Neighbours

Henk Barendregt

Paper written as an attempt to put into words a certain 'thought/feeling' experience, which I will call 'A'. I had A the first time around 1959 and thereafter a couple of other times.

A cannot be obtained by volition. It sometimes just appeared, usually if I started thinking about the Universe; of what would there be if the earth had not existed; then a thought association would start, going over into mental perceptions that cannot be put into words; then suddenly A could be there.

The experience A has the following aspects.

- A lasts very short, only a few seconds.
- A is infinitely frightening and (paradoxically) at the same time infinitely blissful.
- A is the most powerful experience one may have (that is how it feels).
- It feels to be the most important experience as well.

To give some intuition about the experience: A does confronts us with non-being, with nothingness. This nothingness is frightening, because in it one does not exist. At the same time A is blissful, because experience is there, in a fundamental selfless way.

When I had A the second time, I remembered very well the first time it occurred, but also that the aspects fade away almost as fast as the experience itself. Therefore I wrote down on a piece of paper the aspects listed above. After the second time A faded away, again these aspects as experience did not stick into my memory. So, rereading the note I thought: 'This is nonsense'. Nevertheless I kept it in a special place.

Then A reoccured about a year later and I remembered the written note that I kept. The written aspects corresponded exactly to the renewed experience. Then I decided to find out more about it.

The experience A was the reason that I became interested in Buddhism, after first being a short while on the track of some existentialist literature.

I had A about two times during the years I did some zazen (1972-1979), once sitting and once working at Tassajara Mountain Center in the Big Sur area in California. Later I started with vipassana (1979-present). That method enabled me to separate the fear and joy aspects in a fundamental way.

The meaning of this paper is that being able to be aware is more basic than the contents of the awareness. The concept of the neighbours was a tool to convey this.

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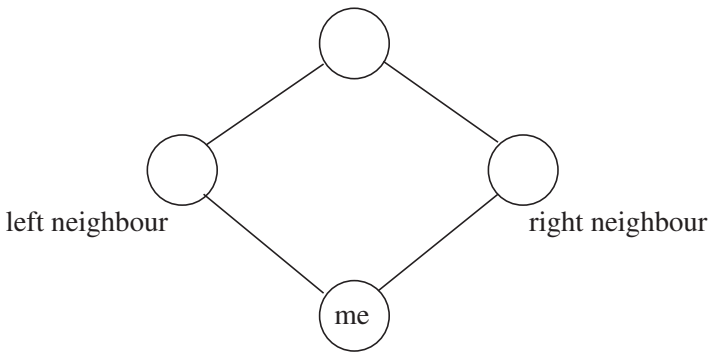
HB July, 1998.

Neighbours

I am! But I only can exist, if I have something to perceive. Or better, my Universe (=me) has to contain objects. These are my neighbours; I have two of them, a left and a right neighbour.

"Hi", I say to my left neighbour, "you also exist and you are my left neighbour." "You are my right neighbour," he says, "but I also have a left neighbour. Do you perhaps also have a right neighbour?" "Yes", I say, and I ask my right neighbour whether he also has two neighbours. Indeed this is the case. "Hey", says my left neighbour, "if you speak to your right neighbour, then I only can hear you, not him." "This must be because he is not your neighbour", I answer him, "and if you speak with your left one, then I will not be able to hear him".

That turned out to be correct. Thus I soon became curious about the structure of the Universe. Whether we neighbours form a cycle or are an infinite sequence. I discuss this with my two neighbours and ask them to pass on this problem so that as much neighbours as possible will investigate it. But now something funny happens. My left and right neighbour both say that their other neighbour, that I hence cannot see, states that this is being asked also by his other neighbour. I get the wild conjecture that the left neighbour of my left one is the same as the right neighbour of my right one! If this hypothesis is true, then the Universe has a very simple structure:



But now my hypothesis has to be verified. It could be the case that the intended neighbours are not the same, but that by coincidence simultaneously the same question is being asked. In that case there are also scientists somewhere else in our Universe. I agree with my two neighbours that they will give simultaneously, triggered by a signal from me, an impulse to their other neighbour. And what is the result? Each time the intended neighbours say that they get the impulse also from the other side. We repeat the experiment often enough to state with certainty that the structure of the Universe is as we thought it was. We all understand the structure of the Universe and using it I can speak directly or indirectly with all neighbours. We feel comfortable and master the Universe.

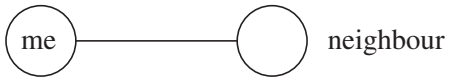
But what happens? I believe that the Universe is ceasing to exist, just now

we can control it! Yes, there it goes. The Universe echoes "Farewell" and then ...

Universe exit

Gee, I am again! Perhaps for you on Earth cultures have raised, are fallen down and have been forgotten. But for me this pause was less than a second. This time I have only one neighbour.

"Hi", I say, "you also exist and are my unique neighbour". "Yes", he says, "I also have only one neighbour, that's you". This time the Universe is very simple:



Again the Universe threatens to disappear. "Help", I say to my neighbour. "Didn't you learn yet" he comforts me, "that understanding the Universe is in contradiction with existence?"

Universe exit

I am! Still I am curious to know the structure of the Universe, even if it ceases when I know it. This time I have four neighbours: one left (a_1), one right (a_2), one above (b_1) and one under (b_2). I say to a_1: "Hi, do you exist too?", but at the same time a_2 says the same to me. To a_2 I say: "Wait a moment I will answer you soon". But the same I hear from a_1. All right I think, now I can answer a_2. "Yes, I also exist". But now a_1 says this to me. It turns out that with b_1 and b_2 the same awkward interaction takes place.

