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Amsterdam

Who is ‘we’? And what is ‘why’?

A conversation between Sonia de Jager and Gerard de Zeeuw
(on what falls through the cracks)

On the afternoon Thursday October 10th 2019, de Jager and de Zeeuw met in Amsterdam, after having been introduced to each other by Caroline Nevejan, who suspected they could engage in a fruitful conversation about mutual interests. While they touched upon some of these interests—constructivism, cybernetics, the development of AI, spatial reasoning, the nature of human collaboration, the ambiguity of symbolic gestures, among many more things—the turns their conversation took forked down into the philosophy of Hegel, the discursive strategies of the British Parliament, the genius of Sophocles and the banality of warships, among other things.

A central preoccupation for both researchers, which triangulates this dialogue, is elucidated by the title assigned to the conversation: what are we doing when we speak of ‘we’? And, if we accept the unstable, “fuzzy logic” of the concept of ‘us,’ what are we doing when we ask each other ‘why’? How many variants of these simple—yet infinitely complex—terms exist? What does it look like when we try to re(de)fine what mutual understandings actually are? Can we shed light on ‘conceptual collaboration’ when we break down what we think might be underlying, tacit assumptions?

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Sonia de Jager is a PhD researcher at the Erasmus School of Philosophy and a lecturer at the Willem de Kooning Art Academy. Her research combines insights from language-modelling, active inference through an eclectic-synthetic approach to philosophy. She organizes the annual music and philosophy conference *Regenerative Feedback*, and is a founding member of the research group *Noise Research Union*.

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S. de Jager: Do you mind if I record?

G. de Zeeuw: What I say is not going to change the course of the world.

SdJ: You never know! First things first, on the topic of who we are: let me introduce myself, I started off at the Rietveld Academy, I actually wanted to study philosophy but I thought I was far too young. To me, at that time, philosophy was for older, wiser people...

GdZ: But you *become* older and wiser.

SdJ: But I was not wise or old enough to realize that back then!

GdZ: Haha.

SdJ: At the Rietveld I focused my visual research on the products of scanning tunneling microscopes, electron microscopes, eventually also astronomical equipment. I worked with the Nanotechnology lab in Leiden, and with the astronomy faculty as well. My theoretical interest was the manufacturing of scientific visualizations, how the technology is conceptualized, how it becomes what it is, etc. This led me down the path of AI, because of the increasing role it plays in big science labs for data analytics, which is what astronomical and microphysical observations are largely based on nowadays. And, eventually, I ended up going for a PhD candidature in philosophy at Erasmus. I'm reading a lot of Hegel right now... to become old and wise! But now I will shut up and give you the floor.

GdZ: Well, this type of interview is not the type where I take the lead, it's a conversation. Which raises the issue of why we are sitting here! My background, well, I am based in England as you know. So, Caroline (Nevejan) who connected us, she did a lot of work on bringing people together in the 1980s, people with HIV, she used to organize events at Paradiso about this. It was interesting, at the time she was doing that she found people to do the computer things for her, then she got in touch with other people in that crowd, and then it turned out all these different people came from my department. That's an indication of what I'm interested in! My group at the time was subsidized by the (Dutch) ministry of education, and the main interest there was in the development of support to individuals; research methods to support individuals. There are a lot of research methods to find knowledge that can support individuals, but knowledge is not always the thing that people need. They sometimes need a friendly pat on the shoulder. And that is not the type of thing that is easy to formalize.

SdJ: To write down as a schema and pass it on! Haha. Is that how the *action* part of your research emerged?

GdZ: There are many interesting ways of dealing with the type of thing I was talking about, which is a pat on the shoulder. One of the possibilities is of course to conceive of it as an action, but that's not the way I got to the *pat*, I was interested in action before all this. When I finished my studies I thought it would be a good idea to go to the United States, so I went to Stanford to do mathematical model building and psychology. Twenty years later I met one of my professors at the time and he said: "I still remember you, you were always asking what relation *learning theory* has to do with action!" So, action is not particularly preferred as an interpretation to move on the interest in supporting people, but it is a very important part. So, you might say my interest in this I share with a lot of people.

