

GiLE Journal of Skills Development

There's a Flip Side: the Mystery of the Human Being and Puzzle of Homo Economicus

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Abstract

Steven Pinker wrote in the introduction to one of his books that every idea in the book may turn out to be wrong, but that would be progress, because our old ideas were too vapid to be wrong. In this essay we are also trying to understand which the right question is. We are looking for a question for which we do not have to look for a single correct answer. We are looking for a question that makes those who prone thinking to be actually start thinking. Here is the question: what does a child learn? We remember that all of us, our children and our grandchildren played with things that were made available to them. Some of us played with dolls, balls, Barbie dolls, Lego blocks, or 5G smart gadgets. The child kicked the ball, comforted the doll the same way as nowadays he or she plays with 5G smart gadgets without any prior training. The tools have simply become more sophisticated. However, something did not change. Ancient Greek tales were read to all. Is it possible the other way round, namely to read or watch contemporary tales on ancient Greek gadgets? We tend to claim that this is impossible, as gadgets are becoming ever more modern day by day, and ancient Greek tales and their ethical norms do not change. In this essay we argue that the 'Septem Artes Liberales' are permanent, but the 'Septem Artes Vulgares' change. As we stated earlier, the emphasis is on asking the right question. Noam Chomsky suggests the terms 'problem' and 'mystery'. Here and now, we are using the terms 'puzzle' and 'mystery' to depict unknown phenomena. This is how we view it: the unknown phenomena of the world are mistakenly classified as puzzles, to which someone either already knows the solution or else the solution will become known sometime in the future. Let us instead accept a world where the 'Septem Artes Liberales' have mysteries, while the 'Septem Artes Vulgares' have puzzles. This explains why the solutions for puzzles have become more sophisticated over time. The mysteries have endured, and it is good that they have done so.

Keywords: analytical thinking, common arts, cognitive skills, liberal arts, metaphorical thinking

1. Artes Liberales vs. Artes Vulgares

During classical antiquity, the ‘Septem Artes Liberales’ (Latin for seven liberal arts) were defined to signify what a free person should know in order to be a useful member of the society. It consisted of the more essential ‘trivium’ of grammar, logic, and rhetoric and the somewhat less important ‘quadrivium’ of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. In the 12th century these were included in the ‘Hortus deliciarum’ (Latin for Garden of Delights) by Herrad von Landsberg, which was intended as a compendium of all human knowledge. At the dawn of Renaissance, they served as basis for creating the first European Universities, where magistri (Latin for masters) taught the scholaria (Latin for scholars or students). The education at these first universities was conducted in Latin.

Juxtaposed to the ‘Artes Liberales’ in antiquity we can find the ‘Artes Vulgares’ (Latin for common arts) or ‘Artes Serviles’ (Latin for servile arts); the first of these two labels emphasising that these are inferior to the ‘Artes Liberales’, while the second signifying knowledge needed to perform work, usually with the purpose of making money, in the service of free men, as a contrast ‘Artes Liberales’, which signified knowledge that has no end other than itself. Due to the negative connotations of vulgar and servile, these were later renamed into ‘Artes Mechanicae’ (Latin for mechanical arts and in later translations practical arts). In the 9th century, John Scotus Eriugena divided ‘Artes Mechanicae’ into *agricultura* (agriculture), *architectura* (architecture), *coquinaria* (cooking), *mercatura* (trade), *metallaria* (blacksmithing), *militia and venatoria* (warfare and hunting) and *vestiaria* (tailoring/weaving). In the 12th century Hugh of St Victor replaced *agricultura*, *architectura*, *coquinaria* and *mercatura* with navigation, medicine and theatrical arts.

The trivium of ‘Artes Liberales’ was renamed as *Studia Humanitatis*, or human (and social) studies, the quadrivium was identified as scientific arts, while the ‘Artes Vulgares’ became the practical arts, in the sense of engineering and medicine. Of course, in today’s world we have a much larger number of disciplines, but we can see that historically, human and social studies were not inferior to science and engineering – to the contrary, they were considered to be the noblest disciplines. As Jerome Bruner said: “We forget at our peril that the great advances in Eastern Europe were led not so much by mathematicians and scientists (although they were there too) but by playwrights, poets, philosophers, and even music teachers” (Bruner, 1996, p. 117). This thought once again draws readers’ attention to the fact that the human sciences do have a serious impact on social and economic development.

In the next section, we will examine how different disciplines can help us understand human behaviour.

2. Mystery vs. Puzzles

In order to do good economics – according to the top behavioural economists – we have to keep in mind that people are human. We have been teaching courses in economics and MBA at domestic and foreign universities for decades. This experience confirms that the presentation, interpretation and applicability of the results achieved by a behavioural economics researcher have only a very marginal place in the education of future economists.

