

SIMILITUDES, ORDER OF THINGS AND THE PROSE OF THE WORLD

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Abstract: Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* transformed Foucault in an intellectual figure in France. As Foucault states right in his introduction, it was not his intention, on the basis of a particular type of knowledge or body of ideas, to draw up a picture of a period, or to reconstitute the spirit of a century. What he wished to do was to present, side by side, a definite number of elements such as the knowledge of living beings, the knowledge of the laws of language, and the knowledge of economic facts, and to relate them to the philosophical discourse that was contemporary with them during a period extending from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. The hereby paper focuses on the way in which Foucault offers a global analysis of what knowledge meant – and how this meaning changed – in Western thought from the Renaissance to the present. At the heart of his account is the notion of representation in philosophical thought, where we find Foucault's most direct engagement with traditional philosophical questions.

Keywords: similitudes, relations, sympathy, communication, signature

The four Similitudes

One of the constructive roles played in the knowledge of Western culture, up to the end of the 16th century, was resemblance. According to the Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary, resemblance means correspondence in appearance or superficial qualities and it is also very close with the term similarity. Therefore, resemblance stayed at the basis of text interpretation, made possible knowledge of things and tried to represent them. Taking into consideration the fact that resemblance implies also the term repetition, it is important to mention that different representations were forms of repetitions, for instance, in the domain of theatre or painting.

A number of writers asked themselves how similitude was conceived at the end of the 16th century. It was discussed however that the semantic web of resemblance was quite rich – *Amicitia, Consonantia, Concertus, Paritas, Conjunctio*.

However, the most important form of similitude is, among others, *convenientia*. This term stands for the adjacency of places and it is more representative compared to similitude. One of the definitions for convenience is the quality of being suitable or useful for a particular purpose. [1] Therefore, things called 'convenient' are the ones that are sufficiently close to one another to be in juxtaposition. This is where resemblance appears and it becomes double as soon as it is unraveled. The best example is 'body' and 'soul'. They are doubly 'convenient' because the soul had "to be dense, heavy and terrestrial for God to place it in the very heart of matter. [...] the soul receives the movements of the body and assimilates itself to that body, while the body is altered and corrupted by the passions of the soul." [2] According to Michel Foucault, the different beings adjust themselves to one another in the syntax of the world. For example, flora and fauna communicate, so do the earth and the sea, and the man with everything around him.

Convenientia is of the same order as conjunction and adjustment and is also connected with space in the form of a graduated scale of proximity. The world means a universal 'convenience' of things, for instance, as Foucault states, there is the same number of fishes in the water as there are animals, or objects produced by nature or man; the same number of beings in the water and on the surface of earth as there are in the sky, the inhabitants of the former corresponding with those of the latter, and finally, there is the same number of beings in the whole of creation as may be found eminently contained in God himself. Therefore, he states further, the world is linked together like a chain. [3] Each point of each contact begins and ends a link that resembles the one before it and the one after it and these similitudes continue in a circle.

The second form of similitude is *aemulatio*, which according to Foucault is a sort of 'convenience' that has been freed from the law of place and is able to function from a distance, without motion. [4] Different from *convenientia* is the fact that the links of the chain do not exist anymore, they are no longer connected, but the circles continue to be held together at a