In the 1960s—you see, I'm a little bit older, apparently!—people started to develop areas such as decision making, cybernetics, AI, computer-supported teaching, systems theory of course, so there were a lot of these new developments, and I participated in all of them because they all share my interest in the sense that they all have to do with the pat on the shoulder, rather than with knowledge. So I met a lot of the people who were developing these areas, interacted with them, and took my own direction from these interactions. At the moment, one of my interests is related to a new doctoral program in the Free University of Brussels, it's called *Thinking*.

SdJ: Is it already up and running?

GdZ: Yes, it's in the *alpha year* at the moment, I was just there yesterday. I'm in Amsterdam right now because of a seminar we have here.

SdJ: I assume you're working on this there, so I want to ask you about others who work in your direction: where do you see the *pat on the shoulder* happening today? Which fields, which people, besides what you're doing yourself? If you had to point at it, where would you point?

GdZ: It's difficult to say, I have to disappoint you that I can't point to a person and say "go to that person, you will find the wisdom of the world!" Haha! But you might be interested in the major project I'm involved in which has to do with how to study and support people doing things in daily life. And that means that you have to study scientific research methods, where they get into difficulties, how the difficulties might be resolved. One of the discussions is about 'non-observational research,' for example.

A lot of the things I'm doing are no longer mainstream, I'm a statistician, and in this field people are starting to realize that statistics is wrong, at least in the way it is applied. In civil services, everywhere. Wherever you use p-values. There's the paper by Ioannidis¹ where he discusses random control trials. It's the most referenced paper in the world! The point he makes is that there are methods that are applied in situations where the conditions do not satisfy the conditions for the method, so it's very easy to make mistakes. Ioannidis was the first to realize that 99% of all the results of RCTs are wrong! And if people start to realize that they are wrong, then there's a growing interest in not applying these kinds of methods in situations where it's not proper. So my work is becoming popular in this regard. People are catching

¹ Ioannidis, John PA. "Why most published research findings are false." *PLoS medicine* 2.8 (2005): e124.

up! They are moving fast, I'm still moving faster than they do, but the distance is getting smaller! The interest in the topic is growing.

In the area of cooperation and collaboration there's the same increase in interest. People are realizing that most of the activities of our brain are actually determined by our interactions with others. So when Caroline started her work that area didn't exist, she was one of the first, and it was very nice for her that there was a whole group of people who were interested in the same type of thing! Over the years she developed on her own and became professor in Amsterdam, she has her research agenda, but we still are in the same area.

SdJ: What do you think is an urgent problem to tackle with regard to statistics in the field of AI?

GdZ: There is, for me, one question that all philosophers should be after.

SdJ: And that is?

GdZ: What is left over if we have machines that can *think*? — But, so, what is the philosophy of AI?

SdJ: To me the question really started with vision-making practices and the question of objectivity. The topic of my Research Master thesis was a consideration of objectivity not as the infamous *view from nowhere* but as—let's say 'positive,' for lack of a better word—a *view from as many points as possible*. How come we rely and become increasingly dependent, in sciences like high-energy physics and astronomy, on images generated of objects that we cannot interact with, besides our indirect 'visual' interaction with them?

The question I moved on to, was “how is AI changing the way we think about reason?” The fact that we're reason-giving beings, and as you mentioned, how our interactions determine what these reasons are and *how* they are given, opens up a huge can of worms when we step into a new paradigm where many, many reasons and decisions are no longer being determined on the basis of our interactions, but on the bases of an automated edifice. It could be said that something like the introduction of laws and institutions did the same. But the pat on the back disappears really quickly in the context of too many computers. We're relegating a lot of cognitive processes that, historically, have been crucial to what we consider human beings are. Instead of conversing: we're trapped in domes of narcissism on our phones, etc. Humans are behind these things, controlling the decision-making machines, but to a certain extent...

