

The Limited Neutrality of Typologies of Systems: A Reply to Gullvåg

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In reply to Gullvåg (*Inquiry*, Vol. 18, 1975), I concede that there are limitations to a pluralistic metaphilosophy. The limits are not, however, specifiable. By increasing a philosophical system's comprehensiveness, one decreases its refutability; as the system becomes more comprehensive, it begins to incorporate its own rules of refutation and other concepts required for assessing validity, but there are no definite limits to comprehensiveness. By increasing a system's comprehensiveness one also diminishes the possibility of comparing that system with others. There is a fairly neutral but vague and imprecise way of expressing oneself metaphysically, but such expressions can never attain absolute neutrality. Nevertheless, it might be useful to retain, as a regulative idea, the notion that all comprehensive systems try to embrace the same single reality.

Introduction

Ingemund Gullvåg's "Naess's Pluralistic Metaphilosophy"¹ is a fine example of criticism which takes every care not to misrepresent the views under examination. Gullvåg offers some usefully succinct formulations of many aspects of these views and uses them to point to a number of weaknesses in the views. In what follows, I shall gratefully make some concessions and restate a way of thinking which I think important in itself and also in its consequences for the policy of philosophy departments.

Typologies of systems have on the whole been *post factum*. They try to furnish a sufficiently broad frame of reference to accommodate existing specimens, not all future possible specimens. But even so, they may not be broad enough. Indian surveys of *all* systems, the *sarvadarsanasamgrahas*, show a dependence upon specific Indian frames, while Karl Jasper's excellent typology manifests his psychological and existential leanings and can hardly be said to cover all Indian systems.² The former reveals a certain narrowness of compass if we try to accommodate other than Indian systems, and the latter illustrates how the inventor of a typology tends to make presuppositions which totally exclude them from the sphere of valid (consistent, true, tenable) systems.

A study of existing typologies suggests that it should be possible to construct wider and more neutral ones. More importantly, the higher the level of neutrality of the typology and the comprehensiveness of the system, the narrower the basis for establishing the invalidity of any of them. Propositions about philosophic systems in general presuppose an *understanding* of all systems. In my view this understanding can only reach certain approximations, because any understanding that occurs can do so only on the basis of a definite set of presuppositions, which cannot be brought into and out of play without altering the personality of the person whose understanding it is. My view, indecently, presupposes that concepts of understanding involve that of a person of some kind.

Really Existing and Identifiable Objects

Gullvåg writes:

With respect to objects, Naess apparently takes a view that is strikingly similar to the ontological standpoint on particulars that Peirce accepted before he came, at a late stage in his philosophical development, to acknowledge them as existing and identifiable independently of conceptual frameworks. . . . My conclusion here is that if there is such a presupposition underlying Naess's semantics and doctrine of systems, he has already deviated quite radically from the programme of system-neutrality.³

I hold that objects exist and are identifiable independently of concepts. With Moore I say I have two hands—for certain. I hold it to be objectively true.

But all this I affirm, or rather admit, “on the T_0 -level”, that is, as point-of-departure formulations which allow extremely different philosophical interpretations.⁴ Even philosophies which contain sentences such as “nothing exists” seems to hold that in certain senses *something* exists. I say “seem to”.

It may well be that some concepts of *maya* are such that in no sense can I imagine that I really and objectively have two hands. This would mean that I cannot understand certain *maya* philosophies, and that they are not taken account of in my typology.

Earlier Gullvåg says:

But I am not at all sure that Naess would want to accept such a picture of the world as sets of *objects* of different kinds, which *are there* independently of out conceptual systems and descriptions. Possibly he would reject it as not a system-neutral account of the relationship between system and reality. Or perhaps he would accept alternative accounts incompatible with the one just mentioned.⁵

This is *also correct*: when the T_0 -version of the object-independency formulation is made more precise, most or all plausible interpretations form highly unneutral philosophical statements—and sometimes false ones, so far as I can understand. I will, as Gullvåg indicates, include views incompatible with some of those precizations in my typology. The typology includes systems with I tend to regard as invalid or strange, but none that I feel to be utterly unintelligible. My hands may be unreal in many senses, but there is a (not easily described) limit to the degree of ontological unreality of my hands beyond which I would tend to say: “I do not follow; I cannot understand your position. Therefore I cannot take it into consideration in my typology.” I say this “undogmatically” (in Sextus Empiricus’s sense). I do not preclude the possibility that I will come to understand your position, and *not* understand that I did not understand.

