

## Dogmas, Idols and the Edge of Chaos

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### Abstract

*Neither Modernism nor Postmodernism provides an understanding of the human person that is adequate to reveal our relationship to the non-human world. In particular, the science of human ecology is increasingly dominated by an abstract vision that only increases our alienation from ourselves and the natural world. To change this we have to realize the necessity and power of Not Knowing that is the deepest meaning of the open-endedness of the scientific spirit. We should understand that our primary task as teachers is not to transmit knowledge, but to nurture in our students the precise and sensitive attention which the mystery of the world demands.*

We are born with an erotic connection to the world which is too often lost as we leave childhood. To keep connected we need contact with lovers. This is not generally one of the stated aims of education. Somehow we survive, but some of us hope that eventually we'll find teachers who share our love for the world. Sometimes this happens. Often it doesn't. Instead of *amateurs*, we find professionals. To be one of those, you have to Profess. And to do that, you have to Know, to be a Master of your Discipline. Too often, what began in love and wonder becomes *only* a Discipline.

I spoke once with a woman who wanted to become an ecologist, but changed her mind in graduate school. She said "I refused to turn the animals I loved into optimal foraging devices." Many of us feel this sense of revolt. We want to move out into the world, fully engaged. Instead we are provided with abstract models, and one currently popular model is the "adaptive system." The goal is to provide a synoptic understanding of the world, a "Theory of Everything."

The most powerful symbol of such a God's Eye view is the image of the blue Earth seen from space. But we are not God, and instead of seeing with God's Eye we find our vision becoming Titanic, Cyclopean. And something is missing. Nowhere is there anything like a "person." We find organisms, rational economic actors, and consumers, but as cognitive scientists are happy to point out, we do not find a "soul." Ivan Illich says with typically stark clarity: "As long as you think about the world as a whole, the time for human beings is over" (Cayley 1992, 281).

One way in which the unifying schemes of science have been resisted by some in the humanities is to claim that the

concept of Single Vision is self-deconstructing. But post-modernists engage in a dangerous game. Recall Ulysses' capture by Cyclopean Vision in the form of Polyphemos. Ulysses is a Trickster. He tells the giant "My name is Nobody." When the blinded Polyphemos roars out of his cave in agony, crying "Nobody's tricked me!" the other Cyclopes laugh and walk away. This works for Ulysses. But there is a risk in playing the mercurial Trickster, deconstructing every form of knowledge: if you have no center, you become Nobody.<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing in modern scientific cosmology, and precious little in postmodern humanism, which enables us to imagine the Person as a category as basic as Space, Time and Energy, and ultimately as indefinable. Henry Corbin, the French philosopher and theologian, has argued that we face the possibility of the annihilation of the Person (Corbin 1981).<sup>3</sup> The abstractions of modern science do not include it. Neither do the multiple visions of postmodernism. This occurs in a culture so frantic that we hardly notice our absence.

The root of this catastrophe lies in our absolute commitment to a certain kind of knowledge and the power that it confers. Chiseled in huge letters on the library at my graduate school was written: "Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make ye free." This used to bother me, since I didn't know of any truths that were making me free. I was pretty neurotic then, and every time I walked by I thought of Nietzsche's Truth: "God is Dead!" I kept thinking "that's not what they mean." I had no answer to the question, Which Truth will make us free?

I was raised in an exceedingly secular household. I did not know that the words come from the Gospel of John. They are spoken by Christ. The whole passage is:

*"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*

(John 8: 31-32)

This explains the words chiseled in the stone. This is the kind of Truth that frees. But a secular culture has no access to it, and our search for knowledge is not contained within limits imposed by a sense of the sacred. We believe, or we act as if we believe that each new fact, each new discovery will liberate us. We behave as if all knowledge is equal, that knowledge is information and information is Power.

This is dangerous. In what I take to be the spirit of Henry Corbin, I want to counter it with a plea for the recognition of the necessity and power of Ignorance. I said this in class last Fall and it made students nervous. It should. But so should the claims of Knowledge. There are kinds of Ignorance, just as there are kinds of Knowledge, and we do not know how to distinguish any of them. I most emphatically do not mean the Ignorance which takes refuge in dogma and hatred and fear, but that which confers the blessing of humility, and is required for love.