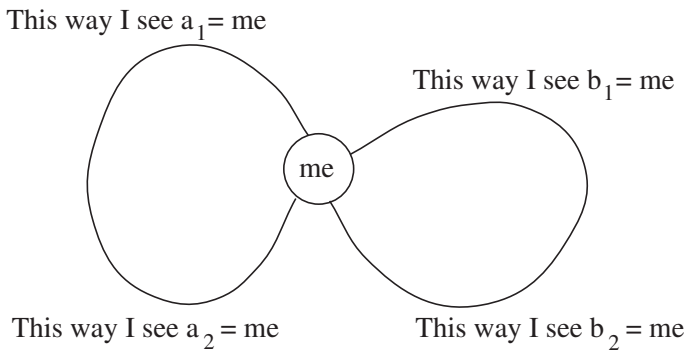
I have to think about this for myself; with my neighbours one cannot discuss. I have the following facts:

1. I talk to $a_1 \Rightarrow a_2$ says the same to me;
2. I talk to $a_2 \Rightarrow a_1$ says the same to me;
3. I talk to $b_1 \Rightarrow b_2$ says the same to me;
4. I talk to $b_2 \Rightarrow b_1$ says the same to me.

What now is the structure? After many considerations I come to the strange conclusion

$$a_1 = a_2 = b_1 = b_2 = \text{me!}$$

The Universe consists only of me with the relation neighbour, this way:



And indeed, I am right: the Universe ceases to exist. This is the consequence of . . . .

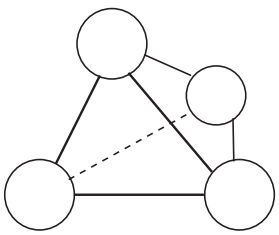
Universe exit

I am! Carefully I look around. I see nothing but myself. Infinite anxiety gets a hold of me, because someone becomes afraid when he is alone. I try to escape my empty I-ness in the neighbours, but the Universe consists only of me!

Fortunately it is ceasing now.

Universe exit

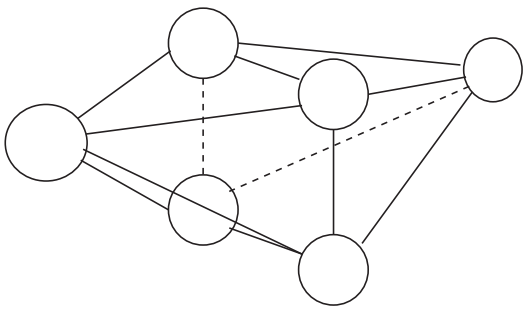
I am! I now have four, no five, ten, infinitely many and yet zero neighbours. It is just me with arrows (the relation neighbour). In order to prevent my anxiety I just pretend that these neighbours are real. I am simply able to do that, even without talking simultaneously. In my first two Universes I did this too, only unconsciously so. Good, now I can give the Universe all kind of shapes:



Lovely!

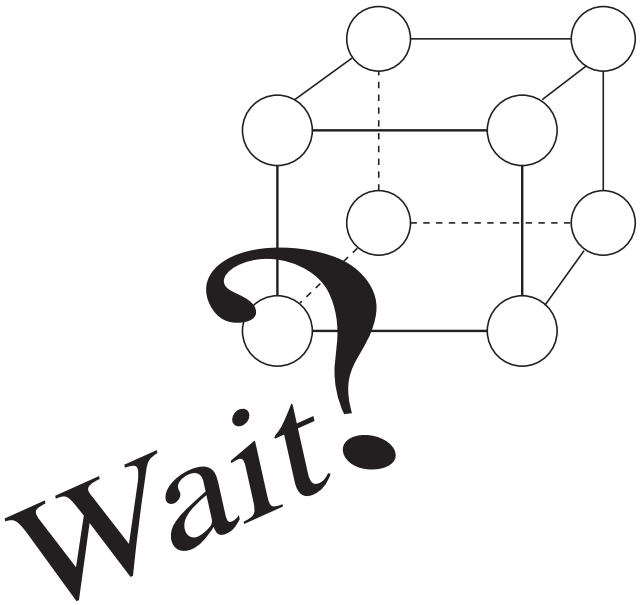
Universe exit

And



Universe exit

And



But wait a minute? (Fortunately I am still hanging with a question-mark onto the Universe.) What am I doing? To escape my anxiety I run from one Universe to the next. If I start to think about this, then I will understand something more. What should I do? Being intimately together with the transient neighbours or look for the truth .... Determined I choose the latter.

I am freed from my neighbours. These are only arrows from myself to myself. I have the power to create them and as soon as I understand the structure of what I have made, the Universe ceases to be. But now I understand not only something about one Universe, I have insight in all Universes. What is left? I feel that my Universe starts to cease. But much more: never there can appear a new Universe, because I will understand it again. Frightened and eagerly I am

sliding into the abyss. Still the neighbours are calling faintly. Shall I? It is still possible .... No, no more neighbours!

Universe exit

Henk Barendregt @ 1964

Editorial note. We do not need to be worried about our friend: as he has told us confidentially, he is safely in the

GREAT ETERNAL VOID

of which all existence is part. Enjoy! Gone are the neighbours!