distance one from another in accordance with a resemblance that needs no contact. The process is something similar to the reflection of a mirror and it is believed that things around the universe can answer one to another: "the human face emulates the sky and just as man's intellect is an imperfect reflection of God's wisdom, so his two eyes, with their limited brightness, are a reflection of the vast illumination spread across the sky by sun and moon; the mouth is Venus, since it gives passage to kisses and words of love; the nose provides an image in miniature of Jove's sceptre and mercury's staff" [5] The relation of emulation gives things the possibility to imitate one another by duplicating themselves in a mirror. Of course, several questions were asked, for example, if the reflections are original images or which one is reality, which one is projection. Foucault comes further on with an answer, advancing the fact that, emulation, being a sort of natural twinning existing in things, arises from a fold in being, the two sides of which stand immediately opposite to one another. [6] This fundamental duplication of the world is compared to the image of two twins who resemble one another completely, without being possible for anyone to say which of them brought its similitude to the other. [7] It is also possible that one figure may be weaker, and therefore more receptive to the stronger influence of the other. A very appropriate example is considered by Crollius the sky and the stars. He considers the stars as "the matrix of all plants and the sky is only the spiritual prefiguration of a plant, such that it represents that plant and just as each herb or plant is a terrestrial star looking up at the sky, so also each star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which differs from the terrestrial plants in matter alone..., the celestial plants and herbs are turned towards the earth and look directly down upon the plants they have procreated, imbuing them with some particular virtue" [8]

Another form of similitude is *analogy* and it is an old concept familiar to Greek science and medieval thought. The term comprises both *convenientia* and *aemulatio*, therefore its power seems to be quite relevant. The similitudes it treads are not visible or substantial ones; they are only subtle resemblances of relations and it can extend to an endless number of relationships. The best example that Foucault suggests is that the relation of the stars to the sky in which they shine may also be found between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between minerals and the rocks in which they find themselves buried, between sense organs and the face they animate, between skin moles and the body. [9] He also states that the stars, the plants, the minerals, the moles are parts of the systems in which they activate, transferring them important and relevant characteristics that they own as elements integrating in the systems. Thus, this reversibility and polyvalence endow analogy with a universal field of application. The human face is to the human body what the face of heaven is to the ether; man's pulse beats in his veins as the stars circle they sky according to their own fixed paths; the seven orifices in man's

head are to his face what the seven planets are to the sky. [10] Foucault considers that the space occupied by analogies is really a space of radiation and man is surrounded by it on every side. But, on the other side, man transmits these resemblances back into the world from which he receives them. Man is the centre upon which relations are concentrated and the point from which they are once again reflected.

Sympathies is considered the fourth form of resemblance and “it plays through the depths of the universe in a free state.” [11] It is a principle of mobility, “it attracts what is heavy to the heaviness of the earth, what is light up towards the weightless ether; it drives the root towards the water and it makes the great yellow disk of the sunflower turn to follow the curving path of the sun. [...] Sympathy is an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent that it will not rest content to be merely one of the forms of likeness; it has the dangerous power of assimilating, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear – and thus of rendering them foreign to what they were before. Sympathy transforms. It alters, but in the direction of identity, so that if it’s power were not counterbalanced it would reduce the world to a point, to a homogeneous mass, to the featureless form of the *Same*: all its parts would hold together and communicate with one another without a break, with no distance between them, like those metal chains held suspended by sympathy to the attraction of a single magnet.” [12] Sympathy is compensated by antipathy, considered as its twin. It is antipathy that maintains the isolation of things and prevents their assimilation.

The identity of things and the fact that they can resemble others and be drawn to them, though without losing their singularity, is what is assured by the constant counterbalancing of sympathy and antipathy. However, it seems that the sympathy-antipathy pair is a relevant example for all the forms of resemblance. All the echoes of emulation, all the linkages of analogy are supported and maintained by the space governed by sympathy and antipathy, which seem to be drawing things together and holding them apart. This is the explanation for the world remaining identical; resemblances continue to be what they are and to resemble one another. [13]

Signatures

Convenientia, *aemulatio*, *analogy* and *sympathy* are the concepts that present the way the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one another. They also tell us what the paths of similitude are and the directions they take. Of course, these similitudes must be indicated on the surface of things and they must be visible marks for the invisible analogies. Therefore, there are no resemblances without signatures and it seems that the world of similarity can only be a world of signs; one should go straight to their marks if one wishes to know their nature. The system of signatures reverses the relation of the visible to the invisible and it is resemblance which was the invisible form that made things visible. This is the reason why the face of the world is covered with characters and ciphers. Pages are filled with strange figures that in some places repeat themselves and which wait to be deciphered.