There is a tradition in Western culture which affirms the importance of humility in the face of our finitude, and so, of a kind of Ignorance, beginning with Socrates, who was so threatening to the dogmatists of his time that he was put to death. A pinnacle was reached in the 15th century with *De Docta Ignorantia* (On Knowing Ignorance) of Nicolas of Cusa, who hoped to oppose the dominion of Aristotelian logic, which he saw could never be “a fitting instrument to investigate a universe created by [an] infinite God...” (Dolan 1962, 56). Our reason operates within bounds, for we are finite. Nicolas of Cusa writes:

*...we may be compared to owls trying to look at the sun; but since the natural desire in us for knowledge is not without a purpose, its immediate object is our own ignorance. Nothing could be more beneficial for even the most zealous searcher for knowledge than his being in fact most learned in that very ignorance which is most particularly his own; and the better a man will have known his own ignorance, the greater his learning will be*

(Dolan 1962, 8-9).<sup>4</sup>

Four hundred years later, in the shadow of the Enlightenment, Keats felt the limits of an excessive rationality yet again. Charles Olson writes:

*...John Keats, walking home from the mummings' play at Christmas 1817, and afterwards he'd had to listen to Coleridge again, thought to himself all that irritable reaching after fact and reason, it won't do. I don't believe in it. I do better to stay in the condition of things. No matter what it amounts to, mystery confusion doubt, it has a power, it has what I mean by Negative Capability. Keats, without setting out to, had put across the century the inch of steel to wreck Hegel, if anything could.*

(Olson 1996, 46)

In the words of George Steiner, it is this negative capability that “allows us to inhabit the tentative.” (Steiner 1989, 176).<sup>5</sup> We need a dose of this now, and there are those who argue for it even within science itself.

Jacob Bronowski is a powerful spokesman for the view that the fundamental characteristic of science is its opposition to all dogma. In the forever unforgettable moments of his television series *The Ascent of Man* filmed at Auschwitz, he says:

*It is said that science will dehumanize people and turn them into numbers. That is...tragically false... This is where people were turned into numbers. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. When people believe they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave... We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power.”*

(Bronowski 1974, 374).

For Bronowski, ignorance is belief in absolute knowledge. And although there is something special about science as he understands it, there is nothing special about scientists. They fall all too often into dogma like the rest of us.

Another challenge to the domination of Certainty comes right from the heart of theoretical biology in complex systems theory. Stuart Kauffman argues that adaptive systems at all scales, from the cell to the society, are most resilient, most able to change in the face of changing environments, when they exist on the “edge of chaos,” balanced between chance and necessity. The law-like we can foresee; the contingent is always a surprise. On the basis of theoretical work of his own and of many others, Kauffman suggests that it is characteristic of sufficiently complex natural systems to be inherently unpredictable *in principle* over comparatively short time scales in many crucial aspects of their behavior. Because we ourselves live on the border between chaos and order, there is an inherent limit on how much we can know, and we must be careful to take small steps. We cannot see very far ahead. The haphazard experimentations of a democratic, pluralistic and de-centralized world

*may be far and away the best process to solve the complex problems of a complex evolving society... All we...can do is be locally wise, not globally wise... Only God can foretell the future... We can only do our local, level best.*

(Kauffman 1995, 28-29)

I believe that the *docta ignorantia*, the “knowing ignorance” which Nicholas of Cusa defended, provides a way between the absolute dogmas of totalitarianisms of all kinds, and the nihilism which Corbin argues is the inevitable outcome of any postmodern relativism (Corbin 1981). The post-modernists are on to *something*, since the obvious response to Single Vision is Multiple Vision. We want not the single

vision of the Titanic Cyclops, but perhaps a re-imagination of the Old Testament vision of Ezekiel: the wheels of the Chariot had rims full of eyes all around. But what prevents a dissolution into nihilism? What prevents “negative capability” from being merely a back door onto the landscapes of totalitarianism, where the individual as such has no autonomy, no place, no meaning? What cosmology can save the person?

We are losing ourselves because we are Positivists. We have lost touch completely with that distinction known to medieval theologians between the positive and negative attributes of God.<sup>6</sup> The Supreme Being of Positive Theology exhibits attributes such as Goodness, Power, Justice. This Deity is an inflated likeness of the creatures of the world, us mostly, and is in some sense knowable; Big, but knowable, because it is somehow “like us.” Modern science is a secularized version of this: the world is in principle within our grasp, and we can imagine having a Theory of Everything. And, knowing Everything, we will be in Control. Positive Theology breeds Positivist Science.

But, if you have Everything, then what’s left is: Nothing. When you know the attributes of God, when you have found the Theory of Everything, You’re done! You have the Truth. And then you’re really dangerous. It only remains to make everyone see the Truth. And, you must hold this Truth very tightly indeed, because the alternative to Everything is the Abyss.

But there is another Nothing. The source of Being cannot itself be another being. It must be somehow *like* Being; so says positive theology. But it must also be beyond, unlike all Being: that’s Negative Theology. This is not a Black Hole which consumes and annihilates. It is the No-thing from which all being derives, which is the source of all things.