We mention some of influential behavioural economists without supposing to be exhaustive: Dan Ariely (2010), Tim Harford (2008), Daniel Kahneman (2011) and Richard H. Thaler (2008; 2015). “For four decades, since my time as a graduate student, I have been preoccupied by these

kinds of stories about the myriad ways in which people depart from the fictional creatures that populate economic models. It has never been my point to say that there is something wrong with people; we are all just human beings – homo sapiens. Rather, the problem is with the model being used by economists, a model that replaces homo sapiens with a fictional creature called homo economicus, which I like to call an Econ for short. Compared to this fictional world of Econs, Humans do a lot of misbehaving, and that means that economic models make a lot of bad predictions, predictions that can have much more serious consequences than upsetting a group of students” (Thaler, 2015, p. 4). And so now we can see the conflict of the homo economicus of mainstream economics and the homo sapiens of behavioural economics. At this point we will again cite Richard Thaler, who is the 2017 recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his contributions to behavioural economics. “Although I have at times been critical of economists in this book, I am entirely optimistic about the future of economics. One sign that I find particularly encouraging is that economists who do not identify themselves as “behavioural” wrote some of the best behavioural economics papers published in recent years. These economists simply do solid empirical work and “let the chips fall where they may” (Thaler, 2015, p. 357).

The human being always remains a mystery, even if the homo economicus is presented in the form of a puzzle. “Our ignorance can be divided into problems and mysteries. When we face a problem, we may not know its solution, but we have insight, increasing knowledge, and an inkling of what we are looking for. When we face a mystery, however, we can only stare in wonder and bewilderment, not knowing what an explanation would even look like” (Chomsky, 2015, p. 124). Solving puzzles is different. Let us take the mystery of fear as an example. We are aware that fear is taught at some schools as if it was a puzzle for which there is a correct solution, however, we are also aware that this is wrong. Let us see some examples:

We are afraid of becoming fat but also of becoming slim.

We are afraid of going to a good school but also of going to a bad one.

We are afraid of our partner leaving us but also of them staying.

We are afraid of getting to know others but also of not getting to know anybody.

We could go on listing the mysteries of fear, but it is superfluous. Less deeply, positivists say that solving puzzles needs intelligence and solving mysteries needs creativity. This thought is an error. The trouble is that we do not know anything about creativity. According to Avram Noam Chomsky, who is an American linguist, philosopher and one of the founders of cognitive science we can say this less bluntly: “we barely know more about creativity than what Juan Huarte knew, a Spanish philosopher in the XVI century” (Chomsky, 2015, p. 99). Problems arise when someone does not believe this and wants to learn something that cannot be learned. Bela Hamvas, the one of the greatest Hungarian thinkers and writers of the 20th century, said that a man, as soon as it is about things over the fence, becomes suspicious, looks in disbelief, and thinks that someone wants to push him against the wall.

Disciplines have specialised over time. In 1300 they were classified into seven disciplines. In 1950, they were classified into 54 disciplines, in 1975 into almost 2000 disciplines. Nowadays references mention more than 8000 disciplines. It is impossible to figure a new way out within the frames of a single discipline, however, it does not follow as a result that disciplines can be chosen at random. “If there is something in nature you don't understand, odds are it makes sense

in a deeper way that is beyond your understanding. So there is a logic to natural things that is much superior to our own. Just as there is a dichotomy in law: 'innocent until proven guilty' as opposed to 'guilty until proven innocent', let me express my rule as follows: what Mother Nature does is rigorous until proven otherwise; what humans and science do is flawed until proven otherwise" (Taleb, 2012, p. 388). Reality does not do the favour of remaining within the frames of a single discipline. Perhaps if those embracing the transdisciplinary view are given some space, we could be closer to getting to know reality. The transdisciplinary mindset does not wish to control or dominate other disciplines. Here and now, we are wishing not to rise above disciplines but to get beyond them, and from that place to get a perspective on how organisations can be led. To achieve this, we need to leave the cage of learned disciplines, and experiment with terminology that is over disciplines – metaphors. "Philosophical theories are our conscious, systematic attempts to develop coherent, rational views about our world and our place in it. They help us understand our experience, and they also make it possible for us to reflect critically on our views and to see where and how they ought to be changed" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 480).

The big question is whether one must stay caught up in the cage of their learned discipline. Some time ago philosophy was the 'king' of all disciplines. Today's world looks as if positivist thinkers want to direct everyone towards the cage of physics, where it is recommended to describe reality using causal relationships. Referring to science these people even look down on others thinking within soft disciplines and seeing the world in different ways than physicists do. If we want to take a step further from disciplines and accept the excitement of studying new phenomena in a discipline-free way, then we will not be longing for our cage or that of our neighbours.

In this section we remind the reader that human being will never be like homo economicus. So, in the next section, we examine how we – as a human being – understand each other!

