



Doing the Right Thing: the Problems of...Gerard de Zeeuw, Academic Guerilla.

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Abstract

A set of central themes, constituting both a method and an approach, demonstrated in the “Problems of...” conference series over the last quarter century, are extracted from the work of Gerard de Zeeuw. These themes are based in a consideration of and concern for improvement, and an attempt to reduce the frequently negative side-effects of attempts at improvement by creating “high quality observations” and empowering those helped by making them actors.

Keywords

action, actor, help, improvement intervention, observation (high quality), Problems of... Conferences, re-entry, second-order, support

Introduction: the Problems of Conferences and de Zeeuw’s Oeuvre

Twenty three years ago, in 1979, Gerard de Zeeuw created what has become a series of conferences, based around the concept and name “Problems of...”. These conferences have become something of an unconventional institution. Not entirely satisfied by the usual conference format, de Zeeuw, with his varied background covering psychology, mathematics, cybernetics and systems, social science, philosophy and scientific method decided to instigate a conference in which contributors responded to a set theme. The problems to be faced—the theme—change with each meeting to reflect what de Zeeuw has seen, at the time of the conference, as a central concern facing at least the wide range of the academic world he is interested in.

This is not the place to discuss these conferences.¹ However, the conference themes can be considered to reflect more than the particular problems de Zeeuw finds in his fields: they also reflect his preoccupations, and, since he sets the theme, it may be assumed these themes are close to his heart—i.e. particularly important/significant to him and to the development of his

¹ For a longer description of some of the academic processes of these conferences, see the introduction and afterword to the volume of conference proceedings for the conference “Problems of Action and Observation” (Glanville and de Zeeuw (2000)).

own work. The conferences may be seen (as will be argued towards the end of this paper) as both example and embodiment of de Zeeuw's approach.²

My reason for introducing the conferences is that I have decided (in order to discuss aspects of de Zeeuw's work) that I will focus mainly on the papers he wrote as part of the process and progress of these conferences (de Zeeuw 1978, 1979, 1983, 1991, 1993, 1998; de Zeeuw and Koppelaar 1995; de Zeeuw and Vahl 1997, 2000; Soudijn and de Zeeuw 1996).³ I do not claim to be an expert on de Zeeuw's work: but I have a long, close and continuing association through which I have learnt many lessons: de Zeeuw has had a profound effect, improving me and my thinking.

We will find a central concern in de Zeeuw's work is exactly such improvement (and support). This concern drives his work as its ideological purpose: its passion. De Zeeuw wants to improve the world (or help others do so), and these conferences, indeed all his work, is designed towards this end.

De Zeeuw's papers, flowing out of these conferences, are always subject to a process of continuing improvement as meeting follows meeting. There is no final statement. I have often felt that there are not even interim statements: de Zeeuw consciously chooses to be in a Herocletian stream rather than taking "snapshots" of points along his progress. De Zeeuw may not thank me for writing this paper, therefore: he is suspicious of constant (universal) themes, of "fixed" positions. This continuous modification and search for improvement is actually a crucial feature of de Zeeuw's undertaking.

What appears in the body of work constituting this group of papers, is an expanding and developing position, an argument that includes ever more, focusing on different elements and shifting; sometimes destroying what went before. In other words, in the second-order the body of papers does not just describe but, applying that description, does what it describes. Nevertheless, there are themes that remain constant, and a clear position emerges, even if de Zeeuw has never claimed as much, or chosen to articulate and express this position. It is these constants (which I abstract for him, without his agreement) that we will explore and examine.

Motivation

What motivates de Zeeuw's work? De Zeeuw's area of concern is action in society: specifically, action to improve. Delving into de Zeeuw's Problems of... papers from the last

² Jan Kooistra, in commenting on this paper, points out that the "... " in the title "Problems of ..." indicates also that the conferences are places where scientists from many disciplines are expected to perform high quality observations. De Zeeuw has orchestrated and conducted the performances throughout the existence of the conferences. In this way, the "... " represents the second order re-entry and circularity of de Zeeuw's account of science. It is characteristic of both de Zeeuw's thinking and way of working that he uses second order strategies. He is particularly successful at spotting talent and inspiring originality in others.

