

Beyond the Quest for Certainty

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In 1929, the great American philosopher John Dewey published a book called *The Quest for Certainty*. It was one of his greatest works, but he was a thinker so out of step with the philosophy of his time that few people could even understand – much less accept his message. He concluded that most of the problems of modern society stem from the colossal failure of philosophy – especially in the 19th century. He argued that philosophers had forsaken the crucial task of interpreting the findings of science and had lost themselves in the age-old “quest for certainty”. In that book Dewey explained how it was that much of the intellectual progress of the Enlightenment era had stagnated and even regressed with the re-emergence of a world view that, once more, cut the world in two. He showed how Immanuel Kant’s ‘second Copernican Revolution’ – rather than building on the first – had actually reversed the cultural progress flowing from it. The empirical approach to knowing that, thanks to the work of Copernicus and others, had begun to replace the old axiom-based, deductive science of the Scholastics was buried yet again – this time by Kant’s Transcendentalism. In an effort to reinstate the concept of an isolated domain of fixed, immutable substance that, alone, was discoverable by science, Kant had produced a model that effectively separated the knowing mind – and the ‘phenomena’ accessible to that mind – from what he considered the essentially unpredictable domain of moral choice and action. He succeeded in reviving the older ‘mind-matter’ dualism of Descartes, in a seemingly more sophisticated form. Cartesian Dualism had, in its turn, breathed new life into that which had been so long-entrenched in Western culture by the enduring theories of Plato and Aristotle. David Hume’s insight about the inevitably uncertain nature of human beliefs was buried for another two centuries in the wholesale rush instigated by Kant to resume, in updated guise, the age-old ‘quest for certainty’.

According to Dewey, a major reason that Kant’s explanations were so universally welcomed, and have dominated Western culture for so long, was that they provided a means of reconciling religion and science. These explanations made it possible to view science and supernaturally based religion as mutually compatible. They glorified, and rendered absolute, the ‘knowing mind’ – with its supposedly innate categories of logical thought for analysing and classifying the

‘mechanistic’ physical surroundings. Kant’s explanations also succeeded in isolating that mind and its operation from the presumed mystery characterizing the other defining aspect of human beings: their nature as autonomous ‘agents of morality’ within a supersensual and indeterminate ‘realm of change’. Altogether, Kant provided a world view within which science itself was seen as a ‘quest for certainty’, but a quest appropriate only for what he viewed as the inherently rational and immutable domain of material substance. Metaphysical explanations – with their promise of escape from uncertainty through the Soul’s ultimate connection to a realm of Perfect Being – were seen as applicable to that ‘realm of change’ with which the methods of science could not cope.

All the major 19th century versions of rationalistic Realism and Romantic Idealism built upon Kant’s ideas – including the American version of popularized in the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. But then along came Darwin, with his theory of natural selection, and this threatened to upset the applecart. *Unless*, that is, evolution could be restricted to what had been neatly categorized as the material domain which, alone, was considered open to logical analysis and thus discoverable through scientific research. For over a century we have witnessed a battle virtually to the death to fence off psychological, anthropological and sociological studies not just from physics, but from that remarkable ordering paradigm providing the very foundation for our understanding of all living things. This war has been fought not only by theologians, but by many established academics in the humanities and so-called ‘hard’ sciences. If it could be shown that evolution has no implications whatsoever for the ‘spiritual’ and ‘practical’ realms – i.e., for human emotions, values, ideals and actions – then the long-established reconciliation of religion and science in our culture need not be endangered. One result of this kind of thinking was that John Dewey’s naturalistic Pragmatism and – with it, the entire world view of evolutionary naturalism – has been buried throughout most of the 20th century by yet another resurgence of philosophical dualism. Virtually all of the ‘modernisms’ and ‘postmodernisms’ of past decades have amounted to nothing more than increasingly tortuous manifestations of the struggle within academia and traditional religion to make dualism intellectually legitimate in an age of science. The stakes are very high. They are nothing less than the issue of whether or not humankind can move beyond the age-old ‘quest for certainty’.

We need only recall the fury with which the work of Edward O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins has been received even by many fellow biologists. These

scientists are daring to depart from the mainstream by documenting and explaining the interaction between the biological and the psycho-socio-cultural. If the evolutionary aspects of Jean Piaget's theories on genetic and psychological development had been fully comprehended he would have been similarly reviled. Another example of the widespread refusal to accept humans simply as a part of nature is the hostile response to B. F. Skinner from the communities of science and formal education. Skinner was sufficiently heretical to attempt to spell out the precise process by which natural selection could be said to operate at the psychological and sociological levels of interaction. He accomplished this by showing how the reinforcement of responses by the social environment serves to select and perpetuate certain behaviours and attitudes and values within the acting individual and group, and to cause others to disappear over time. He concluded that reinforcement therefore operates as a key vehicle both of individual learning and cultural evolution, in a process similar to that of natural selection at the biological level.

