

Chapter 4: Doubt has been eliminated

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In a speech before the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Climate Change, said:

So what is it that is new today? What is new is that doubt has been eliminated.

The report of the International Panel on Climate Change is clear. And so is the Stern report. It is irresponsible, reckless and deeply immoral to question the seriousness of the situation. The time for diagnosis is over. Now it is time to act (Brundtland 2007).

This chapter is not going to argue that Brundtland's statement indicates a religious or even close-to-religious belief in the ability of Science to speak Truth to Power. I am not going to propose that she expressed a religious or even dogmatic attitude by claiming that doubt has been eliminated in this specific case, i.e. the claim for anthropogenic climate change. What I will argue, however, is that Brundtland's statement as well as the curious ethics debate that followed in Norway – the story of which follows below – exemplify some of the peculiar challenges that arise when it is Science that is supposed to speak the Truth. Rather than framing these challenges in terms of the direct relationship between Science and Religion, I will borrow from Ragnar Fjelland (1985), who employed the Norwegian concept *livssyn* ("life philosophies"⁷) and analyzed how life philosophies may borrow authority from Science and Religion. I shall argue that Brundtland's statement indicates a belief in Science that has less to do with philosophy of science and more to do with life philosophy. I shall also criticize that type of belief, in a way that will be quite familiar to many contemporary (21st century) readers. However, even if the criticism may be trivial in intellectual terms, its acknowledgement in policy and governance still appears remote and unlikely.

Elimination of doubt and the ethos of science

"Doubt has been eliminated," according to Brundtland's statement, and the reason for this was that the "report of the International Panel on Climate Change" (AR4, the

⁷ The literal translation of "livssyn" is "life view". One can find three translations of this term into English: (secular) "philosophy of life", "life philosophy" and "world view". The Norwegian Government appears to prefer "philosophy of life" in their official documents. In order to avoid the connotation to the Germanic philosophical tradition, I will use the slightly more awkward "life philosophy" in this chapter. "World-view" is in my opinion not an adequate translation because the concept of "livssyn" typically embraces and emphasizes the existential and moral dimension of human life.

Fourth Assessment reports of IPCC) and “the Stern report” (the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change) were “clear”. In other words, these publications were seen (by Brundtland) as carrying sufficient authority to be able to eliminate doubt in the competent and rational reader. It also seems obvious that their authority is based on their scientific character and credibility. Regardless of how Brundtland may or may not value scientific and political authority, *her* claim – coming from a UN special envoy, former Prime Minister of Norway and former Director General of WHO – about the elimination of doubt would appear quite ridiculous if she supported it merely by, say, the conclusion of a citizens’ consensus conference, the decision of a political party, or a declaration from an environmentalist NGO. What is noteworthy about the IPCC is that it is set up in order to ensure high scientific quality and legitimacy; and the Stern report is called the Stern report because of Sir Nicholas Stern’s position and academic reputation. Their authority does not lie in an acknowledgement of their moral superiority but in their presumed ability to *describe things as they are*, or to “Speak Truth to Power” if one is willing to accept this kind of jargon from science policy discourse. When Brundtland says that the reports are “clear”, it may mean they make it “clear” what needs to be done in terms of decisions and actions, but first and foremost the clarity is of a descriptive nature. It is *such that* anthropogenic climate change is upon us.

The problem, however, is that most contemporary philosophies of science – professional philosophies as well as the implicit and practiced ones that Søren Kjørup (1996) called “spontaneous philosophies” – would tend to grant continued discussion, open criticism and methodical doubt a central place among their ideals for scientific practice. Indeed, in the very center of twentieth-century expressions of belief in Enlightenment and Progress, thinkers such as Karl Popper and Robert K. Merton argued that a critical mind-set and the organization of skepticism are essential to Science and necessary for the maintenance of open and democratic societies. One may of course disagree with the Popper-Merton theses about the mutual dependencies between self-critical science and the open society, or about the empirical adequacy of describing scientific institutions and practices as the enactment of celebrated virtues of open-mindedness. Ever since Thomas Kuhn, the production of such disagreements has become an academic industry in itself. To express such disagreements, however, tends to be an act of distancing oneself from the official discourse on the Ethos of Science and how it is supposed to be embedded in scientific practice, taught in our universities, regulated by written and unwritten codes of conduct and employed in public decision-making. An argument in favor of the empirical description or normative prescription of “normal science” as a dogmatic enterprise rarely goes well with an argument for the supreme authority of the voice of Science in public decisions.

