

Does “unity of science” mean “inexorable oblivion”. Review of F. J. VANDAMME : *Economie en wetenschapsfilosofie*, Antwerpen, De Sikkel, 1975, 221 pp.

In his book on economy and philosophy of science F. J. Van Damme presents his thoughts on the relationship between some parts of economics and of philosophy. His purpose is a reciprocal fertilization of both disciplines. He remarks that at the present the attempts of unification are lacking. This situation is amazing, considering that in the 18th and 19th centuries philosophers were active both as economists and philosophers. This book tries to redirect the attention : a unified treatment of economics and philosophy can be rendered fruitful to both economics and philosophy. As a philosopher of language, he draws the attention to the approach of philosophy of language and linguistics, in which economics recently figures a great deal.

The first chapter deals with philosophy in general, philosophy of science in particular. The second consists of an overview of the different approaches to economic science, hence deals with the much debated question of the definition of economics. The third treats the discussion of rational behaviour, particularly the universality of the principle of rationality in economics. The fourth chapter renders an introduction to some major subjects in philosophy of science : the evaluation and testing of theories; the function of theories in scientific investigation. The fifth chapter deals with the evaluation of economic theory and the theory formation in economics. The sixth gives an account of the unification point of view : different possibilities of unification, as e.g. reduction and synthesis, are discussed. The principal part of the book contains the authors suggestions on the synthesis of economics and other subjects of scientific investigation : economics and communication; economics and language; economics, ideology and language, economics and ecology. The last chapter deals with the relationship between economics and logic : the author discusses the subject of the logical form of economic theories and the subject of the logic of preference.

Apparently, the volume contains a great variety of specialized subjects, which the author tries to link, inspired by the idea of a “unified science”. This purpose must be acknowledged as positive in itself. Apart from this, the book provides an introduction to some major subjects in the philosophy of science. Taking into account that it attends to students and probably originated out of university lectures, it can easily be understood that the main purpose was to furnish a rather general and introductory acquaintance with a great collection of themes and problems.

This, however, does not prevent us from being somewhat disappointed with both the final design and the greater part of the book. In the first place it lacks, in some of its substantial parts, a clear, simple but nonetheless profound discussion of the subjects and problems treated. Secondly we vainly sought for an explicit relationship between the chapters. The book consists of separate treatments of diverse aspects of economics, philosophy of science and the philosophy of language.

We do not want to ignore the many interesting and relevant discussions. For example, there is a need for a treatment of the debates in epistemology and methodology. Van Damme provides us with such a treatment. Nevertheless a more explicit and systematic treatment of verification, confirmation, falsification, Popper's position on falsification in contradistinction with others, and so on, could be asked for. One could wonder why the author spread out over three chapters, the discussion of related subjects: Chap. 4: value of knowledge in science – the evaluation of science (pp. 44-47); Chap. 5: Dimensions for the evaluation of scientific activities (sections 5.3.a, b, c, d.; pp. 55-65); Chap. 8: section 8.2. "Something about the logical form of economic theories" (pp. 178-187)?

The discussion of the problem of unity of science from the point of view of microreduction and synthesis seems adequate, although more information concerning the place of microreduction and synthesis in the social sciences is lacking. In our opinion, the author inspired by Putnam-Oppenheim's positions – skips rather easily with the differences between the methodological and the ontological dimensions of microreduction (see micro- and macroreduction, p. 80 and p. 81). We found some paragraphs in this part of the book that seem to be tautologies in our view. For example, on page 83, the author says:

Wat de invloed betreft van mikro-reduktie op de wetenschappelijke ruimte is het duidelijk, dat ze zal zorgen voor een sterke toename van de systematisatie. Immers, alle delen van de wetenschappelijke ruimte worden door de mikro-reduktie met elkaar in relatie gebracht...

Is there another point in stating this than in saying simply: if micro-reduction brings together all levels of scientific activity and investigation, then micro-reduction brings together all levels of scientific activity and investigation? There are further minor problems with the book. We cannot discuss them at full length. The author renders an inadequate overview of the definition of economy. In our esteem, he pays too much attention at Maurice Godelier's confusing books on economic anthropology and economic rationality. In chapter 2 we don't find a clear distinction between "economy" and "economics", which could lead to much confusion (see beneath). The discussion on the principle of rationality, which shows to have not much in common with Chap. 2., does not seem to be up to date. The major debates in economics, economic sociology and economic anthropology are not mentioned. Finally, the rendering of the cardinal/ordinal utility discussion in economics is rather incomplete.

However, our main arguments against the book pertain to the subject of the unity of economics with philosophy of science and philosophy of language. Indeed, when the author tries to progress towards a synthesis between those subjects, this is done at the cost of relevance, or, more precisely, at the cost of empirical significance. Too many generalizations, which in our view are rather trivial, are harmful to the endeavours to succeed in a unitary scientific treatment. We might illustrate this with some examples from the seventh chapter: "Economie en andere wetenschappen vanuit een synthese-perspektief" (–Economics and other sciences from the point of view of synthesis–) One of the important treatments concerns the communication phenomenon in relation with exchange, or with economic data at large<sup>1</sup>.

