



**Beam me
up,
Scotty!**



**English transcript
to the
podcast**

Beam me up, Scotty!

Methodological podcast on the METIS-Projekt

English transcript

Zürich: METIS Podcast Transcriptions 2023

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ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast of the METIS Project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature, and wisdom practices to be found on www.metis.ethz.ch.

*In this edition, we'd like to elicit another methodological pillar of the METIS Project. Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* will be center stage of this talk. Michael Hampe, Professor of Philosophy at ETH Zurich, and initiator of this intercultural philosophy platform will help us to understand how Goodman's investigation can be of use to such a platform. My name is Eliane Schmid, and I welcome our listeners and Michael Hampe who is here in the studio with me today.*

MH: Hello.

ES: Hi! I have a Wittgensteinian quote to start with: "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him." Well, human beings do have a lot of words and concepts, but nevertheless we

fail to understand each other very, very often, even if we share the same language and the same culture. METIS is then confronted with a Babylonian confusion, or what do you think?

MH: Well, it can be a Babylonian confusion we are living in if we do not try to understand each other. But it is not necessary so that we have to live in a Babylonian confusion. So it's up to us if we live in different cultural bubbles or as Nelson Goodman called it, "in different worlds".

The interesting thing about Nelson Goodman is that he thought that we can jump from one world in the other world, that we can make worlds out of worlds. And I don't know now what he would have said to the Wittgenstein quote you gave us, if we would be able to jump into the world of a lion. He probably would have thought that that is too difficult because there are many practices that lions follow, which we cannot participate in, say, hunting a deer or so. We can only do that with a rifle, but not with our teeth. So the life form of a lion might be so different from ours that we cannot transport, say, or translate or bridge our world into the world of a lion. But I think Goodman thought that if we look at the way humans produce worlds, then we can understand how we come from one world to another world.

ES: Are we talking about imagined worlds here or concepts of worlds, or how can we understand these worlds that Goodman is talking about?

MH: That's a very good question. It's not easy to answer it because Goodman was quite radical in his use of the concept of world. He thought that there is no possibility to talk about our world without using a certain symbol system. So we have no non-symbolic access to the world according to Goodman. Even if we feel pain or if we see something red, then we interpret the pain as being harmful or non-harmful, being the pain of a tumor or being the pain of a tooth. All pains are given to us in a certain symbol system. All colors are given to us in a certain symbol system. Red can be the red of a cherry, the red of a tomato, the red of lips or whatever.

Our access to the world is never unsymbolic he thought. And because we have different symbol systems, he thought that we actually live in different worlds and not just imagined worlds, but actual worlds. So he believed in different actual worlds. And once he compared his own project to the project of the philosopher Cassirer, who also talked about symbol systems, then developed a philosophy of symbolic forms. And Cassirer said that there is a symbol system of mythology, the symbol system of art, the symbol system of science. And what Goodman does is radicalizing this idea of different symbol systems by saying our experience of the world is always shaped by certain symbol systems.

ES: There is no real world we all live in. We all live in our different symbol systems.

MH: Well, these symbol systems are real, our worlds are just a mixture of experiences that are formed by symbol systems. And if we want to talk about our experiences independently from the symbol systems, we just don't have any method of talking about...how should we talk about our experience without using symbols? We just can't do that. And therefore our worlds are shaped in more or less different ways by the different symbol systems.

That's in fact a thought that not only Goodman had, but that can also be found in Kant who thought that we need concepts in order to make experiences, that there are no experiences that are not conceptually shaped. And what Kant thought, was that these concepts are universal, that all human beings use the same concepts like space and time and causality in order to shape their experiences. And Goodman thinks or believes or shows that we use different concepts especially in different sciences in order to shape our experiences.

ES: We need to find a way to talk with one another and to bring these symbol systems into a discourse with one another.

MH: That's at least the idea we have in the METIS project. Goodman himself was not so much interested in bringing people from different cultures into contact with each other so that they can understand them better. But he was very much interested in the way art and science develops. And if you take Newtonian physics for example, you see that Newtonian physics is

very different from Einsteinian physics. And that's because the concepts of space and time in Einstein's physics are different from the concepts of space and time in Newtonian physics.

And in Newton you have a container space and an absolute time, where in Einstein the space is something that is related to mass and there is no empty space and time and space are connected to the velocity of bodies that move through fields. So it all seems very different.