Humanists should be aware of the extent and ferocity of this current battle over the issue of whether or not Darwinian evolution has implications for the study of human behaviour. And we need to recognize that the enemy comprises not merely the Creationists and Intelligent Design theorists, but cultural dualism in all its forms. We need to face up to the fact that *most* of us have trouble shedding our dualistic premises. Consider the endurance of dualism among scientists, in the face of rapidly accumulating evidence to the contrary. We should be aware that it is not confined merely to those biologists who tout the Gaia Hypothesis and its accompanying notion of Cosmic Consciousness. There are also numerous physicists and astronomers (such as Stephen Hawking) who seek an encounter with 'the face of God' as the ultimate goal of scientific inquiry.

I even noted (with considerable surprise) the ambiguous concluding paragraph in an otherwise excellent new book on evolution, *Darwin's Ghost*, by the British geneticist, Steve Jones. Here we find the sentence, "The birth of Adam, whether real or metaphorical, marked the *insertion into the animal body* of a post-biological soul that leaves no fossils and needs no genes." The problem with the kind of 'closet dualism' exhibited by Jones is that recent breakthroughs in biology, evolutionary science, cognitive psychology and neuroscience have made such attempts at drawing 'lines in the shifting sand' between the activities of self-conscious human primates and other forms of organic life increasingly tortuous. Imagine the cognitive crippling required for otherwise intelligent people to juggle

such logical incompatibilities! No wonder we are producing so many mystics who throw all criteria for truth claims to the winds, while crying blithely; “All, all is mystery. We must learn to live with contradiction – to intuitively ‘know’ the unknowable!” And so many academics who tell us that science is valid only in the material domain.

Do we really want to live like this, in an imagined world of two isolated ‘realms of being’ with an unbridgeable chasm in between? It appears that modern dualists do indeed feel that it’s worth the stress of manipulating increasingly conflicting and logically contradictory sets of explanations, as they move from the lab to ordinary life. They recognize that dualism – and only dualism – makes transcendently based religion possible for thinking people. But they forget the other side of this dubious coin. A dualistic world view also makes any hope for an authentic social science *impossible*! And it is becoming increasingly clear that it is precisely where the physical and the social-psychological studies overlap that we most need dependable knowledge: knowledge obtainable by no other means than disciplined empirical inquiry. Only the scientific approach – and the demonstrably reliable body of facts structured by means of it – can ensure relatively sound answers concerning the likely future consequences of current choices in any area of life. And only such capacity to predict can allow us to judge the degree to which the outcomes flowing from our choices would be either universally fulfilling and desirable, or universally destructive, over the long term.

If we can agree that one of the greatest threats to the survival of life is our culture’s enduring dualism, and the ‘quest for certainty’ encouraged by it, the issue then becomes: What can we do about it? Is it the case, as some are now claiming, that the emotional need for absolute Truth – and an absolute Good beyond any origin or test in human experience – is so deeply embedded within the human psyche that we could not shed it even if we wanted to?

I agree that we humans are all involved, in some way, in a search for the truest possible explanations of the way things are. But this need not translate into a ‘quest for certainty’. And it’s obvious that people who think about things at all can’t really function in a world devoid of meaning. We tend to be satisfied only if a particular truth claim ‘makes sense’ in terms of what we already believe; that is, if it fits into our current ‘meaning frame’. But that need not imply a ‘meaning frame’ that is immune to incoming evidence. Granted, we all have to explain our own brief voyage through life in a way which offers us emotional and intellectual

satisfaction. But what offers such satisfaction is determined largely by our early socialization – rather than the immutable nature of things. And the problem is that, from infancy on, most of us have learned to accept without question those unchallengeable explanations about the essence of humanity which happen to operate as the dominant sources of meaning in our culture.

Why is there so much resistance to accepting the impossibility of any attainment of certainty where Truth is concerned? Part of the answer may indeed lie in our genes. Survival, for our primitive ancestors, may well have been furthered by a propensity to explain their experience in terms that would provide a sense of security and the emotional comfort and satisfaction flowing from it. Some evolutionary theorists have even gone so far as to postulate that this means humans are ‘hard-wired’ for religion.

I suspect, rather, that what these theorists are talking about when they use the word, ‘religion’ here, is our deeply embedded drive for emotional and intellectual security – manifested in a quest for certainty where explanations are concerned. In the magical conceptual world of our early forebears, this innate need for security would have been satisfied only by some kind of assurance that they, as individuals, did indeed have a specially designated cosmic Purpose and moral value. Because they sensed themselves to be creatures of ‘will’ and ‘purpose’, the only way they could explain the workings of the universe was by projecting a similar Will and Purpose into it. Once they did this, humans became convinced that it had been the other way around – that it was their gods who had, instead, created them. And those gods had provided Revelation, for those with the will to grasp it, as the timeless source of truth concerning the “good” and “true”. Thus, the religions created by needy humans served to provide continuing reassurance of their God-given cosmic role. And it was this role, they believed, that marked them off from other forms of life as uniquely worthy – thereby giving human lives a special meaning and eternal existence not shared by other animals or inanimate objects.

