

God is great and Niels Bohr is his prophet

By Lene Andersen

A 2005-reflection on the freedom of speech and the ways in which we think, written in the aftermath of the Mohammed cartoons. The thoughts presented here are a central part of the philosophy in Both-And.

- "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."
- "Either you are with us – or you are with the terrorists".
- "Those who say 'freedom of expression is absolute, *but...*' are traitors".
- "A cannot be both B and not-B at the same time".
- "All philosophers are human beings. Plato is a philosopher; ergo Plato is a human being".

As the above quotations show, the ancient Greeks still have a strong grip on us.

The first quotation, however, is inspired by the Gospel of Matthew and has set the international political agenda since about September 12, 2001.

The second quotation is a logical short-circuit; nevertheless, that is the direction public debate has taken lately.

The third and fourth quotations originate from a man who has shaped the Western European way of thinking for almost 2,300 years. His name is Aristotle, and his logic is so ingrained in our understanding of the world that we are not even aware that his philosophical framework permeates just

about everything we think and believe. We should appreciate this, though, for without Aristotelian logic, we would have had no Renaissance, no philosophy of the Enlightenment, no modern science, and probably neither a free society with freedom of expression nor coherent argumentation. A third point which Aristotle nailed down – or at least, it has been accredited to him – was that the validity of an argument does not depend on the topic, nor on who expresses it, but solely on the logical structure of the argument and the facts it refers to.

To talk about apples and oranges does not necessarily make a statement true or false. One can express truths about apples and one can express non-truths about apples – and the same goes for oranges. No topic in itself guarantees that what people say about it is in accordance with reality. In the same way, fruit-vendors, farmers, teachers and priests can comment upon apples and oranges, but then again, it is not, a priori, a given that what is being said by either is true. A pro-apple argument does not become true just because it is expressed by a priest – or a farmer for that matter.

Truth depends exclusively on whether you have studied what apples and oranges are like in reality – and to what degree the conclusions you draw regarding apples and oranges are logically valid.

If I held a piece of fruit in my hand, I would, according to Aristotle, be able to say: This fruit is either an apple or a non-apple – it cannot be both at the same time. Furthermore I could say: All apples are fruits; this is an apple, ergo, this is a fruit.

Aristotle developed his logic further than this, and when I postulate that, thanks to Aristotle, we divide the world into apples and non-apples, black and white, this is, from a strictly academic point of view, not the whole truth. But according to "lay-logic" – the logic which succeeded in oozing out of the universities and reaching all of us – our Aristotel-

ian heritage is characterized by an either-or between this-and-that. Either A is B or not-B; apple or not-apple. In Europe and the rest of Western civilization, we have schooled ourselves to think this way, and when topics like freedom of expression, sacredness, "them versus us", blasphemy, democracy, secularism, Islamism and similar topics come up, we understand them through this Aristotelian paradigm. Either you are with us—or you are against us! When things get totally out of hand we even mix everything together and conclude that, if you talk about a non-apple, it necessarily has to be an orange, and thus you either agree with us, and are therefore a democrat, or you disagree, which makes you a terrorist.

But isn't reality more sophisticated? Yes. Was Aristotle wrong? No. But in the meantime his logic has been supplemented by other forms of logic, and we must get used to a new logical paradigm. It's called fuzzy logic and was "invented" by an Iranian by the name of Lofti Zadeh about 40 years ago.

The word "fuzzy" says it all. Instead of perceiving the world as "either-or" with hard borders, Zadeh formulated a logic with gliding transitions. A ripe, freshly picked Granny Smith, for example, is very much an apple. The first tiny shoot of the apple-blossom, that little, green, sour apple, is less of an apple. But it is more apple than the orange, which isn't much of an apple. On the other hand, the orange is more apple than, for example, a coconut is. However, all of them are fruits, and thus the orange and the coconut are more apple than a horse is. The classic dilemma in fuzzy logic is this: How many grains of sand can you remove from a pile of sand before it is no longer a pile?

