

Changing Evaluation by Changing Perspective:

Role of Worldview

An Interview with Mieke Boon

By

Ruth Deddens en Gerdien Rots¹

Note from Sophie Editor: "Your perspective determines what you see or observe. Though brought up in an atheist environment, philosopher Mieke Boon developed an affinity with religion. This transition taught her to see and observe differently and to evaluate differently."

A philosophy of observation² examines the concepts that envelop us and determine *how* we see, think and experience things, often without being conscious of all that ourselves. This is what fascinates me. As philosopher I try to verbalize such concepts and to discover whether these are beneficial for us or limiting.

An example is our reflection over knowledge and over the manner whereby we gain knowledge and use it. Is knowledge objective or subjective? Is our knowledge determined by the world *an sich*, as it is, or by our feelings, emotions and the interests associated with these? The image hiding behind these questions restricts the way we see ourselves and other people—in other words, the way we think about being human. That image comprises the idea that thinking and feeling are opposites. Knowledge comes from the outside and is a kind of imprint in our head. Emotions, on the other hand, come from within and constitute a kind of agitation of the heart. Actually, both come on the scene *passively*. This image deprives us of the insight on human capabilities that must be developed by people themselves. For our insights and our understanding of the world around us do not emerge

¹"Anders waarden door anders te kijken," segments of an interview. Transl. Jan H. Boer. *Sophie*, 3/2013, pp. 10-15.

²"Filosofie van het kijken."

passively but thanks to intellectual, moral, esthetic and even religious capabilities. And those capabilities in turn come to maturity by the gathering of knowledge and concepts—and their processing. You achieve this processing by thinking about it and by researching what effect it has on you, as, for example, by observing how it affects your view on the world. By this process you will sometimes see new aspects for which you previously had no eye.³

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The question I had was: How is it possible that people see the world in such different ways and form such greatly diverse moral judgements? How can it be that people describe one and the same situation so differently and hold such divers interpretations of it?

People often hold the naïve image of themselves that they look at reality objectively.

A “solution” can begin with the realization that everyone observes from a specific set of ideas or worldview.

You need to take it one step further. You can *only* look at reality from a specific framework of ideas or worldview. People often think that they must get rid of their assumptions. Sometimes, of course, that is correct. But even if you push your assumptions aside, then you still cannot observe things without some framework. If you look without a framework, you would see nothing meaningful. For example, if you observe people, your moral framework plays a role. In that moral perspective there is a hidden anthropology. Without that, you would not be able to form any kind of judgement about people.⁴

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If you look at moral ideas, you will see how in our time regarding each other as equals and autonomous is very important to us. That is an inheritance from Christianity that is deeply rooted in our thought. That is very good....⁵

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³P. 11.

⁴P. 12.

⁵P. 13.

I observe many students steeped in relativism. They enter the lecture hall and say, "We have no genuine knowledge." When I pursue them on this for ten minutes it appears they are stuck in an absolute faith in true knowledge! They find themselves in an intellectual dichotomous split. You are politically correct when you don't believe in genuine knowledge, but in the meantime most people do believe in it. In the past I experienced this intellectual split myself. It is correct that we do not control truth, but we are capable of researching how we have arrived at our knowledge.

Question: Is there such a thing as genuine knowledge?

No, I don't think so. You have knowledge and you have the perspectives with which you work. You can only trace both of them partly. We have knowledge that can be empirically verified, but it remains restricted or limited knowledge. Reality is much richer than our knowledge of it. Even the insight we have on how we obtain that knowledge is always limited.

Question: How do you regard the truth claim of religions?

I find it a totally useless idea when people believe that their knowledge comes from heaven. I understand the history of it, but our current culture finds it unacceptable for people to associate a truth claim with their religion.

Nevertheless, I have begun to find religion very important. Not in the traditional sense, but as a capability people possess to either develop it or not. People have the capability to be religious, just as they can be moral or intellectual beings. That brings with it a number of typical religious virtues such as a sense of connectedness with the world, gratitude, humility and self-sacrifice. It is in this sense that religion is important for me. It becomes concrete in practice through communal prayer or a religious service.

