

Extremes

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Our world is one of extremes. On the one hand, huge numbers of people live in relative prosperity, and we have become more than ever free of racial discrimination and women's oppression, even though there is still a way to go to live in a fully emancipated world. On the other hand, the Enlightenment thinking and praxis that underlies these great achievements – the economic imperative from a logical-scientific framework – is disastrous for the planet in terms of (biodiversity) diversity, environment and climate. Last Friday I gave a lecture on (neuro) psychology in relation to design, architecture and styling, where one of the attendees commented that nowadays almost all buildings and landscapes (including parks and forests) are designed. The architect concluded that because of this, designers are the most important employees of our planet. However, the extremes, both our human merits and our problems, lie in the human competence to design.

Each design starts from a more or less specific perspective, to avert one particular (type of) problem. However, there is always an infinite number of conceivable perspectives; it is precisely because of the preoccupation with the designed perspective that new problems will arise in one of these conceivable perspectives, which have not been thought about beforehand. This, of course, also applies to new conditions that arise naturally, that are not "designed", in which something can thrive, unbalance itself or something else and thus force change often through chaos (dynamical systems). Species appear and disappear. For example, what is a species from one perspective, may be a germ from another perspective. In nature, the transition from one balance to another creates chaos, from which a new (temporary) balance will always arise. As human beings, we protect ourselves against nature through technology and (logically) we do not accept chaos (illness, cold, attackers). We intervene by designing: coats, fire, spears and, for example, also by designing a vaccine with which we tackle a virus that is wreaking havoc in our world.

Averting threats

In the short term, human design can successfully tackle or avert threats. Yet in the long run we are certainly no better than nature at restoring balance. For example, purebred dogs are 'designed' for certain characteristics and on average invariably more vulnerable to disease and ailments than mongrel dogs. Optimal from one perspective - large or strong - while the "design" never takes into account an infinite number of long-term aspects. Innovating for the sake of innovation is actually mainly good as an exercise in perspective change, but not for ultimately creating an ideal perspective on an ideal world.

As Richard Rorty (1932-2007) and Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1922-1996) have stated, a perspective that transcends all other perspectives on reality is impossible. It is therefore impossible to determine which perspective is correct or true. In the natural sciences too, paradigms can only be compared in a partial way, with which natural science must also be seen as a social and cultural phenomenon, equivalent to art and politics.

Humanity has created a world where many people can live in relative wealth at the same time (7.2% of all people who have ever lived are alive right now!) It's fantastic that mass communication has made global inequality painfully visible, resulting in increasingly one humanity. But at the same time, we must become aware that the road to this human success – infinite growth from finite resources – gradually threatens almost every kind of diversity (cultural, biological). We can't go back, but at the same time we really can't go on like this. We can buy time by stopping meat consumption worldwide. At present, 96% of all mammalian biomass is related to our direct survival: humans = 36%, beef cattle (sheep, cows and pigs) = 60%. So only 4% is the mass of all other mammals. Ecological imbalance. So optimistically, there are both great merits and great concerns in our world of extremes!