3. Metaphors vs. Algorithms

When we sit in a café and overhear a conversation about new tools at another table, we do not know anything about the people who are talking. However, we know everything: they are industrial workers, and they are not talking about tools, but they are legitimising themselves: 'we are up-to-date workers'. When we overhear a conversation on the tram about today's lunch, we do not know anything about the people who are talking. However, we know everything: they are housewives, who are not talking about soup, but they are legitimising themselves: 'we are taking care of our families'. When observing a narrative, a frame arises which creates the order for the sensemaking of the narratives. We do not have to accurately foresee what will happen. This is impossible and superfluous. Human beings are not trains that can only move on tracks. What we have to understand is the sensemaking of the narratives.

It is the illusion of positivists that human beings will function according to the laws of physics. Maintaining the illusion of rationality and single correct sensemaking costs much and it is dangerous. We are wasting immense amount of mental capacity on measuring the unmeasurable, quantifying the unquantifiable, and imposing these on complex societal systems. We are doing all this instead of paying attention to the sensemaking of the narratives. Not only do we waste time and capacity, but the disappointment in the end is harmful as well.

Observing the sensemaking of the narratives about the direction of movement within complex societal systems may get us closer to understanding complexity than the models imposed on us which are based on the laws of physics. Based on the sensemaking of narratives we can understand that the individual thinking, narratives, decisions and actions that operate complex societal systems make individual phenomena cognisable. We cannot talk about significant changes until we understand individual phenomena, which can only be derived from the whole. Sensemaking is a prerequisite and a consequence of whether we can connect it with our experiences.

When we look at metaphors, they are in fact fancy heuristics, in the sense that they are based on the starting image, as opposed to deductive, inductive or abductive reasoning. This is acceptable as we can only work with what we see, and that is the starting image, when we do not know anything. “Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish, a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 4).

The increase in the number of observations increases the distance among narratives. The sensemaking of phenomena which occurred in the past includes the memories of our experiences. This means that it is foolish to expect that two minds will create the same image when exposed to the same narrative. As a consequence, two people who have experienced the same phenomena there and then, will attribute two different sensemaking in the here and now regarding the same phenomena. It is an error to assert that there and then they both experienced the same phenomenon. The emphasis should not be on precision. There is no text which has a universal sensemaking, there is only individual sensemaking. Using words to express things is a game which does not aim to create a single sensemaking that is recognisable and imitable for everyone. The beauty of the text is conferred by its mysteriousness and the multiple possibilities of sensemaking according to the mood of the reader. If the same text meant the same for everyone, every time and everywhere, then an algorithm could be easily defined. Only those who really pay attention can talk. Primitive people are not capable of playing with sensemaking. For them, one word or phrase can have only one sensemaking. These people try to create a world that is tolerable for themselves, or in other words: they make the phenomena of the world unambiguous. Complex societal systems have an abundance of phenomena which cannot be typified. These organisations survive until symbols are recognised and can be given sensemaking that is not typified. The educated mind can respond to symbols by making use of symbols and can make sense of the functioning of the system through rituals and myths. This person does not try to determine which phenomena he or she will observe but observes phenomena which occur.

The educated mind describes new phenomena using metaphors. Some notions have a certain kind of sensemaking only then and there. The then-and-there sensemaking of the notion cannot be found in dictionaries. These are symbols the sensemaking of which can be different from the original meaning. Phenomena are named by saying ‘this is this’ and that’s it. “We do not know very much about the experiential bases of metaphors. Because of our ignorance in this matter, we have described the metaphors separately, only later adding speculative notes on their

possible experiential bases. We are adopting this practice out of ignorance, not out of principle. In actuality we feel that no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 20). In contrast, metaphors are poetically intensified and are abstract. After using them for a long time, they appear solid and obligatory, their frequent use makes us forget about their origin. We often say that the leader in the organisation is like a conductor. He is not playing the instruments instead of the members of the orchestra, but he ensures they are playing harmoniously. The phenomena can be described more understandably with this expression. Only primitive men think about him wearing a tailcoat and waving with a stick. By using more metaphors, we can make understanding easier. For example, the leader of the organisation conducts the winning team. Be careful with beautifying metaphors! – says Henry Mintzberg (2019) the doyen of the influential thinkers on business and management. “The top is nothing more than a metaphor – a quite silly one, actually. The leader is on top of the organigram, on the top of the salary scale, and most often on the top of the office building” (Mintzberg, 2019, p. 50). In these situations, it is a must to use metaphors but use them carefully. It is possible that there and then in a particular culture they can be used for something; they seem insignificant only when observing them from the standpoint of a different culture.

