The balloon effect.
Eight problems related to philosophy tyrannized by information

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Let me pose a pretty modest thesis: the inflation of information, which itself is a part of the information society, is not neutral for the philosophical practice. The situation can be described with the metaphor of an expanding balloon. Using the balloon model, I point out eight problems.

We need to begin with a certain model of philosophical activity. The good beginning for that is Herbert Schnädelbach's (1994) remark saying that the modern philosophy, in order to survive, had to adopt itself to the academic world, its rules, and its division of labor. It means that philosophy had become a research area like other research areas. From that moment on, philosophical practice includes writing texts, reading texts, analyzing texts, getting research funds, discussions, conferences, speeches, formal rituals, formal titles, official progress reports etc.

Research activity has been well described by the science and technology studies. Thus we can view philosophical studies using Bruno Latour's notion of the circulating reference (1999). The circulating reference emerges wherever there is a series of translations that bind together an object of research and a result of research, through successive steps. Those steps, called "translations" or "transformations" enable switching from ignorance to certainty, from flood of information to short theoretical grasp, from the various to the standardized, from a research object hard to move to a paper text or a computer file easy to spread, from the local to the universal.

Thus the problem no. 1 is: how to handle the texts to study? And, more importantly, *what to do when having to many texts to study?*

Philosophy has developed a number of mechanisms for handling texts. Usually, a circulating reference in philosophy emerges in this way: you start with Classic's texts. You read them, you make marks, highlights and take notes. But still, in the end of the day, you have to many notes, marks, and highlighted paragraphs to a have a general perspective. So you take the next step, and construct main Classic's conceptual structures out of your notes. When you analyze and explain them, you will get home, having your article finished.

But that is oversimplified. Normally, we study both a Classic and her Commentators. So the chain of translations becomes longer, you need to add others' results of studying Classic to yours. The number of notes increases, and you need to compare your final conceptual structures with those done by Commentators. So far so good.

But what can you do, when the number of Commentators' works is that big, that they are no longer a reasonable object of studies? Some time ago, a colleague of mine found, in a library search, 7000 texts on Wittgenstein's philosophy. Assume modestly, that it meant 100 books (200 pages each) and 6900 articles (10 pages each). Total amount of pages equals 71000. Assume generously, that you are able to study 50 pages a day, which results in 1420 days of work. That is almost four years of permanent studying. Is any individual able to handle that?

Where is the ultimate border of individual talent and ability to cope with such large amount of information?

But it's not over, since having so many philosophers nowadays, we have more and more comments.

1. The Balloon Effect

The described processes generates the balloon effect. Paint a couple of small dots on a balloon. The more you inflate the balloon, the bigger the inter-dot space will be. A small individual standing on one of them can see them all in the beginning. Then they turn into bigger stains and some of them disappear behind the horizon. The multiplication of Classics and Commentators stimulates the balloon effect.

Being socialized in a certain philosophical school, and having given the balloon effect, you and all the others can see less and less. You also have to reject or pass more and more. The balloon effect makes it easier to find unstudied Classic, or one that is hardly known. It also stimulates institutional conflicts and inconsistencies. There are many examples of arguing against somebody (during conference, doctoral examination, habilitation *colloquium* or in a journal) for not mentioning, or analyzing a certain philosophical school, or a tradition, or a Commentator. Even if you studied for last five years a problem for fifteen hours a day, you have no excuse. It would sound highly unprofessional, saying that you had no time, no possibility or no need.

But there is another consequence. Inconsistency between the ideal and the real features of the social role of a reviewer (e. g. of a doctoral thesis or a habilitation) is another result of the balloon effect. The ideal says, a reviewer is a person who knows the problems of a work she reviews, up one side and down another. However, in fact, it is utterly possible, that she barely knows them. By the way, this conflict may stimulate the emerging of some new features of a social role. Thus, for instance, one may say, that a reviewer should only evaluate the form, methodology, and not the contents.

The balloon effect also forces us to reformulate the methodological requirements of doing studies. Since one cannot refer to all the comments to a studied Classic, and read every single book in the field, one has to abandon the present ideal of studying a subject. The question thus is – and that's the problem no. 2 – *what the conditions of this methodological capitulation should be?*

2. The body of knowledge

The balloon effect also influences our concept of the body of knowledge. Shortly speaking, it falls apart, unless we use some arbitrary criterion for deciding what counts as proper knowledge. *The balloon effect makes it futile to try to unite knowledge as a whole*, which is the problem no. 3. Therefore, the knowledge progress is impossible, for the knowledge itself expands sideways, horizontally, so to speak, instead of vertically.

Thus a Commentator is forced to be a partial expert, only inside a school of interpretation. Such a situation is conductive to the obtaining simultaneously the same results in different times and places. Thus the balloon effect carries multiplicity even further. Is it possible then to find any "external" referee to judge what in philosophy is progressive, and what is regressive?

The balloon effect employs those who prefer to compare and confront. Necessarily, instead of developing any account, an inter-account wandering, and compiling is more valuable.

3. Structural malfunction

Let me use a different perspective, coming from the organizational studies. View philosophy as an institutional structure aiming at processing information. Its main task is to process input data in such a way, as to produce their brief synthesis with a cognitive surplus information as output.

The core of the organizational theories says that there is a crucial relation between a structure of an organization and its effectiveness in processing data. Thus, the horizontal structures are much more effective in processing information than the hierarchical, vertical ones. Nonetheless the latter are typical for academic life. And the former generate less noise, and additional inner signals essential for the very survival of the structure.