Van Damme uses Charles Morris' definition of communication (we are quoting it from the author's rendering of the definition, and we are obliged to consider the Dutch text):

Elk proces waarbij een eigenschap F (of een bundel eigenschappen; zo zouden we

een objekt kunnen karakteriseren) die toekomt aan een objekt A meegedeeld wordt aan of overgebracht wordt op een objekt B, noemen we kommunikatie de in ruimere zin. (Van Damme, o.c., p. 105)

This definition seems to us to be trivial and even tautological. What is the meaning of "meegedeeld wordt"? In English translation it sounds "which has been communicated", or "which has been passed over to...". The former translation indicates that Van Damme's rendering of Morris' definition does not help us in identifying "communication". The examples Van Damme gives in order to elaborate the definition seem awkward and not at all convincing (for example: the heating of a can of water on the fire). This shows up when he provides specifications on the differences between "communication", "influence", "interaction". He says (and again for objectivity's sake we are quoting in Dutch):

Wanneer een sneeuwlawine een dorp vernielt of enkele bergbeklimmers doodt, dan kunnen we wel van beïnvloeding of inwerking spreken van de lawine of het landschap, maar van communicatie tussen de lawine en het dorp kan er moeilijk sprake zijn. Wordt er een eigenschap van de lawine meegedeeld aan het dorp? Voorzover het het vernielen van het dorp of het doden van de bergbeklimmers betreft hebben we geen dergelijke eigenschap. Vandaar dat we, tenminste wat deze aspecten betreft, niet kunnen spreken van communicatie tussen de lawine en het dorp of tussen de lawine en de bergbeklimmers. (ibidem).

However, not satisfied with this argumentation, the author adds, that in the example quoted above, some "secondary communication processes" can be found.

Neem het voorbeeld van destructie van een dorp door een sneeuwlawine. De destructie is hier essentieel voor de inwerking van de lawine op het dorp. Dit is een niet communicatieinwerking. Maar we hebben hier secundair wel communicatieinwerking, nl. temperatuur van de sneeuwlawine zal overgenomen worden door de materialen en organismen die met de lawine in aanraking komen, enz. (o.c., p. 106).

Because of the lack of further precision on the so-called "properties", which have been "communicated", one cannot speak of much progress on the subject. On what terms a clear-cut distinction can be made between what is and what is not a communication phenomenon? This question is evidently of the greatest importance for chapter seven. All further comments on the relationships, the similarities, even the identity between communication and exchange, are rooted in it.

We mentioned, for quite another reason, those definition difficulties Van Damme is encountering in the main chapter of his book. The above quotations show the core of the author's treatment of economics and linguistics. His treatment is built upon rather sketchy generalizations. His plea for a synthesis does not seem to grow out of a profound acquaintance with the science of economics, and with the epistemological and ideological difficulties, highly characteristic for that science. At many places we asked ourselves: on which concrete domain, on what precise subject, the author is giving his comments? What is the empirical relevance of the things he is talking about? This critique we consider to be fundamental. All along chapter seven Van Damme pleads for synthesis, without giving the very subject of synthesis, while refuting into an inadequate account of economy, and communication as well. This shows up, as we said earlier, with the word "economy". We guess that the author identifies "economy" with "economische wetenschap" (economics), and not with "economisch systeem, leven, proces" (economy, economic life, process, and so on). The author neglects to specify it clearly, and consequently his discussion is 'ill-tracked'. An example runs as follows:

Bij de behandeling van de relatie tussen communicatie en economie hebben we lang getwijfeld, wat we als basisindeling zouden hanteren: 1) a) syntaxis en economie, b) semantiek en economie, en c) pragmatiek en economie of daarentegen de indeling 2) a) communicatie en economie, b) taal en economie, c) informatie en

ekonomie. Wij hebben uiteindelijk geopteerd voor de laatste indeling. Hierbij zullen we waar relevant de differentiatie syntax, semantiek en pragmatiek als onderverdelingen gebruiken.

Het voordeel van de laatste indeling ligt naar onze mening in het feit, dat de verschillende wijzen waarop de ekonomie zich tot kommunikatie verhoudt beter tot haar recht komen en dat we ook een betere systematisatie verkrijgen. (o.c., pp. 109-110).