It is possible that only explanations of this nature could have assuaged the fear of death encountered by humans once imagination and memory and self-consciousness had evolved, and connections could be made between the deaths of others and their own likely fates. Our primitive ancestors lived in a world fraught with unknown dangers, with little control over external circumstance and little awareness of cause and effect to guide them. It’s easy to understand how they

might have longed unceasingly for the security of magical parental beings housed in the bodies of key predators or prey, or in the towering rocks above their caves, or in the forever-inaccessible 'heavens' – from which issued the thunder and lightning that signalled the power of the Almighty.

We can think of such traditional cultural myths as 'conceptual caves' into which people could retreat for safety from the apparently arbitrary events of daily life. It is possible that those who held fast to such Truths – and to their own important role in the nature of things on which these Truths were predicated – would have acted with greater confidence, and been more willing to assume the risks associated with hunting and fighting off marauding neighbours, than were those who cowered within their literal caves overcome by the insecurity and fear that their situation probably warranted.

And, of course, the rituals devised to celebrate those religious beliefs would have served, in turn, to reinforce them. So the 'true believers' might well have survived in greater numbers to produce progeny with similar propensities and acquired habits, and to affect the subsequent beliefs and social behaviours of the clan or tribe as a whole. We can only guess whether the evolution of this successfully adaptive behavioural pattern within the group was primarily genetic in nature or reinforced anew within each generation by prevailing environmental challenges – sociocultural as well as physical. It doesn't really matter because, in fact, what the process of natural selection is all about is this feedback between environmental demand and the drive to satisfy biological needs.

If an innate predisposition did, in fact, evolve, I would think it was this need felt by humans for a 'conceptual cave' rooted in absolute premises and promising certain answers to the dilemmas of life. It so happens that our humanly created religions have, throughout history, provided just such immutable premises and conclusions. These would have established a feedback cycle whereby prevailing beliefs and rituals reinforced the innate drive for security. Thus it is not the need for religion as such that is hard-wired into the human brain, but a need for explanations that satisfy the ancient 'quest for certainty' in a terrifying, uncertain world. But we now know that innate needs can be overridden by socialization and enculturation, and an uncertain world can be rendered more orderly and controllable by science. And therein lies our hope for the future.

However, the task will be difficult. Even today, only a relatively few

thinkers have managed to move beyond the quest for certainty. Only a minority appear able to find emotional and intellectual satisfaction in the contemplation of a publicly disciplined, self-correcting and ever-broadening *journey* – rather than in the oxymoronic prospect of grasping absolute knowledge of an *arrival* in some unknowable ‘realm of being’ beyond the reach of experience. These are the people who are spurred to scepticism and curiosity – rather than satisfied – by a compartmentalized world view, plagued as it necessarily is with internal contradictions. They go so far as to suggest that there are no ultimate truths accessible to humans at all, and that the ‘quest for certainty’, in whatever form it takes, is a fruitless and harmful quest.

Unlike most of their contemporaries in every age, such people explain existence as one natural, evolving process of interacting mass and energy. They believe that human beings make up merely an infinitesimal aspect of the very reality we seek to know. And that reality is itself constantly evolving, as are the fallible mental tools upon which we must rely for the ‘knowing’ of it. And also that, in the very act of observing that nature in which we are irrevocably embedded, we cannot help but alter it somewhat. This is the premise of naturalism with its accompanying agnostic and Pragmatic notion of truth. And it is a premise now supported not only by the facts of evolution, but by Einstein’s theory of relativity, quantum mechanics and chaos theory in physics

Nevertheless, and despite claims by mystics to the contrary, these explanations do not set adrift within a sea of nihilism of moral relativism where all are free to create their own truths. Rather, they imply that our hope – and only source of control over our own impact on that environment of which we are a part – lies in the fact that some claims about the nature of things have been shown throughout history to be more workable and fruitful than others. They allow us to predict and therefore to control the consequences of our actions. And they generate new and ever-more- refined questions and hypotheses. Well-tested and scientifically predictable beliefs, although tentative, are therefore more deserving of our confidence than are conclusions deduced from axiomatic truths. They are more dependable as the basis for wise judgment and action. In other words, the explanations most satisfying to modern humanists are those which have been well-confirmed by science, even though they are held always as subject to the discovery of new evidence that may disconfirm them. People who think this way are agnostic in that, for them, the only reliable method of achieving such knowledge ever discovered by humans has been the broadly defined, self-correcting process of

scientific inquiry. And their faith is in the process, rather than in any particular answer.

I have thought for some time that the enduring popularity of the ‘quest for certainty’ is highly dangerous in the modern world. Like John Dewey, Thomas and Julian Huxley, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, Edward O. Wilson and many others discussed in my new book, ***The Road to Reason***, I am worried about the future welfare of a humankind attempting to navigate the perilous waters of the future with one foot aboard the seaworthy craft of science and the other embedded in the tangled vines of Transcendentalism and the quicksand of mysticism along the shore. I am confident that many of you are worried too. Perhaps, together, we humanists can help human culture move beyond the age-old ‘quest for certainty’ before it is too late.