Unsurprisingly, Brundtland was indeed accused of anti-scientific attitudes in her embrace of IPCC and the Stern report; accused in a quite literal sense. In a great moment of late modern irony, the Norwegian Research Ethics Committee for Science and Technology (NENT) received a complaint in November 2009 about Brundtland's speech, arguing that it violated basic principles of research ethics: academic freedom, anti-dogmatism, organized skepticism.⁸ NENT, a committee appointed by the Norwegian government and mandated by the Norwegian Act on Research Ethics, concluded in three parts. First, NENT clarified that it would not arbitrate on Brundtland's statement as such because she is not a researcher and the statement apparently did not intend to influence research practice. Secondly, however, NENT admitted the relationship between climate research and climate policy. A political speech, regardless of its intentions, may therefore indirectly and unwillingly influence scientific practice. Accordingly, NENT decided that the committee could and should comment on the content of Brundtland's speech. I have translated an excerpt of the comment:

NENT finds it relevant to point out that accepted language use in scientific contexts differs from what one finds in the mentioned quote [*the introductory quote of this chapter, author's comment*]. Traditional academic norms allow and encourage doubt and critical questions. Doubt may in such contexts be well or ill founded, but not irresponsible and immoral by itself. In a situation of action, which then is not a purely scientific context, it may of course be irresponsible and immoral not to act, for example by maintaining doubt or criticism that one oneself finds poorly justified. It might be that Brundtland has this type of action in mind (NENT 2009).

NENT's statement goes on to mention precautionary principles as an example of principles of action designed to alleviate the tension between academic and political moral norms: "Such principles seek to justify political action while acknowledging scientific uncertainty and maintaining critical scientific debate" (*ibid.*).

In summary, NENT probably went as far as it could within its mandate, concluding that Brundtland's speech differed from "accepted language use in scientific contexts". In plain terms: her utterance violated the norms of the Ethos of Science. It would be a serious underestimation of actors at Brundtland's level, however, to think that her speech was a careless mistake or a result of ignorance. Of course she knew that it is "more scientific" to qualify statements; to appreciate the plurality of perspectives and expert opinions; to show awareness of the essential fallibility of scientific facts,

⁸ The complaint made to NENT by cand. real. (≈ M. Sc.) Jan M. Döderlein as well as the Committee's reply is publicly available at <http://www.etikkom.no>. I should make clear that I was not a distant observer in this case, as I was a member of the NENT Committee at the time and participated in the drafting of the response to Döderlein.

theories and advice. Her task was a different one than being scientific: it was to argue for the supreme authority of science in order to combat doubts about the authority of the advice from IPCC and the Stern report.

The unscientific belief in science

General questions about the justification of the authority of perspectives and positions are very difficult and have received massive attention in (some would say *have plagued*) modern philosophy. In this chapter I shall not enter into what many would claim to be the more pertinent issue – namely how to justify one's special beliefs (some would say *comprehensive doctrines*) in a politically liberal society where others cannot be expected to share one's worldview or to endorse the same set of values or virtues. Rather, I will discuss some aspects of justification *from within* a perspective because I think it will shed light on the topic of this chapter, i.e. the relationship between science and life philosophies as exemplified by Brundtland's speech.

