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Catchword: Explanatory Principle

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People are not disturbed by things per se, but by the view they take of them.

Epictetus (ca. 50 – 125AD.)

What exactly is an instinct? And how does gravity actually work? What is drug addiction? What are the correct definitions of AIDS or of psychosis, neurosis and borderline syndrome? Does ADHS or the free will of man, for example, exist in reality or are these “merely” constructs, inventions, figments of our imagination? How do we arrive at accurate, valid, objective descriptions and explanations? Such, it could be said, are some of the fundamental questions which occupy us from time to time and which are yet to be answered “definitively”. On the other hand we are quite comfortable with the diversity of different opinions and theories (about instinct, about gravity, about drug addiction, AIDS, psychoses, ADHS, free will, truth and correct philosophizing), with the uncertainty as to what is really right, with the lack of unequivocal and “true” definitions in everyday life, professional life and science. We act on the basis of what we *believe we know*, and insist upon the validity of that which we personally hold to be true and objectively *correct*. As an afterthought we philosophize a little on the subject of how we arrive at the truth and objective knowledge, or at least how we can come close to doing so. We take for granted that to know “the truth” is in any sense important.

Yet *sometimes* it can be interesting and stimulating to reflect on Epictetus’ observation that it are not *the things per se*, but “only” our *opinions*, our *ideas* of them, the way that we imagine them that concern us – and, moreover, not only concern us, but can also *make us happy, cheer us up, arouse us, delight us* or *leave us feeling indifferent*. Gregory Bateson reminds us of as much when, in response to his daughter’s question “What is an instinct?” he elected not to give one of the usual, and somewhat surprisingly, diverse scientific answers (go ahead and Google it!) nor one suitable for everyday usage. He points out that instinct can be treated as an “explanatory principle”:

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“...an explanatory principle – like ‘gravity’ or ‘instinct’ – really explains nothing. It’s a sort of conventional agreement between scientists to stop trying to explain things at a certain point.”

Gregory Bateson (1972). Metalogue: What is an instinct? Steps to an Ecology of Mind. New York: Chandler, 38-58

In so characterising things Bateson is highlighting the fact that, in general, use of one single term can save us the trouble of any further description and explanation. One word alone is enough to evoke in the mind of the listener quite specific concepts. When I say “instinct”, I am relying on the fact that my interlocutor will know what I mean – more detailed descriptions are superfluous.

That is one of the fundamental functions of language: to evoke without undue effort as many similar ideas as possible in the mind of the listener as in the mind of the speaker. But we run the risk of treating the terms that we employ as being real: the more often we employ them, the more real they appear to us. We forget that we are “only” speaking, that we are doing nothing more than exchanging concepts and generating images, which in fact describe or explain nothing “accurately”. We forget that it is not the things themselves that are the currency of our exchanges, but rather our terms and concepts, our ideas and opinions. We hope (and may as a rule rely on the fact), that the other party already knows what we mean.

The concept of the explanatory principle could prove useful to the extent that it reminds us that we are dealing not with reality itself, but rather with our conception of it (and with our own definitions, descriptions and explanations), when we discuss, for example, drug dependency, ADHS, intelligence, laziness, criminal propensity, freedom of will, mental impairment, capitalism. It renders, for example, the quest for the supposedly one and only correct, “true definition” (which then appears to us as “scientific” and in consequence presumably as “objective”) superfluous. Instead we are invited to exchange our different ideas and the different definitions which lie behind them. It is no longer then a question of “truth”, but rather a question of for whom and in what situation a particular definition/description/explanation is of use: perhaps it is sometimes more helpful to describe and explain a particular behaviour as “normal” or “reasonable”, as “resulting from valid reasons”, that in different circumstances is depicted as “addicted”, “psychotic”, “sick”: And since we are talking “only” of explanatory principles, of our conception of things, we can permit ourselves to approach these explanatory principles (and in consequence our ideas) in a playful spirit, to toy around with them in order to see if different ones might not be more suitable. We ought not to cling to purported realities and rely upon such. We could with the help of the concept of the “explanatory principle” adopt a more relaxed approach when we catch ourselves trying to relate and pass off *what we believe we know* as actual “knowledge”.

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All too often we are seduced by the desire to evaluate “the truth” of a theory. Perhaps it makes more sense to conceive of theories as tools, as instruments, which can be of use in particular situations for certain particular concerns and purposes – and not so in others. And equally these other tools and instruments (hammer, piano, coffee machine) must also be tested in terms of the “content of their truthfulness”.

The same can be said for the concept of the explanatory principle itself: it is *likewise not the correct answer* to the question “What is a ...?”, rather simply only *one* of many possible answers: “Explanatory principle” is likewise “only” one explanatory principle, *one* possible way of looking at things, describing them, explaining them. A point of view cannot be “true” or “false”, but at most lacking purpose and unusable or, for example, new, inspiring and stimulating, and therefore able to create new opportunities. Whether or not that is the case however, can only be a subjective decision, dependent on the context and current issue in question – not something which applies across the board and is universally valid.

Give it a try: the next time you catch yourself in the act of explaining a particular type of behaviour by means of an explanatory principle, experiment by substituting a different one for it and put it to the test: for example, by using “habit” instead of “drug addiction,” “level of cooperation” instead of “resistance”, “personal merit” instead of “luck”, “life skills” instead of “trauma” or “attention seeking behaviour” instead of “ADHS”(or come up with other alternatives). And notice how these modified “explanations” may perhaps prove to be more useful to you and others than the previous ones in specific situations and for specific purposes.

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