

The Cybernetics of Value and the Value of Cybernetics.
The Art of Invariance and the Invariance of Art.
Et Cetera

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Abstract

In this paper, Spencer Brown's Logic of Distinctions is considered in the light of various amendments proposed by the author. These considerations, concerning (in the main) the notion of the separation of the mark and the value of the distinction, are examined in terms of value (meaning) and invariance (remaining, being) in art Objects. The contradiction between an older view of meaning as inherent in Objects and the more recent view of meanings being with the observer is elaborated; and the way that these attitudes can be seen as complementary is related to attitudes to and experiences of such art Objects.

Keywords

Value, meaning, invariant, Object, distinction, logic, contradiction, mark, self, other

Introductory Thoughts

- *Theories account for experience(s) which precede them. Simply. (And, often, predictively.)*
When we have made theories,
we may discover they account for other experiences and may extend our range of experience, and how we experience these experiences.
- *Artists, today, are practising philosophers:*
their processes and the traces of these processes (leading to their construct questions exploring our experiences and our accounts: we art Objects) provide the answers (if any), ie we give value.
- *For the purposes of exemplification, consider an art Object that has survived (and been valued, if only in being retained) for some time.*

The Currency of Value (and the Value of Currency)

The American artist, JG Boggs, draws (US non-US) currency. He is quite explicit that what he draws is not the mint original: it is his original, his currency.

What he is interested in is to see if he can share his currency with others, to arrive at an agreed value for his currency.

His drawings are neat and meticulous, but are clearly drawings. They cannot be mistaken for US mint currency although they bear a superficial resemblance. (This does not prevent the FBI from accusing him of forgery and confiscating his currency.)

He takes his (drawn) currency out with him, and he attempts to spend it. He tries to trade it at face value, one-to-one: \$100 (Boggs) spent for \$100 (US). He buys goods and pays (if the

seller will accept) with his currency and takes his change (in US dollars).

He takes the goods he has bought with his currency, together with any receipts (the records of the transaction), to a collector (of his work). He haggles with the collector about the worth of the records and sells them (for US currency).

This leaves the collector with a problem. He must now go to the person who provided the goods in return for the Boggs' currency and persuade him to sell the Boggs currency to him to complete the record of the transaction.

(Naturally the collector has to pay more than the (Boggs) face value.)

Only upon attaining the relevant piece of Boggs currency is the work complete.

So where is the value? Is it in the piece of drawn currency? The completeness of the collection? The agreements of prices in transactions? Somewhere else?

Do any of these values get to be, and to remain fixed?

This paper is not an attempt to answer these questions directly. It is an attempt to deal in the same territory but using different means.

The Valuing of Art and the Art of Valuing

But it is interesting to consider art, for art is one thing in our society that the “educated” would probably agree has a value (other than, of course the value indicated by its price), which value moves us, shows us beauty, informs us about ourselves, our spirits, and the world we inhabit, and makes the world a better place to be in; and it is assumed, also, to be invariant—standing the test of time and remaining what the artist meant it to be (representation).

In this paper I present an introduction to a logic that is essentially based in value, and I shall tell of its limitations and of how these limitations can be transcended, and what they tell us about value and invariance.

And we shall discover how what we learn reflects the understanding of art that I propose here.

The characteristic I consider (under the circumstances of this paper) interesting about art in this context is the following:

The great works of art (the great art Objects) are those that have survived for a long time. They have meant a lot not only to a lot of people, but also to a lot of people over a long time. Thus, they have survived changes that are (in conventional terms) socio-cultural as well as individual. They are invariant.

It seems that such Objects can continue to reflect meaningfully the interests of not only many individuals (each of whom sees the world differently) but also of many ages (and hence socio-cultural conditions).

What do they do?

Clearly, if there is meaning involved here, that meaning cannot be fixed. Without entering into argument at this point about where meaning exists (I am one who would argue that meaning exists in the observer and not in the Object, that things have no meanings and that we do not transmit meanings), it is clear that the “meaning” of an art Object must be changeable. So changeable that, given the accounts we make of how our societies and our cultures differ and how these differences may often be seemingly so great as to be contradictory, they may be mutually exclusive. Yet we find these meanings in our art Objects.