Right now I'm working on a paper on the GPT-2 language model,² for example, it's a model that generates text on the basis of whatever input one gives it, a sentence, a paragraph or so. It's grammatically and more or less semantically coherent because it uses a database that not only predicts the next incoming word in a sentence accurately, but it also fishes words from the 'right' kind of databases. Let's say I input: “First mix flour and salt” and ask it to produce a longer text on the basis of that. It will not just add any

² Meanwhile GPT-2 has been updated to GPT-3: Brown, Tom B., et al. "Language models are few-shot learners." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2005.14165*, 2020.

other string of coherent text like “then tie shoelaces” but actually find the pattern of “flour and salt” in it’s database and come back with something related to a pizza recipe, since that’s a prominent feature in pizza dough recipes.

GdZ: Does the name Sokal³ say anything here?

SdJ: Haha, yeah, it was a mean trick he pulled. But yes, it certainly reminds of the structure of this.

GdZ: I just reviewed a paper that sounded like it was automatically generated. The other reviewers also agreed, so we didn’t accept it.

SdJ: It may have been generated!

GdZ: Haha, yes, but we noticed!

SdJ: So, yes, that’s what I’m interested in. The fact that reading these texts feels like reading something generated by a human is one of the first, simple instances in which we can realize how deep the rabbit hole will eventually go.

GdZ: But these types of texts already exist, except they’re not generated by a computer, they’re generated by Donald Trump.

SdJ: Have you seen this website where you have to distinguish between a real and an automatically generated tweet by Trump? It’s uncanny, you can’t tell them apart.⁴

GdZ: What was this phrase... “in my immense wisdom...”? Haha! But not everybody is able to recognize it yet. But yes, what is the singular unique property of individuals as opposed to AI? It’s the fact that the telephone does not look at you, but you just look at the telephone.

SdJ: Well, one could also argue that the telephone certainly looks at you! But indeed, again: humans determine each other by their interactions.

GdZ: But you were telling me about GPT-2. If you can recognize the text as artificial, then you’re ‘human’?

SdJ: No, no, what I’m interested in is how when one is reading these texts, one automatically generates another human on the other side, it’s impossible to read them as if there was no ‘voice’ behind them. Recipes and such are perhaps less compelling than texts generated as a short story or a philosophical observation. You try to get meaning out of something that you know is nonsense, but you cannot not try, that’s just how we read: as if *someone* has meant to say *something*.

³ De Zeeuw is referring to the infamous *Sokal Hoax*, see: Sokal, Alan D., ed. *The Sokal hoax: the sham that shook the academy*. U of Nebraska Press, 2000.

⁴ See: <https://filiph.github.io/markov/>

Funnily enough, what happened to me was that after experimenting with it for a few hours, I went back to reading people-generated text and could not shake off the disbelief from my eyes, it was quite strange. At the risk of sounding very conservative, the closer we come to bigger and bigger ‘simulations,’ I am afraid the less attention we pay to this kind of trust—which is integral to feeling ‘in place’ and coherent in social circumstances—the more it will disappear. Or maybe new forms of trust will emerge, who knows.

GdZ: The name that comes to mind, as somebody who is responding to what you are saying, is René Descartes. What you’re talking about is his evil demon.⁵

SdJ: Yes, coincidentally I mention the evil demon in this paper I’m writing. I also relate this concept of controlling or being in control to the work of Joscha Bach, who talks about human cognition as analogous to a synthesizer. A synthesizer in the sense that you can dial things up, down, and funnily enough Descartes indeed also referred to the human system as a pipe organ, with the air blowing through it and modulating its song.

GdZ: But then, Descartes had the solution: *cogito ergo sum*. He was aware that the demon couldn’t fake him in precisely one area.

SdJ: I always wonder whether I agree with that, because how could you possibly know? If you combine the Laplacian demon⁶ with the Cartesian demon, pure determinism does the same thing: how can he be free in his thinking when it’s completely determined?

GdZ: Well, I like Descartes more than Laplace, in this sense. There are a lot of people in the Netherlands right now who claim that because science is built on a mechanistic model, therefore, if we do social science: we’re just building mechanistic models of people! And therefore people aren’t anything else but mechanistic...