And there are some relativists who say Einstein and Newton talked about entirely different things. They are 'incommensurable' was the term. And Goodman shows that you can produce Einstein's world out of Newton's world by distorting Newton's concepts a little bit, by understanding them in a different way and then you can understand Einsteinian physics as distorted Newtonian physics, or you can understand Newtonian physics as simplified or distorted Einsteinian physics.

ES: It's all about bringing things in relation to one another again, in that case?

MH: That's right, you bring them in relation to another, and you say they are different. Goodman would say the Einsteinian world is different from the Newtonian world, but nevertheless, you can make the Einsteinian world out of the Newtonian world by changing it a little bit. He was an art dealer and he applied it also to paintings by say, you can show how cubist painting develops out of a certain way, say the impressionists painted and the way photographs were made and the way photographs had an impact on painters and so on. So he tried to show how ways of painting are ways of world making and how ways of painting in a certain way developed out of former ways of painting.

And now we try to apply this idea to intercultural relations. So we try to say that in Buddhism say you have a certain attitude to making claims. What relevance should claims have in your life? And then we look say at skepticism and at Pyrrhonic skepticism, and then we say: "Well, Pyrrhonic skepticism is certainly different from Buddhism because it seems that the Pyrrhonian skeptics did not meditate where the Buddhists meditate." But nevertheless, the idea that your mind gets calm if you do not hold strong views is common in both of them.

You might look at Buddhism as a sort of distorted skepticism or you might look at skepticism as a sort of distorted Buddhism. So, you get a relation between traditions of wisdom that use different concepts and you accept them that they are different. But nevertheless, you can travel from one wisdom tradition to the other one.

ES: But to kind of travel back and forth, to find these relations, do we then need to start with the same need? So if you say that we want to find inner calmness, is this the starting point we need to look at these different forms of philosophy and literature? Or how can we go about starting these relations?

MH: Now that's a very difficult undertaking I would say, because you have to be very cautious how you deal with the differences. And I would say there are two extremisms in our present way of looking at cultural differences. The one is say dogmatic relativism that you say: "The people in China are so different from us that we will never understand what they mean by death, what they meant by friendship. And we are not allowed to argue with them about deaths, friendship, or love because Chinese are Chinese people and Swiss people are Swiss people."

I would say that's dogmatic relativism, which is to my view at the background of all those people who produce strong criticism of cultural appropriation. They treat people in different cultures as a sort of aliens say, which we cannot understand, like the lion who if he would speak, we would not understand the lion. And they almost seem to say: "Well, if Chinese speak, and even if you learn Mandarin, you will never understand a Chinese person because you have not been brought up in their culture."

ES: So, Goodman is a bit more optimistic if we think about it.

MH: Very much so. He's also a relativist, but he's not a dogmatic relativist. He calls himself a rational relativist. But before I talk about the way he thinks relativism can be made rational, I want to distinguish his type of relativism from dogmatic universalism. Dogmatic universalism would say we could only understand people in China or Japan if we would produce a universal

global culture in which we all use the same symbol system. And I think that is imperialism, that you would try to draw people out of their histories and put a global, perhaps artificial culture on top of their head in order to put people into contact.

ES: Because we would have to define one thought to follow, right? Someone would have to say, this is the way we think and we all need to do this.

MH: That's right. It was tried in a very Goodmanian way some time ago by producing an artificial language like Esperanto, that you try to make people understand each other by eliminating all the historically grown languages and put some artificial language on top of them in order to put them in contact. And as we all know, that did not really work.

So symbolic structures have a history and people adhere to their histories and they like the way they lead their life, and you cannot just pull them out of their ways without being violent. So you have to respect different forms of life. You do not need a global culture. You do not need a global symbolic system. But nevertheless, you could help people to understand each other all over the globe by showing how you can transform one symbol system in another symbol system.

And that's what Goodman tried. He tried to show that Newton and Einstein did not live in enclosed bubbles and that you could not understand Newton from an Einsteinian perspective and the other way around because he knew that students of physics can understand both Einstein and Newton and they developed out of each other.

And we now apply this to wisdom literature by saying, certainly Zhuangzi is different from Immanuel Kant say, but nevertheless, I can relate the symbol system of the Kantian ethics to the symbol system of the Daoistic or Confucian ethics.

ES: METIS actually wants to embrace all these symbol systems and kind of bring them into contact with one another.