I grew up in the province of Friesland between the members of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands and of its Kuyperian offshoot known as *Gereformeerden*.⁶ My parents hailed from the urban west of the country and were convinced atheists. They considered religious people kind of stupid,⁷ an

⁶The first is the ancient former state church, the *Hervormde Kerk*, while the other has always been a free church and the one with which Kuyper associated. Both names mean "Reformed." The two have reunited to form De Protestantse Kerken van Nederland—The Protestant Churches of The Netherlands.

⁷This has been the typical attitude of the more liberal classes in the country. Abraham Kuyper wrote:
"When Minister Pierson raised a toast to the country people as threatened by stupidity and laziness, he experienced an unusual honest moment. Thus came across his lips during an unguarded utterance an attitude that always is thinly veiled among the elite. Men like Pierson do

attitude that did not sit well with me. I wanted to understand how it was possible for other people to be religious. In other words, I've always had a certain fascination about the significance of religion. I developed that through a number of phases. The sickness and death of my first husband moved me deeply. It made me aware of how small an arsenal an atheist has to face such situations. That is when I became aware that religion can offer an alternative way of observing and feeling. Since then I have tried to further develop that insight. William James has given us a very fine image of the moral athlete and the religious person. The moral athlete tries to do everything on his own strength, to have everything under control. But some situations you simply cannot control. The religious person has an eye for that.

In this respect, my in-law family also is inspiring. They are Christian Reformed.⁸ My husband walked away from that during his student years, but the rest of that family is deeply faithful. They have a literal faith. I grant them that and will not touch it, for I have deep respect for their way of life. They live with gratitude, which is a Christian virtue that I find beautiful! I prefer dealing with such people than with convinced atheists, who have no less a faith. Scholarship has amply shown that...

I found the enormous witch hunt against Muslims appalling. It was at its height during the period I was working on a philosophical series in the Christian daily *Trouw* on the subject of this interview. In those articles I tried to verbalize what it means to be religious. Religion can be important for people and it is a capacity that they can develop. Non-religious people have no idea about this, because they have never utilized this capacity.⁹

not know the people. They know nothing but the cultured elite themselves, for these are the neighbours among whom they move about. All their sympathies go to that population. Well, yes, those other people are there and out of an insulting condescension, they will sometimes "do something" for them, but they have a low opinion of them and have not the slightest idea of their significance and value." Quoted in H. Algra, "Doctor Kuyper," p. 1—translated by Jan H. Boer and slated to be published somewhere on this website page.

⁸Not to be confused with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. The Dutch name is "*Christelijk Gereformeerd*."

⁹P. 14.

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The philosophy of scholarship that I develop leaves room for religion. I describe this as Kantian and pragmatic. Scholarship is a practice within which we develop knowledge tools with which we can think about reality. Those tools must match with our intellectual capacities, with our questions and with reality. With those tools we can make predictions, develop technology and create new knowledge. That is the great value of scholarship. But, just as with religion, scholarship must not make truth claims.

What does all this mean for our education?

I think it important for our well being to have a more realistic idea of what scholarship or science can and cannot do. On the one hand, we are creating a technological culture a la Jacques Ellul. On the other hand, we live in a democratic society, but the level at which most people reflect over the enormously complex system in which we live is much too low and too simplistic. I find that dangerous. This is a partial explanation for the growth of populist movements. Education means you develop an eye for complexity, you learn to reflect and you learn to understand the specific needs of our time.

Is understanding the core of it all?

Yes. That is the focal point of my philosophical work. What actually is understanding? To understand something is not the same as to know something. Understanding is to develop a framework within which you reflect. It is very well possible that over time your framework needs to be adjusted, but for the moment it works for you. Understanding is intellectual as well as emotional. Understanding can bring you pleasure; it is thrilling and exciting. Understanding can give you a feeling of relief—"now I can do something with it"--, and of satisfaction. Then all your efforts of reflecting and studying receive their reward.

Is understanding for everyone?

No, not everyone is a philosopher or has an antenna for philosophical reflection. That's a good thing, for philosophy moves slowly and is often impractical. Some people are very practical and activist—and that is fantastic--, but others are inclined towards reflection. It all belongs together. Philosophers are often *avant garde* with their ideas, but they are not suited for exercising power. Take my own case, for example. I cannot think strategically. That's a blind spot of mine. I don't think spontaneously like: someone takes this particular step, for he wants eventually to achieve this or that, and therefore he must.... This helps to keep me modest about the range of human capacities. You cannot develop everything.¹⁰

¹⁰pp. 14-15.