SdJ: Well, yes, you call upon the world and the world answers back as an echo. Or you gaze into the abyss and the abyss gazes back, as Nietzsche might say!⁷

GdZ: How would you, yourself, distinguish between an organism and a mechanism? I mean, I’m not asking you for the final answer, haha, just an impression!

SdJ: I’ve been reading predictive processing literature since 2015 or so. Karl Friston, for example, the most quoted neuroscientist out there—to continue along our statistical trend of ‘most quotations’!—has developed the concept of the *free energy principle* as a way to explain how systems minimize free energy in their interactions with the world, by actively generating their own inputs on the basis of entropic

⁵ Descartes, René. *René Descartes: Meditations on first philosophy: With selections from the objections and replies*. Cambridge University Press, 2013 (1641).

⁶ Laplace, Pierre Simon, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, translated into English from the original French 6th ed. by Truscott, F.W. and Emory, F.L., Dover Publications, New York, 1951.

⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future (Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft)*, Cambridge University Press 2001 (1886).

surprise, so: the things they cannot generate inputs about, they cannot account for. It's basically an attempt at clarifying how it is that something self-organizes.⁸

GdZ: Ahh, yes, I know about this. Not in this context, but yes.

SdJ: So perhaps, within that context, I would like to *hint at* but not schematically model the distinction: an organism is a porous but self-contained entity that persists in the face of a lot of uncertainty. A mechanism can also be said to persist—until it is stopped by a greater force, it does not self-repair, etc. But we could say that of a fly that gets swatted. It's a difficult question... what would you say?

GdZ: There's an element that's in our language, that isn't in the language of science, and hence might be a distinguishing characteristic between mechanisms and organisms. There's a language that we use in daily life, and there's a scientific language, and there's a difference between them. The difference might be that since the scientific language is mechanistic, that the organic is something closer to what occurs in our daily language, rather than in a mechanism language. What is not in the scientific language is, perhaps, the *bias*. Science, including Descartes, develops by reducing the personal reference. Bias is something that you reduce, but it's precisely that which is very characteristic of organisms. It is the fact that you look at it from a personal point of view.

SdJ: As someone who has been interested in the philosophy of science, I've always supported the idea that, as you say, bias is unavoidable. There's always the context of perspective. Direction for the type of research, the desire for doing the research. In the end it's all a matter of intersubjective perspectives, but *perspectives* nevertheless.

GdZ: The question for me also has to do with the idea that, if there is bias, then isn't that the characteristic that differentiates between organism and the mechanism? Because there is no bias in the mechanism.

SdJ: I guess we need a definition of bias then. Because we could say that the parameters that determine how, let's say, adversarial networks are trained, is that they bias each other. Or would you say that the deterministic way in which they proceed makes them lack a specific *organic* bias? I'm afraid I lack the words for the distinction again.

GdZ: But if you think about bias in the usual sense, you know, the one where it was noted that the measurements of the professor and his assistant differed. If I remember well, the assistant was fired, but the point was made: professors are biased. Even well-trained researchers might not conclude that something is in a particular position. We are willing to accept that the star is in a particular position and that anything deviating from that is bias. Where does the idea come from that it is possible to actually determine that there is a bias? The question is, then, where is the bias of the professor coming from?

⁸ Friston, Karl. "The free-energy principle: a unified brain theory?." *Nature reviews neuroscience* 11.2 (2010): 127-138.

SdJ: From being in the world!

GdZ: I would very much agree with that answer. The professor could just say “I like Descartes.” But the point of you saying that bias is unavoidable, is because every observer is in a particular position. So once you’re in that position you cannot look at things from another position.

SdJ: And you block everyone else from achieving that point of view, perhaps. Although language does create a certain multiperspectival bridge of sorts, we could say.

GdZ: So, you know, the most usual definition of objectivity is, you know, objective is that where everybody agrees on the observation. But that is a very fuzzy definition.

SdJ: Yeah, it’s almost a certain kind of circular logic.

GdZ: Exactly.