There are two faces to everything, corresponding to the two faces of Divinity, the Positive and the Negative. To the first correspond attributes like location, velocity, genotype, trophic level, psychological type, gender, race... But then, beyond what is knowable, lies, not the Abyss, but the Gift. We may call this Presence. It is what keeps the world, and each thing in it *open*, alive and Real, and at the same time *it is the principle of individuation itself*. It is hard to talk about, since it emanates from beyond the realm of discursive knowledge. But it can be felt. It may be in some sense “mystical” but it is in no way indeterminate. Christopher Alexander calls it the Quality Without a Name. He writes:

*The fact that this quality cannot be named does not mean that it is vague or imprecise. It is impossible to name it because it is unerringly precise. Words fail to capture it because it is much more precise than any word.*

(Alexander 1979, 29)

The traditions of Abrahamic monotheism hold that it is in the human person that this Presence can become most shattering, most God-like. It is what keeps us irreducible to optimal foraging devices, or genes, or history. Yet it is not restricted to human beings alone. It is the spark of divinity in all things. It is the essential counterweight to Positive theology and Positivist science, which want to tell us finally and forever who and what we, the world, and God are. But there can never be a final Theory of Everything. There can never be a final theory of anything, because the Absolute source of all being is, in the words of the Sufis, “an Ocean without a shore,” not encompassed by any system. It must reveal itself in a myriad lights, a multitude of perspectives, none of which can ever exhaust its fullness. It is the necessary peacock’s tail of reality, each eye precisely detailed.

And so idolatry is forbidden in the Abrahamic tradition. Idolatry is believing that there is somewhere you can stop knowing, having attained the Truth, about the world, about a thing, about a person. The recognition of Presence transmutes idols into icons which are always more than they appear.<sup>7</sup>

Abolishing idolatry does not mean anything goes. Each step requires an attention to place, to context, to the particular, which we might well call “ecological” in the sense in which the word is used by the lovers, the “amateurs,” those who have not yet been taken captive by a “discipline.” Always we must think, always feel. There is enormous responsibility in this, and it is tremendously difficult. Vaclav Havel says that stupidity consists of passing on ideas without thinking them. Insensitivity consists of being in the world without feeling it. Stupid and insensate, we live in a little box because it seems secure. But we cannot breath in there.

To get out we need an Imaginal Mind: sensitive to what William James called the “eachness” of things, a mind which is receptive, resilient, and alive.<sup>8</sup> We don’t get a lot of practice at this. We live in a generalizing time. We move too fast. We are trained to see patterns and laws, not particular things, and we have not been taught to discriminate finely in the realms of feeling. Our very language imposes constraints. Sanskrit has 96 words for love; Persian, 80; but English has only one (Johnson 1993, 6). And modern English is full of abstractions. Not all languages are. Arabic, for instance, is rooted in sensual particulars. The Islamicist William Chittick writes:

*An old joke among orientalists tells us that every Arabic word has four meanings: It means what it means, then it means the opposite of what it means, then it has something to do with sex, and finally it designates something to do with a camel. ...The rational mind tends to push the meaning of a word away from experience to ‘what it*

*means' but the imaginal mind finds the self-disclosure of the Real in the sex and the camel...it is in the world's concrete realities that God is found, not in its abstractions.*

(Chittick 1998, xxxv-xxvi)

The primary characteristic of the imaginal mind is that it "thinks concretely." We find this imaginative approach to the world wherever egoless love is in play.

There are ways of life which effectively engage the world and yet recognize mystery as a positive power. Reality is forever beyond our ability to know it definitively. If we open ourselves to this, then landscapes burst, over-run with life and lives. Cosmologies take effect in the souls of individuals who live according to them. If we wish to act effectively to change the worldview of our culture, then we must view our task as teachers in a new light. Our primary function is to nurture the precise and sensitive attention which the world demands. Because it is this feeling for the exuberance of our geographies, rooted in loves for the world, which draws our students to human ecology in the first place.

## Endnotes

1. As this issue was going to press it was announced that this essay won a John Templeton Foundation Exemplary Award for the "Expanding Humanities' Vision of God" Program. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Xth International Conference of the Society for Human Ecology, Montreal, PQ, Canada, May 27-30, 1999. Mailing address: 450 Dahlia Farm Road, Monroe, Maine 04951 USA
2. Charlene Spretnak in *States of Grace* (1991), makes a useful distinction between deconstructive post-modernism which is well represented in several branches of the humanities, and what she calls ecological postmodernism. It is the former that I refer to here. Although Spretnak's distinction is very useful, I think that in the end her vision of ecological postmodernism cannot avoid falling prey to the forces of what the postmodernists call "totalizing discourse."
3. See also (Corbin 1969) and (Cheetham 1998 and Cheetham in press).
4. This passage is quoted also in Nasr 1989. Chapter 1 is useful in understanding Nicolas's view of human reason and intellect.
5. Steiner (1989), provides a *tour de force* which seems to me to echo much in Corbin's work which is relevant to the subject of this essay, while speaking from an aesthetic and literary perspective rather than a specifically philosophical and theological one.
6. On what follows, see (Corbin 1969, 1981), and (Cheetham in press).
7. See especially Corbin (1969, 133-135).
8. On the concept of the "imaginal" see Corbin (1977, vii-xix) and Hillman (1992).

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