But one can also refer to Stephen Fuchs's studies on scientific knowledge (1992). There are two main variables in his model (in fact there are eleven of them): task uncertainty and mutual dependence. Philosophy is viewed as a hermeneutical field, since its mutual dependence is low, and task uncertainty is high. Such a field tends to generate plenty of metainformation, which function is to regulate the work of an institutional structure, or the very processing of information. Therefore, the balloon effect is reinforced and expanded by the vertical hermeneutical structure. It means, for example, that the processing of the information by a researcher increases the number of information to process by another one. It particularly happens when there emerges a new aim or a method, or the old ones are transformed, as a result of a research process. Thus the problem no. 4: organizational structure of philosophical activity amplifies the balloon effect. Philosophy, viewed as a way of handling information overflow, generates even more information; its troubles are partially a result of its attempts to solve them.

4. Information overload

Having the balloon effect amplified by the structural malfunction, it is reasonably to assume that philosophy as a data processing structure is overflowed by information. The metaphor of a flow suggests two options: first, improving the flow, and second, slowing it down by creating blocks.

D. Katz and R. Kahn in their remarks on communication and flow of information in organizations, refer to J. G. Miller's analysis of responses to the information overload (Katz and Kahn 1979: 357-363, Miller 1960). He describes seven types of responses:

1. Omitting, passing over some information.

2. Error, incorrect processing of information.

3. Gathering, delaying the processing with a hope for further processing.

4. Filtering, not processing the certain type of information according to a pattern of preferences.

5. Bringing various information closer, decreasing the number of differentiating categories (generality, and lack of precision).

6. Multiplication of the channels, using parallel channels, decentralization.

7. Escape from the task (Katz i Kahn 1979: 357).

In addition to the classification, Katz and Kahn try to characterize the responses as dysfunctional or adaptive. The responses no. 1, 2, and 7 are dysfunctional, all the others are context dependent. The difference between dysfunctional and adaptive response is viewed by analogy to psychological distinction defensive / offensive mechanisms. Offensive mechanisms (adaptive response) solve problems, *defensive mechanisms protect an agent, but do not solve any problems* (problem no. 5).

Consider examples from academic practice referring to seven response mentioned above. 1. We have no escape from omitting things while doing any studies, there is always something not read, not researched, or unknown. 2. Think of widely spread in philosophy accusation of unjustified criticism on the ground that the criticized account is oversimplified. 3. Libraries collect and store books for a better future, which comes very rarely. 4. Some philosophers reject the whole fields as not belonging to philosophy: feminism, psychoanalysis, belles-lettres, logics etc. 5. A tendency to operate on very general models. 6. Group research with a division of tasks. 7. An inclination to lock up in an immensely narrow subfield.

But I would say that *the main problem connected with dysfunctional / adaptive mechanisms* (no. 6) *is the shrinking of the field of philosophical investigations*, utterly visible in last three hundred years. Usually, it is said that the field of philosophical studies shrinked when empirical sciences and studies became independent. Thus, what is left as a standard subject for philosophical investigations is the history of philosophy and other texts written by fellow philosophers. Doesn't it seem too modest comparing to philosophical ambitions known from history: question of *arche*, of cognition, of right ethics? Some philosophers narrowing down their ambitions, claim that at stake is only asking questions and the very quest for answers, not the answers themselves (for definitive answers are not attainable). But even the questions themselves narrow down the research area to the philosophical tradition. Whatever the reasons, it looks like a mechanism that reduces the number of the output data, which means response no. 4. But one may also interpret it as a dysfunctional response no. 1 – omitting some information.

If there is a connection between cultural information overflow and the shrinking of philosophical ambitions, then it would make sense to work out any methods that help to handle information overflow, and bring back bigger ambitions to philosophy. The least we can to is to make the overflow the subject of philosophical investigations.

5. Rising costs

As mentioned earlier, the balloon effect stimulates the pluralization of philosophy. The balloon effect on the level of schools, Classics, and paradigms, deepens chasms among traditions, research accounts, conceptual schemes, structures of meaning, and rules of proceeding. Shortly speaking, differences among various language games

increase. *This means rising the cost of any movement from a language game to another one* (problem no. 7). It will cost more time and effort. The more language games, schools, or paradigms to comprehend, the bigger the problem.

When you want to understand a new thought style (a paradigm), first, its concepts look weird, its problems bizarre or trivial, its methods surprising, its arguments not convincing. You also need to contact new people representing the thought style, and talk to them trying to understand their perspectives. Let me stress it once more: psychological and social costs of entering a new form of philosophical life get higher, and the basic philosophical competences acquired while studying are relatively lower. Time is one of those costs. Each attempt to comprehend a new paradigm or a school needs time. But we are always short of time in the tyranny of the moment culture (Eriksen 2001). *Anything that is not instant – like slow cumulative efforts to understand other way of thinking – moves to the cultural margins* (problem no. 8).

It means that the balloon effect together with the fast time domination make "external" public uninterested in philosophy. You have time for philosophy only when you are a professional philosopher, because only then you can afford the costs of studying philosophical books.

But, whatever to say, that is an optimistic alternative. The pessimistic one says: the costs of comprehending philosophical language games are so high, that it is much easier to assume philosophy as not making any sense. It may seem absolutely nonsensical to spend a lot of your time on studying philosophical books without any view for instant gratification, especially when you look from the inside of the fast time perspective. The lack of effectiveness and slowliness clash with a need for instant effectiveness. Yet, such a clash would not be seen as a conflict between two times, but as a conflict between common sense and nonsensical, splitting hairs thinking.

Various consequences are possible, and let me point out only one. If our collective life depends on our ideas about its future shape, then philosophy (and humanities in general) will loose its prestige as a cultural capital, and will loose any influence on those ideas.

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