SdJ: At the most simple level this is already achieved by VR, a group of people can all experience the same situation from the same audiovisual perspective. Other senses are still lacking, and of course we’re not talking about the implicit bias that each person carries with them because of their time spent on this planet, but it is possible to imagine a future where the same experience can be had by many different entities. No?

GdZ: Yes, this is actually being demonstrated in the British Parliament right now! Well, yes, suppose we’re in some system where everyone is connected, one possibility of this vision you mention is that everyone might agree about everything. But the interesting thing is that, in the British Parliament, people are very surprised and they call it “incompetent,” but I think that’s the wrong word. The British Parliament is not ‘incompetent,’ the people in it are not ‘incompetent,’ they are supposedly trained, they must be competent. But they face something that the British Empire never faced. When discussing Brexit somebody said: “well, if the EU is going to give us a delay, a no-deal Brexit, then we should be very nasty to them!” I said “well, that’s a very interesting proposal, you still seem to think that every problem can be solved by sending a warship!” They’ve always sent a warship, everywhere, and that’s always apparently solved the problem...

SdJ: I’ve recently been talking with friends about British and other European ships, as the parent-problem of most problems...

GdZ: The problem is, if you send a warship, you know what the bias is. This is the first time that the Parliament is facing a situation where they don’t know what the bias is. If you know what the bias is, you know what the position of the bias is. How do you know? Well, we all agree, don’t we? Yes, but it moves! Yes, I know it moves, it moves at 90.000km per second, but it’s still there! But the whole point is, if you send a warship you assume that there is one solution to every problem. And of course, you assume that it is *your* solution, but even then: the British were always willing to accept that somebody else’s solution would be as good, but it would still be *one* solution. Nowadays in the Parliament they are not

incompetent, but they don't realize what it is they are talking about. That it is *bias* in the sense that there is no way to derive *non-bias* from it. And that's where AI is still very vulnerable, I think. So for example, when people say "yeah, we have a no-deal!" You know, in the end it turns out that, after they did some polls, many people thought that "no-deal" meant staying in the EU... Haha! So, there you have it.

SdJ: Yes, "post-truth" is the catch-phrase....

GdZ: People didn't realize that there is no-deal in the no-deal. So how can some people be opposed? They are opposed to what they consider a "deal"—it's at the level of words, concepts, that they are already confused.

SdJ: But isn't this a problem that has been the same for the entire history of the human condition? Is it a problem of education, of language itself?

GdZ: It's a problem of evolution. For a long time people assumed that there is something that you can have a bias against. I mean, a monarchy, *mono-arkhon*, is a monolithic institution. In the Netherlands it's not. But it's only very recently that people have begun thinking of bias as something special. Starting the nineteenth century scientism started to develop, an ideology claiming that "every problem can be resolved by science."⁹ And here in the Netherlands you have Van de Maas, professor Van de Maas just gave his inaugural lecture, and he claimed that in the future, the development of complexity science will solve all human problems. *All* human problems.

SdJ: Yeah, that's easy to say.

GdZ: Yes, especially when you are becoming a professor! Haha.

SdJ: Leibniz already said this as well, you know, in the future we will calculate instead of discuss.¹⁰ One has to wonder what the difference is, since it appears so obvious.

GdZ: Yes, so people have been thinking that there is one unique reality, and that we should all modify our views so it fits that reality. But gradually, people start to realize that that is not the case. But we have all been trained to think in this way. I mean, I already mentioned monarchies, but also: most types of education today still say "well, you know, you have to learn what we already know, and *then* you can deviate." Hokusai said, when he was 89, after a long life of trying to learn what others could do, "If only Heaven will give me just another ten years... Just another five more years, then I could become a real painter."¹¹

⁹ Atkins, P. *On being* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

¹⁰ *De arte characteris.tica ad perficiendas scientias ratione nitentes* in C. I. Gerhardt (ed.), *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (7 vols. 1875–1890) VII 125, R Ariew - The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz, 1995.

¹¹ Hokusai, K. (1760–1849). Cited 2005 July in Potter, Polyxeni. "Of tidal waves and human frailty." *Emerging infectious diseases* 11.10 (2005): pp. 1653.