Neutral Semantics as a Tool in Systems Theory

Gullvåg says that he thinks that “Naess’s notion of a ‘Kindergarten version’ of his semantics is programmatic rather than actualized in any exposition.”⁶

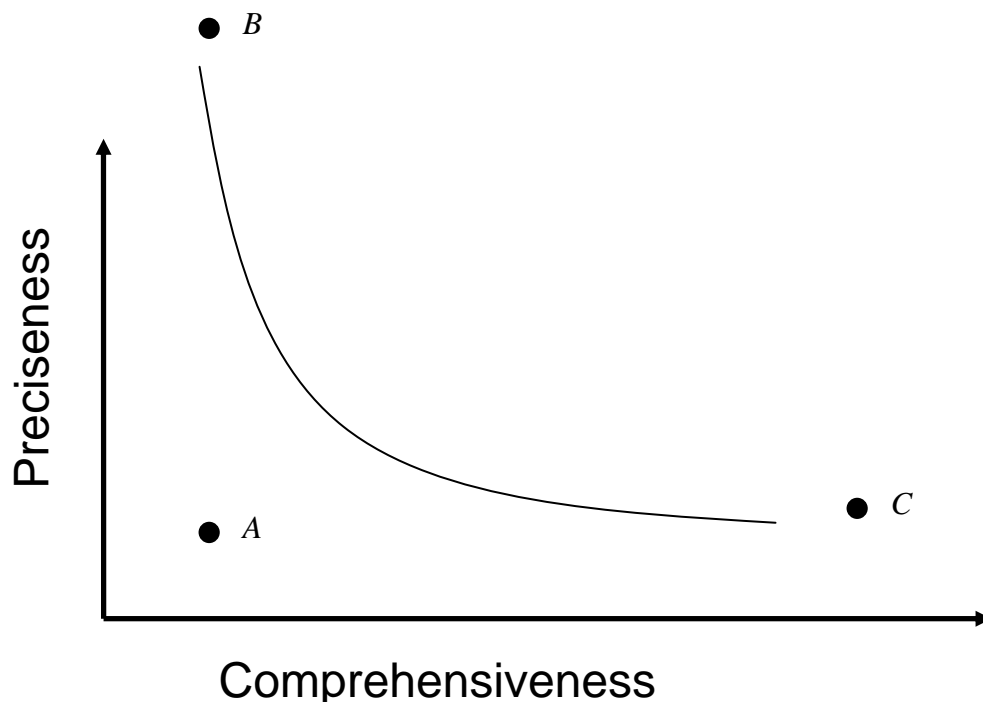
The semantics of my *Communication and Argument*⁷ can be given an exposition that is system neutral to an extremely high *degree*. This is, as Gullvåg indicates, a programme and a hypothesis. But the pluralistic meta-systematic theory makes use, I admit, of more precise versions. And the direction of precization is, presumably, not philosophically completely neutral. It is likely that metasystematic theory fails, to some extent, to fully reach the high level of neutrality intended. Readers can, with less effort than me, point out weaknesses. I can then try to reconstruct in order to avoid the specified weaknesses. But they must be shown before they can be eliminated.

Moderately Comprehensive, Moderately Precise Metatheory

Again Gullvåg:

Apparently, then, the pluralistic theory of systems cannot be a *theory* in any strict sense, that is, something that can in principle be evaluated with regard to truth, consistency, and entailments. Nor does Naess claim any such status for it. Some of his remarks suggest that his account of systems is a quasi-theoretical attempt to *show* or *indicate* something that cannot, *strictly speaking*, be stated. It cannot strictly speaking be correct to say anything about systems in general.⁸

Yes, but there are less paradoxical levels of the metaphilosophy of systems. It must be borne in mind that there are *two* dimensions—more or less comprehensive systems, and more or less precise typological conceptual frameworks dealing with systems. Between the two there is a complementarity relation—the more precise the conceptual framework, the less comprehensive the typology.



The extreme difficulties arise when we try to combine an extreme degree of comprehensiveness with even a modest degree of precision—like typology *C* in the diagram. Or where, as with *B*, a considerable degree of precision is combined with even a modest degree of comprehensiveness.

How precise must a theory be in order to be a theory “in any strict sense”? Gestalt-theory and some other theories which have generated much insight never acquired any substantial level of interpersonal preciseness. The metaphilosophy of systems may also generate or help insight despite its low interpersonal preciseness.

Systems: Absolutely or Relatively True—or Simply True?