Thus it seems that great art Objects must be able to support all sorts of (flatly mutually contradictory and exclusive) meanings that we (as societies, as cultures and as individuals—often within them) find in these Objects.

How do they do that?

Things which support different interpretations (to use the conventional expression), that allow the construction of different meanings, are ambiguous. Ambiguity, if it is great enough, can even contain paradox and flat contradiction.

Extreme ambiguity, as extreme contradiction, is meaningless. If (almost) any meaning is possible, there is no meaning (in the classical sense).

Then, art Objects are at least ambiguous, and at most meaningless—in classical terms (where the meaning of an Object is contained within the Object).

(This means that we have to supply the meanings, of course: but the (art) Objects must also be capable of “receiving” or “supporting” these meanings we attribute.)

Notice the ambiguity of meaning meant by the means of meaning here. It is not enough to take the mean— not to be mean about this.

But meaning is, of course, in these circumstances, to be taken as a virtual synonym for value.

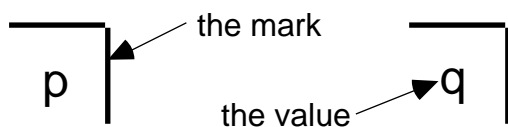
The Logic of Values and the Values of Logic

There is a logic which, by its primitive act (of drawing a distinction) is concerned, at its heart, with value. This logic is George Spencer Brown’s (1969) Logic of Distinctions—his “Laws of Form”.

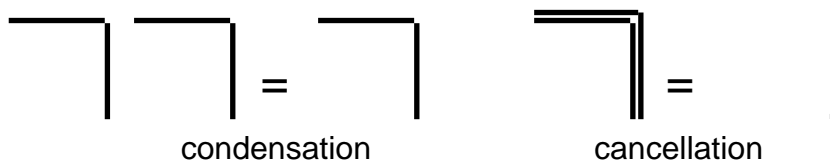
But there are, I have argued (Glanville (1979, 1987), Glanville and Varela (1981)), flaws in Spencer Brown’s proposition, that, in being resolved, lead to an even clearer view of what value is: a view that supports the sort of insights about art Objects that have just been presented.

Spencer Brown begins his argument from the dictum: “Draw a Distinction!” The argument is well rehearsed, as are my objections, and they will only briefly be described here.

According to Spencer Brown, drawing a distinction brings a logical state into being by cleaving a logical space. Such spaces are distinguished by the mark of the distinction, which distinguishes the value of the mark. Thus:



The cleaved space and its entire contents are the form of the distinction. Different values can be distinguished, and the logic develops by the clustering of distinctions such that the actions condensation and cancellation are permitted. Thus:



But there are certain problems that occur. If everything depends on drawing a distinction, how is the mark separated from the value? It must be distinguished. Then, if it is distinguished,

it is distinguished by another mark (and value) drawn... ad infinitum. Unless the mark is the value, the value is the mark—ie, unless there is no space (that is to be cleaved), and the distinction drawn distinguishes only itself.

(In geometric analogy, instead of the distinction taking the form of a circle, it takes the form of a Möbius strip—that, from above, looks like a circle—which contains no space, has no in and outside, and which, having only one surface, can have its own value on itself: the mark is the value, the value is the mark.)

Modifying Spencer Brown’s notation, we have:

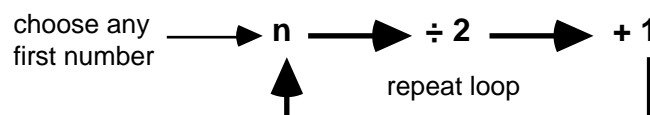


The dismissal of the problem of the distinguishing of the mark from the value (and vice versa) that Spencer Brown seems to have ignored has a fortunate side-effect: for, to use another analogy, Spencer Brown has provided nothing on or with which to draw the distinction. Where is the metaphorical piece of paper, what is the pencil, and how are they distinguished? A self-distinction of the sort indicated is not drawn on anything: it cleaves no space and does not require the distinction of its mark and its value. It needs no paper on which to be drawn. It works precisely because the distinction is a self-distinction and is devoid of a spatial connotation (ie in- and outside): no space is cleaved.