³ It is not easy to find de Zeeuw's papers. This is another reason for choosing the papers I have. He says he writes papers when they seem needed, placing them where they seem needed. As part of the making of this festschrift, he has been persuaded to place copies of versions of many of the papers referred to on the web. They can be found **WWWWWWW**

quarter century, I discern a clear theme: support and improvement.⁴ However, much of his work is critical of the actual effects (results) of help given, effects which often lead to deterioration—in direct contrast to the intention of the helpers.

For instance, de Zeeuw notes that traditional approaches, still holding sway, are inclined to generate side-effects. These are not only unpredictable: they are also usually undesirable (negative): they lead to an undermining of the intended assistance, or the creation of new problems that disable, leading to deterioration.

He also notes that much help is, in a sense, anti-social (author's term). Help given by experts undermines the independence and autonomy of those helped: those helped are disabled and, in a manner, disenfranchised by the very act of helping. To help in such a way that the act of providing help reduces the ability of those helped to help themselves is, in de Zeeuw's view, a way of dis-empowerment. This is the heart of the critique that drives de Zeeuw's work. The job of the expert is to support those who employ his/her expertise: not to re-inforce the difference that gives the expert status.⁵

The central problem that de Zeeuw tackles, then, is to facilitate helping to be carried out in such a manner that it leads to betterment by

- 1) reducing unwanted side-effects;
- And by
- 2) empowering those helped to help themselves.⁶

It is, I believe, in this context that de Zeeuw intends improvement, and would define what is special in his use of the word—which I use I have attempted to capture here.⁷

Speaking on de Zeeuw's Behalf

I am going to attempt something I nowadays try to avoid doing: to speak (uninvited) on someone else's behalf. (Thus, whenever in this paper I make a statement concerning de Zeeuw's views, I am using a shorthand to speak of my understandings of his views.) The following is my attempt at a statement of de Zeeuw's position. Given what I write above, the reader will not be surprised that I have had to do this myself (rather than being able to find

⁴ In the earlier conferences it was de Zeeuw's habit to give a "tutorial" on the conference theme. He did not always produce a paper from these tutorials. In recent years (as participants have come better to understand the boundaries of the themes) these tutorials have disappeared, perhaps as much in an effort to promote high quality observation in the participants as a result of the need to find time for more paper presentations by others; or because he feels the need for the tutorial setting the scene and the style of thinking is no longer as great.

⁵ This view is closely related to a view I like to articulate: the job of the teacher is to do him/herself our of their job. Reg Revans made a career out of pointing out the great risks of trusting experts, leading him to develop "Action Learning". See James Powell et al's paper in this volume.

⁶ This paper does not present an overall review of de Zeeuw's work, but rather represents an attempt to find and develop an important focal theme in it.

⁷ I do not wish to "define" terms, but to present them in contexts that help readers develop their own viable understandings.

ready-made material in de Zeeuw's papers: although statements to the effect of most aspects of what I write may be found in several of the papers I have worked from). So that I may discuss de Zeeuw's work, I have composed the following phases—albeit in trepidation.

- one** Humans make observations, which they improve to create high quality observations.*
- two** Such observations provide a basis for acting. Through acting, humans may intervene in what they have observed.*
- three** Humans intervene in order to make improvements.⁸*
- four** When humans make improvements, they provide support.*

Let us consider these phases in turn. What do we find?

one

Why do we need two classes of observation—normal and high quality? What is wrong with ordinary observation? What is a high quality observation—and what makes it high quality?

According to de Zeeuw, high quality observations are more reliable than ordinary observations, less prone to error. In de Zeeuw's view, all observations are inclined to vagaries resulting from random disturbances. Behind this he appears to assume the concept of ideal objects to which observations should be attached, and thus the need to facilitate closer conformity to that ideal. To the best of my understanding, this view is close to the traditional scientific view of, for instance, how to handle the types of discrepancy we call experimental error.⁹

Observations are upgraded to high quality through repetition: repetition sensitive to error, correcting for it. This gives repeatability. The major way to achieve this is to turn observations into observables: that is, to let the observations (of the observed objects) themselves become observed—as well as the observed objects. By the use of this re-entrant form (closure), de Zeeuw enables what is learnt from errors and shortcomings to be acted on. He also reflects current thinking in second order cybernetics, a field to which he feels close, if not perhaps quite fully integral.