MH: That's exactly the right description. We want to bring them in contact with each other and to mirror them in each other, mirror one symbol system of the wisdom tradition A in the

symbol system of the wisdom tradition B, without producing a universal symbol system, without producing a world wisdom tradition or a universalism of wisdom.

ES: So, I'm trying to think of an example that you might be able to give us to kind of have a clear image that we can understand Goodman's symbol systems.

MH: Well, there are lots of examples. One example is that people deal with death and burial ceremonies differently in Tibet say, and here in Europe. You have corpses being put on stones in high mountains in order to feed animals from the corpses. And if you look at this way of dealing with dead bodies, you might think that there is no respect for the dead person if you do not understand the symbolic contexts in which this tradition has developed. And...

ES: Yes. Thinking in our own box, we would think: "Oh no, this is horrible." Our symbol system would not allow us to do such a thing.

MH: That's right. Yeah, yeah. But if you are Buddhist and if you believe in reincarnation, if you believe in empathy with animals, then you are doing something very gracious and beautiful by feeding say the body of your father to eagles and vultures. There's nothing gruesome about it. It's only gruesome if you think that meat is a thing and that you treat your dead father like a thing if you give him to the birds. And I think for Buddhists in Tibet, it would look gruesome to dig a hole in the ground and to put the body into the ground without bothering about who could be fed from the flesh of this body.

Without understanding the intellectual backgrounds, the symbolic background of these ceremonies, we are often shocked by what people do in different cultures. And if we start to understand the symbolic background, we see that both care for their dead. So in fact, the act of burying and the act of feeding the body to the animals are similar, say in mood, perhaps even similar in intention. They try to solve the problem: How can you deal with your sorrow of the dead. That a dear person is dead now and you need some farewell, so you produce a ceremony. But these ceremonies are very different because the symbolic background in which you create it is different. And once we study these backgrounds, we will not be shocked, I think, by what other people do in different symbolic contexts.

ES: In order for us to not be shocked by others, we need to keep an open mind. And before we start judging other practices, we should think about what context these things happen in.

MH: That's right. As people thought that Einsteinian physics is a sort of madness because it does not use Euclidean geometry anymore, the studying of Einsteinian physics shows that it's not at all a kind of madness. It's as rational as Newtonian physics. It's just a different symbol system that relates to slightly different experiences.

And I think you could say the same about different burial ceremonies, that it's not at all that one burial ceremony is horrific, is a horror show, that burning people, feeding them to animals, throwing them into a river or burying them are disgusting or mad practices. You have to understand these practices by reconstructing the symbolic frame. And by doing that, you can support the understanding of people let's say, that they do not consider each other as mad or irrational.

ES: And to go back to the title of Goodman's text: 'Ways of Worldmaking', so we do actually make worlds in that case.

MH: Yeah, we do.

ES: The examples that you gave with the burials in that case, we have our different worlds, and they are actually made up. We kind of need to move away from the idea that there is the one truth that we can find in that case. So we as people have to come to terms with the fact that we can never find the one truth in the world.

MH: Yeah, I think that's the right description. But the difficulty with this description is that we have something lost, that once we had the one truth, and now we have lots of different truths. But you can think about truths as you can think about time. We all live in different time zones. It's now, I think six hours later in Taipei than it is here in Zurich. And it's now nine hours earlier in California than it is here in Zurich. And in the same way burying people is different in Tibet than it is from burying people in Switzerland. But we have not lost one type of burying people. We have not lost one type of feeling sorrow for the dead.

And we never had one time all over the world. There were always different time zones. What we need is computational systems so that we know while they are six hours ahead in Taipei now and nine hours behind us in California now, and Goodman tried to produce such a transformative system between symbol systems. We have to understand what being sorry about your dead means in Tibet and what it means in India. So you can somehow not have a world time, but you have different burial zones say, that are produced by symbolic forms.

ES: And well, the METIS time or the Wisdom Talk time is actually up now if we have to think about time and what time we are in right now. So I'd like at this point to thank you very much for being here today and for explaining these different systems to us.

MH: Thank you for your questions.

ES: And I would like at this point also to highlight that please go and look at our website and there is lots to discover, and also look in our show notes with the links to the archives for the texts. Please stay curious, please look around, please access www.metis.ethz.ch.

This Meta-METIS Wisdom Talk was produced by Martin Münnich and supported by ETH Zürich and the Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum in Hamburg.