There is, however, another approach to the distinguishing of the mark and the distinction: just to go on drawing the distinction that distinguishes them. A mark produces two spaces, and there is a value to each (the “inside” value indicated above, and the value of the rest of the space). Drawing the distinction that has, distinguished, the mark and the value will require another distinction, etc, ad infinitum: in either intension or extension (or both: it is a matter of preference, and, hence, is arbitrary).

But redrawing a distinction, as it leads inexorably towards infinity, may also lead to iterations in value drawing that are progressively more and more confirmatory. That is to say, which become, to the outside observer—the distinction’s draughtsman—less and less distinguishable. That is, the distinctions, endlessly redrawn, become more the same: and a sameness, a stability, sets in that appears to define some fixed “Object” as a result of the actions of the outsider, the observer. This is other-distinction (in contrast to self-distinction).

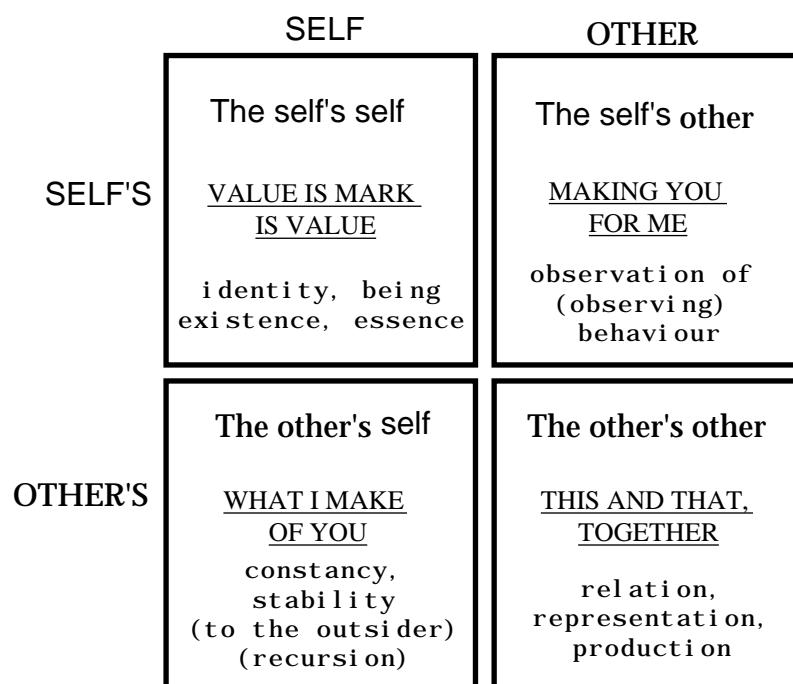
Again, there is an analogy to explain this. It is the Eigen function that produces an Eigen value: an operation carried out on a value that reproduces that value (first used for this purpose by von Foerster (1976)). As an example, the following procedure will tend towards the number 2, which will, itself, always be the outcome of the process iteratively applied.



The value that arises from this sort of action is the value that results from the operations of

the outsider—the (External) observer, the other—through distinguishing and continuing to distinguish. It is akin to the notion of “Object Constancy” that Piaget (1972) convinces us is at the basis of the child’s development of cognitive ability. Thus, the act of distinguishing and redistinguishing, in the analogy of the Eigen function and value, gives rise to a perceived constancy and hence the attribution of “Object-ness” to account for (be a source of) that constancy.

These two are complementary. Although apparently in contradiction, they accommodate—or give rise to—different views: the views (as presumed from the outside view) both from inside and from outside: each of which we need to have and to hold. In turn, they create two other views (the self’s view of the other, the other’s view of the self), which can be summarised (with some salient qualities) in the diagram:



The Meaning of this Logic and the Logic of this Meaning

We find value as being indicative of meaning, and we find continuing invariance to be indicated by continuity in existence.