The creation of high quality observations increases observation reliability. It also brings the observer into the process. The observer observes, then modifies: he acts. There is no exclusion of the observer.

two

For de Zeeuw, the notion of “actor” is always central: improvement is the result of actors acting. While this position might seem commonplace, it is crucial to keep it in mind. For, in de Zeeuw's world, improvement involves making into actors those for whom improvement is intended.

⁸ It is important to stress, once again, that I use this term in the sense I have claimed for de Zeeuw.

⁹ However, the way de Zeeuw sees the role of observation means that each observation, creating a change in what we can observe, necessarily changes (the next) observation. This point is discussed a little later.

Based on the generation of high quality observations, the actions we can take are:

- * to improve the quality of the observations themselves (see above), and
- * to improve how we understand and use the observations so they can be seen to be of high quality.

Acting to change the quality of our observations to high quality, in de Zeeuw's interpretation, we act to create improvement. Since we make high quality observations so that we may act, and act to make them high quality observations, we are involved in a self-referential, bootstrapping activity.

This suggests (as in the previous section) that the "high quality" in high quality observation lies in how we treat the observations, as well as the quality of these observations. The actor is powerfully present as agent and determinant of improvement: a further source of re-entry.

We act to improve our observations so they become high quality observations, which enables us to act (well). The acting, the improving, the shifting of the goal posts in relation to what qualifies as high quality, is continuous (see footnotes 2 and 6). This is de Zeeuw's true fixity.

three

Acting is a form of intervention. (Desirable) intervention suggests positive change and active involvement. This does not come about through the inevitability of some internal dynamic. It occurs because actors become involved: it is a wilful choice by which actors can create changes in the quality of the conditions on which they base their observations.

When we intervene in something, we act. We also change that something: this is the intention of intervention (and of de Zeeuw's undertaking to create genuine, beneficial improvement). The change affects what we can observe (the observable object). Hence, the observations we can make of it also change.

There are two aspects in how we intervene.

- * We intervene in the (observable social) object. We change how it behaves by acting on it. We probably intervene in order to cope with unwanted side-effects, errors etc., so we become more likely to get higher quality observations.

And

- * we intervene in observing. We intervene both in how we observe and in how we think of our observations (for instance, seeing observations as observables).

four

Intervention does not necessarily lead to improvement (not all change, no matter how well intended, is beneficial), although improvement is unlikely without intervention. But, if the result of an intervention is used to upgrade observations from ordinary to high quality, then, in de Zeeuw's world, this increase in the quality of observations should lead to an improvement for those being helped. In effect, this is de Zeeuw's definition of improvement.

Thus, with improvement, the quality of observations is increased, and it is possible to create support rather than risking the application of expertise to the detriment of those for whom help is intended. In de Zeeuw's world, improvement creates support: the two can usually be treated as synonyms.

As improvement becomes support, the importance to the role of those to be helped becomes, if anything, stronger. Talking of support, we talk of them underpinning their own actions, rather than having something applied by an other. The helped become actors and, thus, helpers. Which is, of course, one of de Zeeuw's aims—a form of empowerment.

The improvement lies in the conditions that lead to observations. Making observations of improvement gives new observations. It also gives new observables and new observers.

We complete the chain: circulate; re-enter.

Finally

Notice that the notion of improvement is present in all phases. Every step involves improvement. Observations are improved to become high quality. The resulting actions become interventions that lead to improvement. The whole process, as well as both major constituent stages in it, is involved in creating improvement. Each phase both presumes and demonstrates those before and after it. Each phase has elements of re-entry, bootstrapping earlier phases. The whole is both convoluted and straightforward, a series of steps that affect and effect each in order to lead to an outcome, through their operation, that is continuous, involving, leading to a notion of betterment in which de Zeeuw's position is, I believe, that the adverse effects of side-effects and alienation are countered.