Due to the fact that sympathy creates communication between our bodies and heavens and transmits the movement of the

planets, the shortness of a hand line can, for instance, reflect the simple image of a short life, or the intersection of two furrows mean an obstacle in one’s path, or the upward direction of a wrinkle – a man’s rise to success. Thus, the analogy between the human body and destiny has its sign in the whole system of mirrors and attractions and these analogies are indicated by sympathies and emulations.

Therefore, emulation may be recognized by analogy. For example, the eyes are like stars because they spread light over the face, just as stars light up the sky and spread the darkness. In the same way, man’s face and hands must resemble the soul to which they are joined. Resemblances require signatures, because none of them would be observable if they were not marked. Resemblance signifies exactly what it is indicating, being in this way a similitude. What it does indicate is not the homology; it is another resemblance, an adjacent similitude, one of another type which enables us to recognize the first and which is revealed in its turn by a third. Every resemblance receives a signature and this signature is no more than an intermediate form of the same resemblance. As a result, the sum of all these marks, sliding over the great circle of similitudes, forms a second circle, which is an exact duplication of the first. The signature and what it denotes are of the same nature, they obey a different law of distribution and the pattern from which they are cut is the same. [14] The nature of things, their coexistence, the way in which they are linked together and communicate is nothing other than their resemblance. This resemblance is visible only in the network of signs that crosses the world from one part to another.

The Limits of the World

Resemblance never remains stable within itself. It can be fixed only if it refers back to another similitude, which then, in turn, refers to another. Therefore, each resemblance has value only from the accumulation of all others and the whole world must be explored if even the slightest of analogies is to be justified and finally take on the appearance of certainty.

By positing resemblance as the link between signs and what they indicate, sixteenth-century knowledge condemned itself to never knowing more than the same thing. [15] From this point on, microcosm comes into play. The notion appeared during the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance, by a certain neo-Platonist tradition. By the 16th century, it had a very important role in the field of knowledge. It was claimed to be a world view or *Weltanschauung* and it had one or two functions in the epistemological configuration of the period. It was believed to be a *category of thought* and therefore, it applied the interplay of duplicated resemblances to all realms of nature. It affirms that everything will find its mirror and its macrocosmic justification on another larger scale and that the visible order of the highest spheres will be reflected in the darkest depth of the earth. Seen as a general configuration of nature, it indicates that there is a greater world and that its perimeter defines the limit of all created things; that at the far extremity of this great world there exists a privileged creation which reproduces, within its restricted dimension, the order of the heavens, the stars, the mountains, rivers and storms and that it is between the effective limits of this constituent analogy that the interplay or resemblances takes place. In this way, the distance from microcosm to macrocosm can not be infinite.

Notes

[1] *Longman Exams Dictionary*, Pearson Education Limited, UK, 2006.

[2] G. Porta, *La Physionomie humaine* (Fr. trans. 1655, p.i) in Foucault, Michel, “The Order of Things”, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 20.

[3] Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 21.

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, p. 3 in Foucault, Michel, “The Order of Things”, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 22.

[6] Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 22.

[7] Paracelsus, *Liber paramirum* (trans. Grillot de Givry, Paris, 1913, p. 3) in Foucault, Michel, "The Order of Things", London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 22.

[8] O. Crollius, *Traité des signatures* (Fr. trans. Lyon, 1624, p. 18) in Foucault, Michel, "The Order of Things", London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 23.

[9] Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 24.

[10] Ibidem.

[11] Ibidem.

[12] Porta, *Magic naturelle*, p. 72 in Foucault, Michel, "The Order of Things", London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 27.

[13] Foucault, Michel, "The Order of Things", London and New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 28.

[14] Idem, p. 32.

[15] Idem, p. 34.

Bibliography:

[1] Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

[2] *Longman Exams Dictionary*, Pearson Education Limited, UK, 2006.