SdJ: I was at a conference in Estonia recently, a lush diplomatic event promoting the move towards digitization at the governmental level, the new monarchy you might say. The first speaker at the conference was Stephen Hsu, he's a physicist at Michigan State University. One of the things, among many, that he claimed during the opening keynote, was that "since we already possess knowledge of the genetic markers of IQ, why are we not selectively breeding for smarter babies?" People didn't respond with a communal gasp, which surprised me. During the Q&A, calm and collected but also overwhelmed by outrage, I asked him the question concerning inequality; that given we've already got so much disparity, wouldn't this procedure create an even larger gap between groups of people? He said: "well, first you get your facts, and then you can do your ethics." So, exactly the opposite of what you mentioned: I think there is not even the willingness to learn there, perhaps.

GdZ: I think perhaps there is a certain willingness to learn. But it's extremely difficult if you've spent your entire life in a certain context. One of my PhDs, he did his PhD with a focus of interaction, especially in the police force. I thought he was going in this direction, but he ended up becoming assistant professor, then he married and he got a child. And originally he claimed that I was his father, and now I'm not even related anymore, because he has noticed that it is much easier to go up in the ranks in academia when you *don't* think about research methods, than when you do. So even the younger people realize that the world is based on non-bias. So, he is applying statistics, and I told him "you know, you can't do statistics unless you think."

SdJ: Well said! Haha.

GdZ: So, that to me seems to be one of the answers to the philosophy of AI. So yes, there will be situations where technology dominates human thinking. But in the past there have been so many situations where people have tried to dominate human thinking, so it is not probable that the new type of domination is going to win, where the old types have failed. And you have to be aware, cutting people with a sword in two parts is a way... Haha!

SdJ: So, don't you think that language can be considered the "biggest domination of all"? The act of *pointing*?

GdZ: No, I don't think that's the case. I once met a professor of logic who said "you can translate everything into logical statements, and then you can decide if it's fake or not." And I said "there's no way that you can do that, logic is a reduced form of language." And so is cybernetics, systems thinking, decision-making, each of these disciplines developed because something *else* wasn't able to deal with humans.

SdJ: That's a wonderful phrase.

GdZ: I was at the beginning of the *European Association of Decision Making*, it developed because people realized that people *do not* make rational decisions. And, actually, because of that they are better decision-makers than if they would be rational!

SdJ: This reminds me of Simon's bounded rationality.

GdZ: Yes, but in a way, he didn't get around the problem, he said "people make decisions bounded by circumstances and so are irrational." What I'm saying is that *because* they make bounded decisions, they are better decision-makers!

SdJ: I would absolutely agree with this, it's part of what I'm writing about right now. It's what we mentioned earlier with regard to bias, to being situated: there is no better position than the position you are in, to make a decision! My grandmother always said "there's no better life than a good life."

GdZ: Isn't language the most remarkable achievement? Where you can not only say "this is wrong" but also "this is wrong" because you are talking *inside* your language, and not outside.

SdJ: Well, to me, this goes back to the membrane, the Markov blanket division between one thing and another. I've always interpreted language as functioning like one large mega-organism, which evolves, adapts, etc. I switch back and forth the whole time between the optimistic "it's the most incredible achievement" to "it's the biggest trap."

GdZ: Yes, but you have to be willing to be trapped, if you're going to be trapped. During smalltalk someone told me at a party "I'm a Christian"—good lord!—then she started telling me how good it is to be a Christian. I immediately started using all my strategies to escape! But there are those people who think in a certain way, there are people who think that the Earth is flat!

SdJ: Well, machines are one answer, suggestion algorithms on YouTube...

GdZ: Yes, so, you know, one of the possibilities, you might say is: suppose I'm aware of the dangers of AI, what do I do?

SdJ: Yeah, exactly. I'm trying my best to write a PhD on this, haha.

GdZ: So you're trying to write down your interpretations of the unconscious side effects of AI?

SdJ: Something like that. And I like thinking together with other people, because thinking—or *trapping*—happens together, so besides my lonely research I organize different activities, like the Regenerative Feedback conferences, where it's more about what happens in that space than whatever preparation, context or proceedings.