What the analysis of the art Object and of logic (above) tells us is the following:

If, in drawing a distinction, we do not distinguish between the mark and the value but take the value as being the mark, we have no regress.

The distinction is then a self-distinction, and the value (which is the mark) is the value to the self. It is not accessible to the outsider. It remains private.

We have, instead, Objects that distinguish themselves and do not cleave a space: they do not even need a space within or without.

Thus, the Object (its self itself) maintains itself, but is alone.

The Object is the Object is the Object.

The meaning (value) of the Object—if any—is internal. There is no external meaning except that is attributed by the external observer, which is not the internal meaning.

The meaning attributed by the (external, other) observer is also private to that observer (of that Object). The drawing of such a distinction, separating the mark from the value (by the drawing of always another distinction) leads to an infinite regress.

The Object itself has (to the outside, at least) no meaning, no value. In that it is capable of accepting meanings attributed by observers, and these meanings may have no intra-consistency (such a notion is irrelevant), the meanings of other observers may be inconsistent and paradoxical, either between observers or between instances of observation of any one observer.

The Object may, too, (reflectively inconsistently) be understood as being an Object (in Piaget's sense) through the repeated drawing of distinctions that converge (appear to the observer to be virtually identical on successive instances). This is akin to the Eigen object.

The Object, so proscribed (from the outside) by the observer, may appear to have a constancy that is so precise and fixed that it is invariant. (Thus an externally generated invariance appears that is the complement of the internal invariance that is the (self) drawing of the self-distinction.)

When such a constant proscription appears to hold in a society or culture for a long period, the Object has become (to the outside view) fixed, trapped from the outside: this trapped constancy may have nothing to do (any more) with the Object (insofar as the notion of “having something to do with” has any relevance, is in any respect appropriate, can in any way be justified). This is the equivalent of the unquestioned “universal” art Object, in effect an icon, which exists as a myth of self-perpetuating but ossifying recursive distinguishing, invariant beyond observation, beyond (re-) valuing and beyond questioning.

These contradictory qualities are what I claim as major characteristics of the art Object, much of which is embodied so interestingly in the work of JG Boggs—demonstrating the current role of the artist as practical philosopher—described at the outset.

Conclusion

The paradox of (art) Objects without meaning except perhaps to themselves, where meaning is invested in those Objects by the observer (as the Object, to him), where these so-called meanings must in the long run become the Object itself (the evidence for the Object) as far as the observer is concerned, continues in this paper. Where, what is the meaning? What are the values and the invariants.? The values and invariants argued here, when taken as epitomised in art Objects seen as embodiments of Spencer Brown's logic (when modified to cope with the criticisms), do not exist in this paper, but only, in whatever form, earlier in the writer's and now in the reader's (your and my) mind.

In a paper that argues there is only meaning in the mind of the observer, that “great” (art) Objects are, of necessity, ambiguous to the point of meaninglessness and the author of which believes there are no meanings “out there” “in the world”, the absurdity of discussing anything must always loom in the background.

At least this paper is doing what it says (as, in another context, I would argue art does). But, in the end, the mystery of communication and of being moved remain. What we now have, through the consideration of Values and (In)Variants is the realisation that there is a logic which also, when appropriately modified, functions in this manner. We do not have to dismiss the mystery, the absurdity of our position, the difference between our explanations and our experiences as we have for so long done.

And we have the dual challenge:

to explain how, if meaning is entirely internal (and, therefore, non-communicable) we can, nevertheless, seem to communicate, believing that there is some sort of pseudo-meaning in our utterances (a type of social construct or pseudo-coding, I believe) and that we can tell others what we think and have some success in this. And

to retain the transcendental quality of beauty that goes beyond our logic and our theorising, our descriptive mechanisms and our languages and moves us in spite of, or even because of, the paradox which has us continue our stoically and futilely heroic attempts to talk about (necessarily meaningless) meaning, describe the indescribable

From this contradiction, from this impossibility, we have art that moves us more, because it is at the base of our experience, of our impossible aloneness, of our need to cry out, and of the loss of the I in beauty. And the modified logic described here (by surprising default) accepts this.

“There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said.” (Beckett (1949)).

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