Justification of a comprehensive doctrine from within that doctrine can be anything from quite difficult to completely trivial. For instance, doctrines that postulate their own origin in revelations made by an omniscient, loving and truthful deity can have strong self-justificatory features. Of course we should believe God's words if they tell us that he is always right. Proponents of doctrines about the proper role and authority of science can choose a number of justificatory strategies. Sometimes, justificatory resources can be found within the perspective itself, as in the intriguing debate on the evidence for the utility of evidence-based practice in medicine. At other times, it has been found convenient to emphasize that justification in the last resort resides outside the perspective, as when Karl Popper points out the need to *decide* upon the role of rationality and the choice of critical rationalism. Critical rationalism is not consistent with claiming the *necessity* of its acceptance, if we are to believe Popper.

This is a relevant observation when discussing Brundtland's speech. There can be a scientific belief in Science – but if Science is defined epistemologically as fallible and praxeologically as an activity that embodies norms of doubt and self-criticism, the belief in Science cannot be too dogmatic and too hostile towards criticism raised against it without becoming unscientific. This problem is indeed what one may observe in the Brundtland quote. It claims not only that “doubt is eliminated” in this case but also that to raise further critical questions is immoral. It is very difficult not to see this as expressly unscientific and even at odds with the norms of the institution from which she borrows authority. The contradiction is perhaps not so important in itself. There is little reason to fear that climate scientists will become dogmatic just

because Gro Harlem Brundtland made an unscientific claim about climate science. The interesting question is rather: if Science is not the source of authority for this type of belief in Science, what exactly is the source – as seen from within this type of perspective? Mere trust in IPCC and Stern and his team, however brilliant they may be, appears insufficient for such strong claims. If I am allowed to speculate, I would think that many observers would find it hard to trust such a complex and worldly endeavor as the IPCC *qua* institution to the degree that it eliminates doubt. Bearing in mind Brundtland's experience as former Head of Government and former Director General of WHO, it becomes even more counter-intuitive to imagine that she holds naïve beliefs about big international institutions. On this ground, "Doubt has been eliminated" appears less as an expression of reasoned trust in the worldly IPCC and more as an expression of faith in Science. What kind of phenomenon is that faith?

Livssyn – life philosophies

There is an abundance of potentially useful concepts for the problems I am discussing here. *Comprehensive doctrine* is one example. *Ideology*, *metaphysical position* and *worldview* are others. For instance, we could have followed in Georges Canguilhem's path and discussed how scientific concepts are exported and distorted into non-scientific contexts and become scientific ideologies. The point I wish to pursue, however, is not so much one of epistemology or political theory as one of "life philosophy" in Fjelland's definition. In the following, I shall discuss his analysis, as well as the Norwegian context into which it was introduced.

Norway was and still is (2012) a confessional state. The Norwegian Constitution reads:

All inhabitants of the Realm shall have the right to free exercise of their religion. The Evangelical-Lutheran religion shall remain the official religion of the State. The inhabitants professing it are bound to bring up their children in the same (Norwegian Constitution, Article 2).

This fact is not without practical complication in a modern welfare state. For instance, the State needs a way to distinguish between inhabitants who profess to the official religion and those who do not in order to keep track of public church taxes. A proportion of direct taxes collected from State Church members are directed to the State Church, whereas other, non-State religious communities receive the equivalent amount of public taxes corresponding to the number of their congregations. This principle is supposed to be one instantiation of the constitutional right to free exercise of religion. The economic and institutional dimension of "exercise of religion" is accordingly governed on the basis of membership in religious communities that exist in the designated official registry of such communities (that are approved by

the State), and with reference to the Norwegian Act with the striking name *Lov om trudemssamfunn og ymist anna* (“Norwegian Act on Religious Communities, et cetera” (sic!)). In 1981, secular belief communities were mentioned by name in Norwegian legislation (and not only as “et cetera”) in the Act Relating to Allocations to Belief-based Communities, and in public management the relevant category is now more often than not “tros- og livssynssamfunn”, that is faith/religious and (secular) belief/life philosophy-based communities. A lot could be said about this, not least about the curious controversies that occasionally arise when the State decides not to approve of a particular community as worthy of being listed in the official state registry. For instance, the County Governor of Telemark withdrew the approval of “The Circle of Friends of Pi-ism” in 2006, referring to media news that indicated that the community was not a *serious* religious community⁹ as they were “laughing” about their own approval.