If you insist on the predictable and reductionist view that we used to favour, this may appear a strange position. If you want the (one and only) answer to the (singularly important) question, this approach is not likely to give it. But, I believe, our experience tells us that this is not what we should expect (and de Zeeuw's considerable arguments show us why). In psychotherapy, we consider behaviour crazy when we do not learn from experience: when following a particular path fails time and again to achieve what we want, we may have to consider the possibility that our behaviour in continuing down that path is crazy.

To summarise

Improvement and support go together. They depend on intervention. Intervention is an action, and to be able to act (well) we need high quality observations, implying observation.

Consequences

The consequences of this approach are important. There are two that I wish to emphasise here.

The first is that improvement is a continuous process

- * In de Zeeuw's world, goals always shift, because the observation becomes

observable, and there is always, therefore, something new to add in.¹⁰ As every observation becomes observable, there is a new assessment to be made.

- * Concomitantly, standards are constantly being raised: improvement is a constant activity—we go on. (The constant, the fixity lies in the continuing.)
- * The whole process de Zeeuw proposes is a bootstrapping operation: there is no “final” solution.

The second is that we are involved in making these improvements.

- * Improvement implies an observer who not only makes observations but also turns those observations into actions and observables.
- * The re-entrant nature of de Zeeuw’s aspiring-to-high-quality observations also suggests that the observer becomes involved, the involved become observers. Thus, de Zeeuw inevitably works towards the helped becoming the helpers (of themselves). I have heard de Zeeuw suggest that a solution to a human problem that does not create a new problem is not a proper solution: humans constantly need the challenge of new problems: which his method generates.

A Conclusion to be going on with

De Zeeuw’s approach (method, perhaps) is not a classical problem solving method. De Zeeuw asserts that, in trying to solve the problem (once and for all) we are setting ourselves up. We cannot solve problems in this way: the solutions we have in mind are both unattainable and inappropriate. Part of why they are inappropriate is that they try to bring to a stop what should be a continuing process. The “solution” to the “problem” should set up the next problem. Humans are human because they become involved, they take part, they move (possibly forwards) and they change. The “problem” of side-effects actually permits us to give up classical problems and problem solving, with its finite and definite solutions, and get on with the job of making and solving problems, in some manner, just for now: and hence in the joy of involvement, rather than removing the need for this involvement by disposing of problems (by solving them). His approach is one of development and—wait for it—improvement! He does not try to overthrow the past, but conserves it by building modifications that make a better method from it. His method of improvement is, he would like us to believe, an improvement. His is a philosophy of improvement rather than solution.

(This is how de Zeeuw’s position is very different from that of classical sociology. In my understanding, this also encapsulates the difference between Sociology, and the more recent Andragology of which de Zeeuw was professor until the subject was “abolished”. But it also provides a new paradigm for learning and making knowledge, and to problem solving/setting, worthy of serious consideration: a project for de Zeeuw’s retirement, perhaps.)

In recent work, de Zeeuw has recognised that the question of how to make the improvements he seeks is one of inbetweenness: between the actors and systems, especially the environment, but also the actors themselves. This he defines as a problem of interface. We

¹⁰ There are certain specialist and idealised recursive functions and eigen functions that reproduce themselves. Perhaps de Zeeuw should make them his special ideals, in spite of arguing against such things!

change, stretch and recombine the interface to generate improvements. The notion of interface replaces that of variable. In his interest in the “interface” and “betweenness” (as related ideas) he is not alone. These are explicit areas of design. There is much interesting work to be done here.

In effect, de Zeeuw is a designer. He acts, and, watching what his action tells him, he acts again. He looks at what he did, and the situation that results, with the wonder of the child. That is what designers do.

De Zeeuw is a guerilla. He approaches deftly, unnoticed, he drops an intellectual bomb in to the maelstrom and waits for it to explode, changing us. He is interested to watch the changes, and then to work with them, awaiting the moment for the next guerilla intervention.

In his paper “What does a Self-Referential Research Methodology Look Like?” (de Zeeuw and Vahl 1997), de Zeeuw ends by quoting, with approval, Bennis and Nanus (1985). I end with the same quote, because it so well encapsulates so much of de Zeeuw’s approach. His interest is in

“Doing the right thing, rather than doing things right.”

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The introductions to the Problems of... Proceedings volumes are also of interest