To say that freedom of expression is or should be absolute in the Aristotelian sense is not a good idea. Most adults would probably agree. Common decency tells us that you don't walk up to a handicapped person saying: "Hey, you're a bit clumsy, aren't you?", or if you are on a bus with a

three-year old, and somebody with a visible physical handicap enters, I suppose we all know the fear that junior suddenly, in his high-pitched child's voice, bursts out with something like: "Why does that man walk so funny?" It is, of course, legal to ask such a question; it's just that we know all too well that there are moral and social limits.

There is *more or less freedom* of expression, and it is an ongoing process to make sure that there is always as much of it as possible. With a high degree of freedom of expression, it is, however, also a constant process to discover how much freedom of expression there actually is—or should be. It is always a process to make sure we keep it, or improve it; fine-tune it to the current and specific situation, to a multi-cultural society, where freedom of expression must necessarily go hand in hand with safeguarding life-style, religion, minority rights etc. Freedom and safety for all must be weighed in relation to each other.

Freedom of expression is never "complete", because the world is constantly changing, and thus so are the conditions for freedom of expression. Therefore we must, from one moment to the next, find where its limits are. Though an ideal freedom of expression is absolute, in the real world there is *more or less* freedom, depending on what reactions we are willing to accept. Collective flag-burnings is just another form of expression, which those who consider the Danes a gang of infidels and nit-wits have all the right to show. If we, the Danes, can make fun of their prophet, they can also burn our flag. Quid pro quo.

Jyllandsposten (the Danish newspaper which printed the Mohammed cartoons) and the rest of us have learned where the limit for "scorn, ridicule, and mockery" is in relationship to *some* Muslims, but that does not mean *all* Muslims, or that freedom of expression has been eliminated or fundamentally threatened. That would have been the case had Aristotle been unconditionally right according to his own logic. But he wasn't. It simply means that for the time being

we must work specifically to improve our understanding of each other and of freedom of expression.

Does this mean that we will have freedom of expression and non-freedom of expression at the same time? Is that possible?

Yes, if we go further than Zadeh and his fuzzy logic and turn to Niels Bohr and his quantum physics, then we have the possibility of seeing the world in a totally different way.

Niels Bohr took all his contemporary colleagues by surprise when he claimed that the smallest parts of the atom do not follow our day-to-day common sense but the laws of quantum-mechanics. When you shoot a photon towards a metal sheet with two slits through which the photon can pass, the photon is in a state of so-called superposition, of going either of the two possible ways simultaneously. It goes through both slits at the same time, so to speak. That is, up until the moment when we measure it. Only then is it possible to discover which slit the photon actually passed through.

In this way, a third logical paradigm was created: the superposition, which supplements the two earlier ones. Where Aristotle talked about either-or, and Zadeh about more-or-less, Bohr allows us to talk about both-and; the apple and the non-apple exist side by side, and only at the moment we take a bite, do we discover if it was there. The same goes for the orange.

Therefore the members of the writers' union Danish PEN were not suffering from a collective and acute case of schizophrenia when they left their meeting agreeing to disagree over the Mohammed cartoons. They were just beginning the implementation of the new kind of logic. Both fronts in the union were right: the cartoonists from JyllandsPosten had the right to freely draw the cartoons of Mohammed the way they did; and all the Muslims in the world (and everybody

else, for that matter) had and have the right to be protected from hate speech. The two attitudes are in a superposition to each other, and only at the moment we step into the specific situation do we have to choose what the end-result of our attitude to freedom of expression and safeguarding life-style should be. Freedom of expression is a process and, by going through it, we influence it.