In the obviously difficult work of demarcating what is a serious religious community and not, the Norwegian State supports itself with a definition made by its Ministry of Justice. The definition is quite comprehensive and requires that the (true) followers of a (serious) religion believe in a power or powers that determine fate, and that they direct their lives accordingly. Moreover, it “should” include fundamental concepts such as “holy”, “revelation”, “miracle”, “sin” and “sacrifice” (Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet 2000, see p. 50 also for a self-critical discussion of this position). As for secular communities, it appears that Norwegian authorities never even tried to make a definition of their essence and instead opted for the more pragmatic solution of setting a lower limit of 500 members as a requirement for their approval. Still, the concept is not empty and appears to be endowed with an implicit expectation of seriousness and dignity, as exemplified by Norway’s Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in a speech to Parliament 28 May 2010:

President,

Religion and life philosophy have always been an important part in the life of human beings. Our relationship to religion and life philosophy takes part in defining us both as individuals and as a society. *[He then proceeds to describe religious life, author’s comment.]* [...] Others do not believe in a deity, but find a sense of belonging and guidance in a distinct life philosophy (Stoltenberg 2010).¹⁰

⁹ See <http://www.fylkesmenn.no/liste.aspx?m=5783&amid=1303323>.

¹⁰ Author’s translation, which was anything but easy in this case. Stoltenberg uses the word “tydelig” – *deutlich* in German. I have translated it into “distinct”, which perhaps exaggerates the association to rationalist philosophy in his mention of secular life philosophies.

Hence, the proper follower of a life philosophy – humanism and social humanism are the more visible ones in Norwegian public life – should perhaps not express *faith*, but at least “belonging” and “guidance” and definitely not just play around making silly jokes.

A close reading of Norwegian public documents still leaves one at a loss as to what a philosophy really is, however; one is rather left with a negative definition. It is almost a religion, but without religious beliefs: a type of Coca Cola Light or even Zero. At this point, Ragnar Fjelland's (1985) analysis may come to the rescue.

Fjelland argues that Kant's four questions of philosophy are the suitable point of departure for defining a life philosophy:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. For what may I hope?
4. What is a human being?

Rather than reproducing Fjelland's argument, I shall apply his conclusion in the latter part of the chapter: one's particular answers to the three latter questions form a life philosophy. The answer to the first question – What can I know? – does not form an intrinsic part of the life philosophy, but may be central to its justification.

In this way, the concept of life philosophy is placed on a different level than religion and science. Religion and science may *provide* answers – inputs – to (or justifications for) the life philosophy, but they are not identical to the life philosophy. Fjelland shows how not only a religion such as Christianity but also a cosmology as found in Ancient Greek philosophy can provide answers to Kant's questions, and in this way justify particular life philosophies (from within the perspective itself, of course). Next, he argues that belief in science and progress can easily provide other answers to Kant's questions and in this way produce a science-based life philosophy. “Science-based” is a dangerous term in this respect, however. *Within* the proper domain of science, the quality of being “science-based” may endow a claim with superior epistemic authority. But Kant's questions are philosophical and not scientific ones; a categorical mistake happens if one believes that current biological theories can produce the unique and final truth about what is a human being, or if one uncritically embraces the technological imperative and concludes that we ought to develop and implement all technologies that can be delivered by science.

First or second modernity

Can one appropriately talk about life philosophies while discussing climate change? I think so. The issue of climate change cannot be separated from a number of huge questions about our responsibility for future generations, for global equity, for non-human species, and for our choice of lifestyles and therefore our values. I believe Brundtland and the author would agree on this point. In her speech, she was not trying to be a philosopher of science. She wanted to deliver a message about what is important and what we ought to do as societies and individuals.

Brundtland's speech borrows the answers to Kant's second and third question – what we ought to do and for what we may hope – from the IPCC and the Stern report. We should reduce emissions, and this can be believed to have a good effect. What a human being is, she in a way answered herself in the Brundtland report "Our Common Future", which not only states our responsibilities for future generations and across borders, but in that way also defines our roles and identity as intrinsically bound together on Planet Earth. Many would agree with her.