But what is the meaning of "economie"? Does the author speak of "economic life", "an economic system", "an economic process", or, on the contrary, is he speaking of "economics"? As far as the second meaning is concerned: can one significantly relate a science treating specific social phenomena (cfr. chapter two) with a social phenomenon itself, communication? What is the meaning of the different modi of relationship between "economy" and "communication"? If this is not the purpose of the author (subchapters 7.2.3., 5.2.3.1., 7.2.3.2. seem to disprove so, but what to think of the expression "communication as social anthropology and economy"?), other questions remain. For, if the author is talking of economic phenomena. economic life, economic system, economic processes, or how we may call it, one should expect elucidation on what basis he is comparing, or relating communication properly with these economic phenomena? What economic phenomena? All economic phenomena? The "quintessens" of economic phenomena? What "quintessens"?

The real problem is: can one expect fruitful theoretical considerations concerning the relations between communication phenomena and economic phenomena without empirical specifications of the analyzed phenomena. We think that the answer to this question is negative. But the author seems to believe the contrary. Such leads him to the opinion that the problem of the relationship between "economy" and "communication" depends upon some (not clearly stated) relationship between "a story about economy" and "a story about communication"<sup>2</sup>. This opinion shows an explicit dependance upon the subject of microreduction (and/or synthesis and of the evaluation of scientific theories) and the methodological and ontological levels of reduction (as Nagel, in his *"The Structure of Science"* showed). Not every "story" can be considered as a scientific theory. Some sketchy generalizations on the subject of communication and economic life can neither be considered as scientific (empirically grounded) generalizations, nor as relevant ones.

There is a splendid story in Latin-American literature, written by Jorge Luis Borges, which is called "The inexorable memory of Funes". The extraordinary man of whom Borges tells us, is someone who aims at constructing an infinite vocabulary and a mental register for all images of memory. Borges pictures him as follows:

In the seventeenth century Locke was a protagonist (not for a long time) of an impossible language in which each separate thing, each stone, each bird, and each branch should be given a proper name; once Funes invented such a language, but he abandoned it, because it seemed to general to him, much too less precise. Indeed Funes remembered not only each leaf of each tree, on each mountain, but also each time he had seen them either in reality or in his imagination.

He could have learned English, French, Portugese, Latin without much effort. However, I suppose he was not very able to think. Thinking means to forget differences, means to generalize, to abstract from things. In Funes' overcrowded world were merely details, which changed from one moment to the other.

(our own translation of a Dutch version. J.L. Borges, "De Zahir", Bezige Bij, pp. 155-156).

Not much fantasy is needed to turn this story, from which I quoted the final part, into its contrary. One can easily imagine a man who is equipped with an inexorable oblivion, a remarkable capacity to forget about things. To forget about the phenomena of reality, such

as the leaves, the trees, the mountains, so that his thinking obtains a generality out of proportion. Thinking means, as Borges stated correctly, to forget about differences; it means to generalize, to abstract from things. Nonetheless these differences, these concrete data, these "things" exist, for without them, how could forgetting, generalizing and abstracting could be conceived of ?

We do neither wish to enter into the subject of "meaning" (see *Philosophica*, nrs. 15-16, 1976) nor into the often discussed philosophical problem of the relationship between the phenomenal world and its conceptual and theoretical representation. We should like to conclude however, that modern philosophy of science is haunted by a spectre of forgetting, generalizing, abstracting. In our point of view talking about "whichever" economy, "whichever" economic process, "whichever" economic behaviour, for example, cannot be considered as fruitful thinking just as Funes's thinking was not fruitful.

Although we share the author's plea for a unified science, we are convinced that philosophy of science is rendered a bad service in cultivating oblivion. A philosophy of science ought not to contain a plea for a theoretical activity in which no leaves, no trees, no mountains, ever appear. In doing so, one cannot but repeat the awful characteristics of speculative thinking in general, one cannot but repeat thinking about "nothingness". We remember Wittgenstein's words: "Wovon man nicht sprechen kan, darüber muss man schweigen".

We might conclude our review in saying, that the book merely draws some very rude outlines for the debate on synthesis in the social sciences, particularly in economic science and related subjects. We doubt whether the author will succeed in what he considers as a revival of synthesis. How it may be, the task the author had in mind, must have been too immense for one man to fulfill – it certainly is.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>We wish to refer to our paper "*Remarks on the comparison between 'Exchange' and 'Communication'*", in : *Philosophica*, 1976, Vol. 17, 175-187. In this paper we insist on the similarities between the different renderings of exchange in economic science. We attempted to answer the question, whether the relationship between 'communication' and 'exchange' is a relevant one, seen from the point of view of unified science. We felt drawn to a sceptical position, in view of the lack of precision in the attempts of unification, and of the all too extreme metaphorical and analogical approaches in economics and linguistics. We tried to show that both 'exchange' and 'communication' must be seen as modi of interpersonal relations, and that a unitary approach of these phenomena must take this as the starting point.

<sup>2</sup>The notion "story" is ours. We introduce it because we are convinced people talk about reality by means of "stories"; not always they do so, and sometimes, not satisfied with the rigour of their "stories", they seek for a "theoretical rendering" of reality. For example, what Honoré de Balzac was writing could serve social science quite well, as the work of Karl Marx demonstrates.