The Bohr paradigm breaks with our existing ideas about an absolute world which exists independently from us and our observation of it. Only at the very moment we observe the world, does the world choose its state. Only at the moment we decide to use freedom of expression or safeguard a certain life-style, do we discover where the line between the two is. Only at the moment we make laws about freedom of expression or pass judgement on that question, are we collectively able to arrive at a manifest state regarding freedom of expression. It is through our dealings with the world and each other that freedom of expression and safeguarding of life-style are created. Up until then, they are in a superposition to each other and the case is undecided.

So, DO we have freedom of expression? Well... we have both freedom of expression and non-freedom of expression. Until we choose, they are in a superposition. Another word for superposition is doubt. The fantastic thing about doubt is that it forces us to think and consider. In a world where many different kinds of people with different values live next to one another, one has to take many things into consideration. That wasn't necessary in the "Aristotelian" world of yesteryear when a truth was a truth once and for all.

Isn't this just abstract twiddle-twaddle which – at the most – is of interest to some nerdy members of a philosophy club?

People probably said the same thing about Aristotle 2,300 years ago when priests and rich people were allowed to be right solely because they were priests and rich people.

Ground-breaking ideas, however, take their own sweet time before they start shaping the general world-view. Bohr formulated quantum-physics and broke with traditional logic in the twenties; Zadeh came up with fuzzy logic in 1965. In the future, their thoughts will shape people's logic and world-view as much as Aristotle did.

Does this mean that democracy and freedom of expression are just relative things which can be conjugated to our own pleasure? No. It means that we choose how much democracy and freedom of expression we want, and that we ourselves are responsible for implementing what we choose. Only at the moment when we actually make a choice, do democracy and freedom of expression exist. They are not given beforehand and our concepts and ideas about them as absolutes are just ideas and concepts.

The three logical paradigms do not exclude one another, but supplement each other. From time to time, we must choose a paradigm. Either-or. At other times, it is more one paradigm, less the other. Furthermore, the choice of the applied paradigm can be in a superposition, both this kind of logic and that kind of logic. We ourselves are choosing according to which kind of logic we delineate as our world-view.

Should we have a secular or a religious society? Does it have to be either-or? Isn't it rather a more-or-less situation? And are the two not already in a superposition to each other? Being religious doesn't exclude that you are pro-democracy or read the Bible, the Koran or the Bhagavad Gita in a critical way. That the words of God are sacred and inviolable and are the foundation for your world-view, does not exclude that you are against the death-penalty and pro-homosexual marriages, nor that you insist on evolution instead of creationism, that you find as much inspiration in knowledge as in belief, that you find equal pleasure in meditating on the paradoxes of quantum physics as on those of the Kabbalah, and furthermore, insist on your right to watch "Life of Brian" and sing along with "Always look on the

Bright Side of Life" as often as you please and with great gusto.

Besides, would it not be possible to imagine that in all humanity's striving for greater awareness, a somewhat wobbly thread runs through Abraham, Moses, Confucius, Zoroaster, Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, Mohammed, Maimonides, Da Vinci, Galilei, Spinoza, Newton, Voltaire, Darwin, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Einstein, Bohr, Mandela, Tutu, Havel, the Dalai Lama and whoever the future and/or the Lord Almighty may have in store for us? Not that some are prophets and others are non-prophets, but that some are more of a prophet than others? And that it is up to each and every one of us who he or she would call a prophet?

The foundation of the secular, enlightened, modern society is that there is a lot of freedom of expression. A lot. But it will never reach 100%, and neither should it. However, we must fight tooth and nail against having freedom of expression curtailed by powerful people or organizations. On the other hand, minorities or weak groups or individuals should be protected against the cruder forms of freedom of expression. Who is powerful and who is weak always depends on the situation, and on who uses the freedom of expression. It's a crazy wonderful mix of either-or, more-or-less, both-and, as well as the fact that the world never is and never was absolute, but only exists because of our interacting with it.

Does this imply, then, that we can change our opinions like the wind blows, and that people become basically untrustworthy?

Only if one changes one's answers and opinions according to whom one is talking to. As long as we don't let our positions and opinions be decided by other people, then quantum logic works.