatible with the bible. Firstly she would have to go through this very thick book looking for passages that could possibly fit in, then read through volumes and volumes

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of existing interpretations, and if by then she still remembers what she wanted to say, she can do so by responding to interpretations of a text that wasn't her source of inspiration in the first place. If that is not a way to stop the emergence of new ideas, at least it is a way of slowing them down so considerably that they are not unlikely to grind to a halt. The prospect of arduous and unproductive detours can be so discouraging that one would rather omit a particular statement or idea than plod through them. I might lose the original (nascent) thought, or the courage to stick with it. I might, perhaps without noticing, adapt to what I am reading; not to individual positions perhaps, but to the general paradigm of what is possible and what is not, what can be said and what can not.

I am, therefore, aiming for an approach that avoids this kind of pitfall, and encourages all the inspirational power that other people's ideas and texts can have without them becoming a restrictive force. This probably involves opening to these sources without clinging to them; exposing oneself to these influences, and also letting them go easily when that is what is called for. This links back also to the approach I have pointed to before, of looking at literature with the aim of finding what inspires me, and leaving the rest, possibly to be used by some other person or project where it proves helpful.

Most is taken for granted

A related point is the question of what points, facts, arguments, definitions or understandings can be taken for granted, and which ones ought to be discussed and explained explicitly.
As far as I can see, the largest part of our assumptions is always implicit, not explicit, and I do not think it would be possible to do it any other way. We always, for the largest portion of what we say, draw on an existing common understanding. It begins with language, with use of words. Some words we may explicitly define, elaborate on their exact use and the reasons for it. If we try to do that with all, or even most words we are going to use, we will never finish, nor, perhaps, will we ever start with our main text.
The same, I believe, goes for our rules of arguing, for the structure we use as a framework, for the web of meanings within which we place ourselves. We always only argue a small part and take the largest part as given. It may be helpful to keep in mind that this is the case for mainstream arguments as much as for minority positions.

Repetition

Another aspect that comes to the fore when looking at the nature and origin of thought this way is the relatedness of ideas and their repeated occurrence.

Similar ideas come to people simultaneously. That is unsurprising; if they are part of the same time and cultural realm, they are drawing on similar backgrounds, they encounter similar questions in their lives; one would expect them to come up with similar suggestions. And it seems that indeed they do; and it is perfectly all right, to my mind. I do not see the slightest need to worry about that occurrence, or to try to prevent or curb it in any way. There is no reason I can see to tell anyone that, before uttering what is in her head right now, she ought to make sure that noone else had said that very thing before. It is very likely someone else has said something similar, and almost certain no one else has said it in quite that way. And even if someone had – why not state the same idea twice? Or thrice, or many times?

Sometimes I seem to encounter an implicit assumption within me that if something has been said once, it is "known", and that's it - no need to say it again. However, that is not it. The world is big and complex, and if something is said once that does not mean everyone in the world knows from then on. How ideas spread in the world (even in the academic world) is a long and complicated process and it probably involves the repeated mentioning of ideas by many people in many

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different contexts. Even within one single person, if an idea is heard once, that does not mean that it is "known"; understood, digested or even remembered. Even within the individual, learning, and change of outlook, belief or opinion, is a long and complex process involving, probably, a good number of repetitions in an number of variations and contexts.

Hence, we need perhaps not get nervous at the thought that what we are about to say in an academic context may have been said by someone else before. Quite possibly it has been; that in no way undoes the importance of it being said now, here, by me.

Whether an idea is new is perhaps less important than whether we find it a good idea; whether we wish to use it, to work with it, to make it part of our lives.

Images of thinking and learning

The various images we have of learning processes may also be reflected in the way we structure our academic writing.

One general idea, which has a fairly strong tradition in Europe, is to think that academic writing should follow a sort of linear set-up. That the introduction should prepare the ground, that later chapters should follow on from earlier chapters, and not repeat them. The whole argument should stretch through the text like a tread and lead to the conclusion.

Another way of modelling a text, and therefore of imagining our process of thinking and learning, would be that of a spiral. Repetition is part of the model here: the same areas are touched upon again and again, but on a deeper and deeper level. Unlike a circle, which does indeed cover the exact same points over and over again, a spiral keeps that circular element, but adds another dimension to it, so that what occurs is not mere repetition, but a more and more profound understanding of the same point. (Of course mere repetition may also have a much more important role than we usually credit it with, not only in human learning, but also e.g. in the way that the power of constructs may be related to the number of citations.) For people who wish to add yet another modification, the spiral can also be envisioned as a widening cone, so the points revisited will be both deeper and broader than at the previous encounter.

I do not wish to make a definite case here for one way of looking at things or another; I suppose elements of both can be found in my text. I just wish to remind us of the general point here that there are several models, and that there may be a number of ways of going about writing, reading and learning, linear progression being one of them.

The role of academia in society

What is "science" or "academic writing" can be defined in a number of different ways. Whichever way one chooses, I feel it has to be closely related to the role one thinks academia, or university education in particular, is to play in our societies.

We can go for a very narrow definition of scientific / academic writing, arguing that everything else also exists and is also important, but can find its place in numerous contexts outside the universities. In this case, the position of universities in society would have to change. University education, in that case, could not be the narrow portal through which all who aspire to well-paid or high status positions in society tend to pass. Such a disproportionate amount of power and consequence would undermine any argument saying that other forms of knowing find their adequate place elsewhere. That type of pluralist but separate arrangement would loose legitimacy if resources are in fact all concentrated to just one of the many approaches.

So, one way to move forward would be to decrease the relative importance of university education,

and academic research in policy advice, and so on, to give proper space to other traditions. Paul Feyerabend is one of those who might be seen as making an argument in a similar direction, for instance in his text on science in a free society.

Bearing in mind the very special position academia has in Western society today, there are also other approaches that can be taken. One path, which is the one I am trying to advance in writing this thesis, is to broaden our understanding of academia, making room within it for the many different voices and ways of knowing inherent in human beings.

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