Gullvåg quotes me as saying: “A system can legitimately claim truth and intersubjective validity, not merely expediency or subjective appropriateness.”⁹

What I tried to convey was that metasystematic assertions of plurality do not invalidate or make assertions of the simple kind “*p* is true” meaningless. That would invalidate or make meaningless the assertion “*p*.” In other words, the so-called absolute concept of truth remains. Only, strictly speaking, there is not just one such concept. A rich variety will occur if made precise in relation to different ontologies.

Furthermore, the substitution of “*p* is relatively true” or “*p* is true in relation to my system *S*” for “*p* is true” is of doubtful usefulness. If somebody calls a system “my system *S*,” *S* is not his total system. He administers typological concepts in such a way that he is able to place *S* within a class of different systems. Whatever his system, it is therefore wider than *S*.

This implies that a metasystematic relativism of the kind I assert on the *T*₀-level cannot be stated within a definite total system which is thereby relativized through assertions made by its own adherents.

Reality as a Directive Idea: There Is Only One Reality

In describing my views, Gullvåg says:

The rules for the use of the term “reality” make the notion of reality a kind of regulative or directive idea. “Reality” is not a term that stands for a definite structure or substructure. Here, however, it is natural to ask: In what sense is the idea of reality a directive idea? Does it determine a direction? Apparently, it doesn’t determine anything, since it does not exclude anything, for different, mutually incompatible systems are equally valid in the sense of agreeing equally well with reality.¹⁰

The use of the term “real” is such that it determines a direction towards oneness. Reality is one. In advocating a definite view concerning reality

and trying to refute opposing views, I do not permit the intrusion of the idea that the other views concern another reality, a second or third reality, *unrelated* to each other. If related, then they are mere parts of a greater whole.

A view may, of course, intend to cover a different part or aspect of reality from another view. If one philosopher says “*this* is reality,” the other “no, *that*,” a decision must be made in favour of only one of the possibilities, provided they can be shown to be different. If among philosophers we assert agreement about reality, we assume inevitably and correctly that it is the *same* reality we speak about. This also holds good when we speak of extremely different parts or aspects of reality.

Concerning the Validity of Comprehensive Systems

Gullvåg says:

“According to Naess’s pluralistic metaphilosophy, different, mutually incompatible, all-encompassing systems are equally ‘valid or true’.”¹¹

Yes, but a next step in the dialectical metaphilosophy of systems requires such utterances to be reformulated.

(a) More accurately I would say that there are no decisive arguments against an all-encompassing (consistent) system, and that if *anything* is valid, such a system is valid. (“Consistency” must be thought of as being defined within the system.)

(b) The formulation “different, mutually incompatible systems may agree equally well with reality” is of a moderate level of preciseness. The more comprehensive the system, the more difficult it is to make a systematic comparison, because more and more terms are defined *within* the system. This implies that hypotheses about incompatibility or compatibility have less and less basis for confirmation or disconfirmation. The degree of incomparability increases. Thus it is presumably more precise to say “different, mutually incompatible, or incomparable systems may agree with reality.” The term “equally well” suggests (wrongly) a kind of system-independent measure of agreement. Or we may use the following formulation: “There may be no adequate basis for a conclusion that one system agrees and another does not agree with reality, even if the systems are mutually incompatible.”

(c) All-encompassingness cannot be achieved without encountering grave logical problems. I would say “strict or absolute all-encompassingness is impossible.” On the other hand, fruitful conceptions of “near-total” or “maximally encompassing system” are what are needed in metaphilosophy. The term “total-system” is only used on the T₀-level, as is “total view.”

(d) “Anything is possible” must also be taken as a point-of-departure formulation. It serves to stress a trend towards a greater tolerance of assumptions which postulate states of affairs that generally tend to be called impossible.

If interpreted in an absolute way, the slogan implies “It is impossible that something is impossible.” This goes against my epistemology. I will not exclude the possibility that something is impossible. Transcendental philosophy, especially from the time of Kant, has proffered valuable hypotheses about impossibilities.

Gullvåg’s paper is a valuable contribution to the unending process of correction and elaboration which metaphysical inquiry needs if it is to adapt to changing standards and contexts.

Notes

¹ Ingemund Gullvåg, “Naess’s Pluralistic Metaphilosophy,” *Inquiry*, Vol. 18 (1975), No. 4, pp 391–408.

² Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, 1st edition. 1919. Translation into English of this great work is still lacking.

³ Gullvåg, p. 406.

⁴ *Ibid.*, see pp. 393 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁷ Arne Naess, *Communication and Argument*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo: George Allen & Unwin, London, 1965. Now published as *SWAN* Vol. 7

⁸ Gullvåg, p. 402.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.