GdZ: That is a wonderful experience. It reminds me of something Richard Feynman told in one of his books (I do not remember the page (footnote)). Its gist was that he never listened to what people in conferences were saying. But he would sit and listen and try to solve his own problems (usually about

ten), and sometimes he would hear a word, and immediately realize that it gave him precisely what he had been missing!”¹²

SdJ: Yes, that is one of the facilitating functions of conferences.

GdZ: Yes! But it’s also interesting he says he’s not listening...

SdJ: The conference series I organize, funnily enough, deals precisely with the concept of *listening*.¹³ After the first one in NYC I ended up with the conclusion that intense, ‘true’ listening is close to impossible. Obviously, that we already knew, but sometimes you know something and sometimes you know *and* feel something. After the second conference there were so many bridges crossed and burned and turned and rebuilt that I actually realized those operations are what listening is about. We oscillate between hearing and listening all the time, the intuition we have to want to connect—or disconnect—with another mind is a fascinating thing. And I think that is something that is at stake. I mean, killing at a distance, sending warships, lacking precisely that willingness to engage with the other.

GdZ: One of the dangers I also think, in the present world, is your use of the word “we.”

SdJ: Haha, I agree, I agree. I completely agree. I struggle with finding another word for what I mean to say. I obviously don’t assume a mass of people behind me, but I speak for some feeling of shared sensing. Isn’t that what it’s all about?

GdZ: Haha, yes, that’s why I mentioned the British Parliament. They realize for the first time that there are six hundred and thirty five different points of view. And not a single one. And I think that is where the world is going, we realize that every single individual has a different point of view. And it is possible to deal with that, you deal with that in the sense that each person can pursue things and still be supported by the others. There’s no reason to send a warship and impose “this is what you should be thinking.”

SdJ: But, wouldn’t you say, if someone else was listening to you say that they could co-opt your statement in favor of some kind of meritocratic liberalism?

GdZ: Well, could be, but I would respond with this: first of all the free market is an abstraction which is the opposite, it’s based on the warship. You assume that every individual is represented by a point with four or five different properties, whereas what we are dealing with is, Amartya Sen¹⁴ has emphasized that, that we all have different properties, in fact an infinite number of different properties, the more we interact. So, the first element, the meritocratic part, is linked to the idea of personal excellence, which is also a standard. What I’m talking about is: I’m not telling you that you should become a Christian. You are not telling me that I should either! But we can sit here and say “Good lord!” We each have a body in the here and now, but we can think about the next fifty years to come, and in those fifty years we can do

¹² Feynman, R.P. (1985). *Surely you are joking Mr. Feynman*. London: Vintage Books.

¹³ *Regenerative Feedback*, NYC, Rotterdam, CDMX, Buenos Aires, etc.

¹⁴ Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences laureate and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University.

two things: you can make others your slaves, or you can enjoy an exchange. So that's the difference, there's no inequality there: it is saying that even though the person I am talking to is schizophrenic, or something else, I still take the time to see what they want. Because being human makes it possible to contribute to other people. I could also say "this person is an idiot and I'm highly trained" but the other person is still somebody who is *beyond* something.

So, speaking of warships, the new world of science started to develop in the second world war, I was around, jumping between fields and never staying very long. What I understood, I think, is: how do we include in our science, that which generates bias?

SdJ: Do you have a preferred answer to that question?

GdZ: Well, one of the answers is of course in a paper by Kenneth Arrow, who got the Nobel Prize for his answer: *Arrow's impossibility theorem*.¹⁵ It states that it is formally impossible to combine all the different preferences, in let's say, the British Parliament to arrive at an overall shared preference. But another type of answer is Elinor Ostrom, perhaps, which is the opposite of Arrow's. She never arrived at an official answer, and she used traditional methods for this... So, you see, there's different kinds of merits that receive Nobel Prizes...