Metaphors mirror the cognitive process and the thinking process. They are expressions we use to describe a phenomenon and they may seem distant when we hear them for the first time. Metaphors are not only interpretations but worldviews. Metaphors are tools which make the expression of new phenomena and their content possible. Educated men can express what cannot be said by using metaphors. Metaphors create a conceptual frame which is in harmony with reality and the image of which is mirrored in language. By using a metaphor, we tune in with the phenomenon. Things we believed yesterday to be true we confute today. Things we hold true today we may confute tomorrow. There are no sensemaking set in stone. The same text may make different sense tomorrow. Relying on the knowledge we have today we see a certain image behind a text (metaphor) and tomorrow we may see a different one. Hypotheses can be created about order which assume a simple or a complex causal relationship. This does not exist in complex societal systems.

What is the origin of good things being located above and bad things below? It is better to rise than to sink. In sports we also have upper and lower tiers. At school we have lower and upper classes. It is clear that these are not spatial positions, even though these expressions refer to such. These metaphors ‘mistakenly support’ the right way of thinking. “We have offered evidence that metaphors and metonymies are not random but instead form coherent systems in terms of which we conceptualize our experience. But it is easy to find apparent incoherencies in everyday metaphorical expressions. We have not made a complete study of these, but those that we have looked at in detail have turned out not to be incoherent at all, though they appeared that way at first” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 42).

Those who think beyond disciplines see a simple but obscure picture, which they can only describe by using metaphors. Above the disciplines it is not the birth of a new discipline that can be expected. The twist is if the audience accepts the picture described with metaphors. No society has ever been discovered – not even in the farthest part of the world – where there was not something to be considered art. It does not matter if these objects are drawings or scripts, people found ways to illustrate the world without taking it to pieces beforehand. Analytical

thinking, which has been striving to achieve a monopoly in the past two decades, has extinguished philosophising.

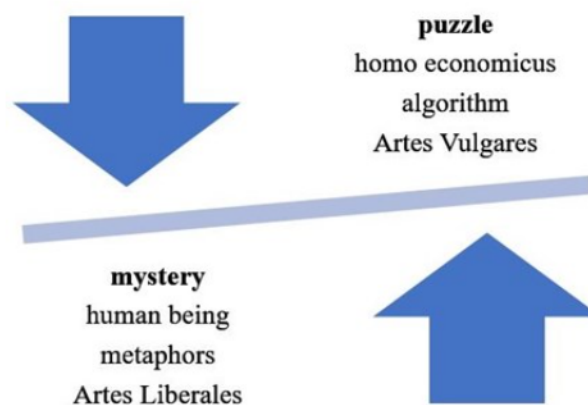
The scientific discourse approaches people as puzzles. “Since you have never heard either sentence before, you must have interpreted them by applying a set of algorithms (incorporating the rules of syntax) to the strings of words. The end product in each case is a novel thought you assembled on the fly. Equipped with the concepts of babies, slugs, and eating, and with an ability to arrange symbols for them on a mental bulletin board according to a scheme that can be registered by the demons that read it, you can think the thought for the first time in your life” (Pinker, 1998, p. 132). Our research method is based on Karl Popper's theory (Popper, 1992). It means that we can define the problem through tentative solutions and error elimination only during the sequence of our research.

4. Discussion

There are ancient Greek tales about digital technology, but there are no new tales about ancient Greek technology. In mysteries the analytical thinking will always be inferior to metaphorical. The scientist's mind is not able and willing to embrace reasoning without reason, which is the notion of human behaviour. What should scientists search for if they want to prove that free will exists? Some kind of random neurological event which is then amplified by other parts of the mind into a behavioural trigger? Thanks to Marc Prensky the words Digital Native and Digital Immigrant are now in the Oxford English Dictionary. He stated that “Digital Immigrant teachers assume that learners are the same as they have always been, and that the same methods that worked for the teachers when they were students will work for their students now. But that assumption is no longer valid” (Prensky, 2001, p. 3). What remains is the charisma of the lecturer and the artistic performance (Tick, 2018, 2019). Add to the previous statement: ancient Greek tales may be taught as before, through performance.

Human beings can trigger behavioural hurricanes, but this does not fit into the stimulus-response model. As a result, we either dismiss human behaviour as something unscientific, or we consider it completely unresolved. “Are there any concepts at all that are understood directly, without metaphor? If not, how can we understand anything at all?” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 57). Figure 1 depicts our model which we offer for discussion.

FIGURE 1. MODEL OF MYSTERY AND PUZZLE SEPARATION



Source: own editing

Some will accept this model, others will not, and some will allow discussion. Our goal should be to engage in discussion focused only on the model of mystery and puzzle separation. “Classical philosophical conceptions of the person have stirred our imaginations and taught us a great deal. But once we understand the importance of the cognitive unconscious, the embodiment of mind, and metaphorical thought, we can never go back to a priori philosophizing about mind and language or to philosophical ideas of what a person is that are inconsistent with what we are learning about the mind. Given our new understanding of the mind, the question of what a human being is arises for us anew in the most urgent way” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 17).

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