The problem appears with the relevance of Kant's first question: what can we know? By expressing her unscientific faith in Science, Brundtland undermines the authority of her life philosophy. It remains science-based, but no longer justified and endorsed by Science in its canonical expression. Nor is it supported by religion. Perhaps it could be supported by a cosmology of Simplicity – the Universe is, if not a Greek Harmonic Cosmos, at least such a simple place that even if scientists remain in methodological self-doubt, the knowledge they produce is in fact The Truth. This position is an intellectually vulnerable one, to the left of Religion and to the right of Science. Popper tried to find a way out if it; Paul Feyerabend spent most of his intellectual energy undressing and ridiculing it. Now, Brundtland's and our politicians' problem is not the presence of smart philosophers. The problem is that many 21st century citizens are endowed with critical skills and so little fear for authority that they no longer obey when leaders such as Brundtland say that doubt is eliminated and moreover immoral. Interpreted as an empirical statement, "Doubt has been eliminated" is quite simply false. One falls into ridicule and one's communication remains ineffective. The serious lack of agency that results, has been analyzed elsewhere (Rommetveit *et al.* 2010) and I shall not enter into political analysis here. I shall only recall Ulrich Beck's more general diagnosis of the class of political-environmental-human global problems that ever more appear to characterize our century:

Wir leben in einer anderen Welt als in der, in der wir denken. Wir leben in der Welt des und, denken in Kategorien des entweder-oder. [...] Die stinknormale Weiter-und-weiter-Modernisierung hat einen Kluft zwischen Begriff und

Wirklichkeit aufgerissen, die deshalb so schwer aufzuzeigen, zu benennen ist, weil die Uhren in den zentralen Begriffen stillgestellt sind. Die “Moderne” [...] ist in ihrem fortgeschrittenen Stadium zur terra incognita geworden, zu einer zivilisatorischen Wildnis, die wir kennen und nicht kennen, nicht begreifen können, weil das monopolistischen Denkmodell der Moderne, ihr Industriegesellschaftliches, industriekapitalistisches Selbstverständnis, im Zuge der verselbstständigten Modernisierung hoffnungslos veraltet ist (Beck 1993: 61-62).

NENT (2009) called for a Second Modernity type of approach: to admit that there is uncertainty in the climate models and still argue that this does not justify the lack of action; indeed the uncertainty may be a *reason* for precautionary action. Brundtland’s problem is that she does not find strong enough power in a discourse of “and”: science is telling us that the climate problem is really urgent AND Science may be wrong. Apparently unable to acknowledge Second Modernity, and no longer able to scare the people into silent obedience, leaders of 21st century democracies are simply left in deadlock.

Can we make constructive suggestions about how to get out of the deadlock? There are many already: epistemological ones (uncertainty and complexity management); political ones (deliberative democracy and a new social contract of science); legal ones (principles of precaution); ethical ones (eco-philosophy etc.). This short chapter shall end with a perhaps somewhat unusual suggestion: to think twice about our concepts of life philosophies. We have seen how even the Norwegian Prime Minister could not avoid quasi-religious concepts such as “belonging” and “guidance” when trying to describe life philosophies. As long as this submissive flavor prevails, secular life philosophies will remain too much a Coca Cola Light. One will be likely to fall into science-based but unscientific dogmatism and then into ridicule. Accordingly, I will end by making the claim for piecemeal, reflexive, self-critical and tentative life philosophies, allowing for the “and” of Beck and for doubts and smiles. A proper argumentation would require another chapter, or indeed a book series; still, let me forward the claim that a life philosophy of Beck’s “and”, fit for Second Modernity, would need to maintain hope in the absence of guarantees from God or from Science, and to see the questions of what we should do and what it is to be a human as deeply entangled (Funtowicz & Strand 2011) and relative to each other. I do so even if a community of such thinkers should not be found worthy by the County Governor of Telemark, Norway, to enter the appropriate State registry.

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