SdJ: I think a viable alternative could also be Fred Moten and Stephano Harney's approach in their *undercommons*.¹⁶ Proposing another interpretation, or anti-interpretation. They talk about the warship from the perspective of the shipped, they frame logistical efficiency around this concept. It's heartbreaking because it's a fresh confrontation with these nasty historical ships yet again. They also criticize 'common sense' for being one of those gigantic traps that actually stalls progress in thinking towards collective equanimity. What's your take on the concept of "common sense," especially in the field of AI? It gets thrown around so much in Silicon Valley-type contexts, never explained, never questioned.

GdZ: Well, the real conflict, one of the things again, once I was dean at the faculty in Amsterdam, and I was called because one of the students had gone off the rails and got an axe and started threatening people to kill them. So they called me, and I used "common sense," so: make sure that you escape this person's framework. I used common sense by turning it into non-common sense. You know the Cretan liar?

SdJ: Yes, the circular paradox.

GdZ: Yes, all Cretans are liars. In itself that's not a problem. But it is said from a certain point of view, that makes it into a problem. The two levels are each other's denial. It's called a paradox because what is *true* is switching all the time. It's not that the one is the denial of the other, it's that the denial is *on the level* of the other. So that's what I did with the student, and I was on crutches... Anyway, because of my

¹⁵ Arrow, Kenneth J. "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare." *Journal of Political Economy*. 58 (4): 328–346, 1950.

¹⁶ Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*, Minor Compositions, 2013.

condition of always having had polio, I have always been vulnerable. I used the Cretan liar. Be aware that in most daily situations what is true in one level, is not true at another level, and if you make things true at both levels, you have an unstable situation, which is what this person had.

SdJ: So, in that context of tautological traps, what do you think of the word “why?”

GdZ: That’s a very good short word, no? Haha! Well, there’s, you know, as you may have understood by now I have a great deal of respect for being human. Antigone, the play by Sophocles, starts out with this very special problem. Creon is the successor of Oedipus, and the two sons of Oedipus fight over who is to succeed Oedipus, and so Creon decides to have one of them killed by the animals outside the wall. And Antigone goes against that, and wants to give her brother a proper death rite. So Creon condemns her to death. But then he realizes that might not be the best solution to his problem, because not obeying him is not not-obeying him at the level of the state, but at the level of the death-rite, which is a higher level. But unfortunately by then, Antigone has already committed suicide herself. Which leads to the suicide of Antigone’s husband to-be, Haemon, which leads to the suicide of Creon’s wife Euridyce, who ends up lonely and alone.

The question is, why does Sophocles think this is worth a play, a drama? And in my view it is because of the change in Antigone’s behavior, first of all she resists, then over time she resists but in the play it is described how she goes to her cave, happily, composed. So what happened in between resisting and being happy? And I think that is one of the answers to your question about “why.” It is not an answer, but it is an indication of what I think an answer is. It is becoming aware of the fact that the framework you use in one situation has now disappeared, and you’re in a new frame. And in the new frame you can answer different questions to “why?” than you did in the other frame.

SdJ: This is very, very Hegelian. Who also talked about Antigone.

GdZ: I have discussed Hegel in my philosophy forum. He’s one of those philosophers who I think has an understanding of certain difficulties but never is able to explain exactly what he’s talking about. The only thing I can do is explain it in the way of Sophocles, so maybe I’m Hegelian in the sense of Sophocles but not Hegelian in the sense of Hegel! Sophocles is one of many, and it’s a drama, but he finds it interesting because the Athenians found it interesting, not to forget. If you read it as a mechanistic philosopher, then you think the chain of suicides is the solution to Creon’s problem of legacy. But it’s much more than that, it’s Antigone who is the heroine, and she’s described in a way that she seems a very beautiful woman, but this is never mentioned.

SdJ: It’s interesting to think about how we can consider the GPT-2 text, with regard to that: the reading of meaning into it, reading a quality that is not actually in it, like you mention with Antigone. There are so many dimensions of this kind that escape us, or precisely: do not escape us but escape our attempts at trapping them.

GdZ: Like your question, why is *why* a question?

SdJ: Well, I said: “what do you think of “why”?” Haha! Almost a non-question. Do you think that’s an interesting question?

GdZ: I think I gave an interesting answer!