

Paine and Modernity

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“There are two distinct classes of what are called Thoughts; those that we produce in ourselves by reflection and the act of thinking, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord. I have always made it a rule to treat those voluntary visitors with civility, taking care to examine, as well as I was able, if they were worth entertaining; and it is from them that I have acquired almost all the knowledge that I have.” (Age of Reason, pg. 83)

“Without stepping beyond the analogy of that which is known, it is easy to people the cosmos with entities, in ascending scale until we reach something practically indistinguishable from omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience.” (T. H. Huxley, “Essays Upon Some Controversial Questions”)

Now, how might we benefit from this brief exploration of Paine’s views on God, Nature, Man and science? It is a common historical truth that our greatest predecessors are often forerunners. They are prescient visionaries who often see farther ahead than we do. Paine was such a predecessor. He foresaw a political and social revolution in the affairs of men far beyond his age. He thought globally even if he acted on the limited stage of nations. Furthermore, he predicted that the religion of the future would be one in which all the historical and institutional excrescences would be cut away by enlightened understanding and all that would remain would be pure Deism – the original religion and the truest of sciences.

Would Paine have any comment to make about our spinning, tilting modern world, about our peculiar modern mind-set? Absolutely. His first point would be, perhaps, that contemporary religious leaders and celebrated scientists should be deeply concerned with the ethics of knowledge and their knowledge of ethics. We are citizens of a Republic of Conscience” and our primary duty is to contribute to its welfare and uplift. As such, we are all equally responsible for the knowledge that we garner within the portals of academia, within the courtyards of monasteries and within the laboratories of large, profit driven corporations. The ‘disinterested pursuit of knowledge’ can never be divorced from an all-embracing *human* purpose. When the noblest impulses of genuine science and of authentic religion are ignored or supplanted then religion degenerates into religiosity and likewise the search for ‘natural philosophy’ or scientific understanding gets tunneled into methodological dogmatism and valueless research. To put this in human terms, the problem with many sincere religious seekers in practice is a tendency toward a righteous, personal insularity from the world and ‘the worldly’ and the problem with many scientists in institutional arenas is a tendency toward moral indifference

to the uses and abuses of scientific discovery, a Pontius Pilate-like washing of the hands of responsibility for the perverse uses of knowledge made by the technocrat and the politician. There is a subtle self-exclusion by the religionist and an unconscious social amorality by the scientist. Thus, the would-be spiritual seeker who ardently pursues a private ‘glimpse of God’ may become so self-absorbed in his quest for personal salvation that he ignores the needs of suffering humanity while the scientist without the passion of human purpose often becomes a danger to his community by virtue of moral default. The latter disconnects in thought from society-at-large and often, all too willingly, places his investigations and discoveries before the behemoth of the state, the altar of capitalism and the fickle goddess of professional fame.

The second point that Paine might make would be about the systematic distortion of the intellectual principle in man. We have sophisticated, rationalizing theologians at one extreme and materialistic, fact-worshipping scientists at the other extreme. One seeks to fathom the mysteries of God primarily through reasoned faith in collusion with revelation; the other seeks to uncover the mysteries of Nature through analysis and tested sense-experience. Theologians cannot ultimately prove God by reasoned argument nor can science disprove God by empirical methods. All claims about God are based on assumptions that are ultimately not provable or falsifiable. In a similar vein, claims by science that it can explain consciousness through the back door of brain research is simply sleight of hand. Consciousness is a non-space-time phenomenon that cannot be empirically reduced to space-time explanation or brain-state studies. Science confuses mind and brain because it can discern empirical correlations between certain brain centers and conscious and unconscious activities. To pinpoint a correlation between certain mind states and certain neurological states does not *ipso facto* reduce mind to brain. We simply understand that both mind and brain matter mutually influence each other. However, the fledging science of neuroplasticity is rather intriguing since there seems to be some evidence that the minds of trained monks can “will” new neuron pathways and that the mind is not simply an epiphenomenon or creation of brain activity.

Alas, poor Man, the thinker, is in the middle between religion and science and is often dwarfed by both. Man is either characterized as a sinner by theistic religion or viewed as an evolving, genome-driven intelligence living in a world of “tooth and claw” by latter day Darwinists. Furthermore, free will is either tithed to an unpredictable God or materialized into the ever-determining DNA molecule. More to the point, rationality is distrusted by the religious believer and knowledge confined by the materialistic scientist to the circle of the empirical – together with that highly elusive concept called “experience”. At the common level, emotional

intensity becomes the test of religious conviction and unflinching methodological fidelity the hallmark of the scientific elite.

However, like Paine, we need to think afresh and at the same time be more self-critical. We should remember that impersonal reason, in its most exalted mood, is really “three dimensional”, “rounded” or “spherical”. Its vertical and horizontal dimensions are usually acknowledged but not its depth. Reason as a “horizontal” activity defines, distinguishes, formulates, compares and contrasts, categorizes and analyzes. Its “verticality” is evident when we use it to integrate, systematize and tier different truths or principles. But beyond these polar activities of rational thought, there is an encircling, illuminated reason that radiates from the center of its perpendicular and horizontal axis. It penetrates into the core of ideas, issues and problems. It is often called intuition, insight and “flashes of genius”. It is a revelatory intelligence that yields new insights and originates new modalities of understanding. Because of its penetrating and laser-like power, it dissolves old thought structures, connects seemingly separate and isolated concepts and gestates new fields of inquiry. This is what Paine is referring to when he talks about those “voluntary visitors” that bolt into the mind unexpectedly and illuminate our understanding. To put this in a different way, we might say that we should not only be open to experimental testing, rational analysis and mathematical calculation but also to analogical reasoning and to those flashes of insight that lead us to new stairways of thought, perception and symbolic meaning.

Paine’s admonitions cannot be taken to heart without cultivating a fresh sense of the sacred and a new kind of metaphysical openness. If God is sacred, so is nature and, above all, so is man. If metaphysical thought is to be welcomed back into the domain of serious human discussion – if it is to be rejuvenated – it has to lose its element of pretension and become more fluid, imaginative and perhaps adopt the metaphors found in legends, myths and fables to express its insights. If science wishes to become more humane, more socially responsible then it has to deglamorize itself. It has to become morally self-critical and acknowledge its natural intellectual boundaries. What religion and science need to do – the correctives they need to embrace – is actually what we all need to do. We must become as little children again. We must attempt to recapture a new “innocence of the imagination”. What is more, we need to learn as children learn, through love and admiration. Strangely enough, we all too soon forget about the dictates of the “wise heart”. Paine understood this. He was after all a lover of Deity and a lover of man. Yet, how easily we overlook the word “love” in the word “Theophilanthropist”. We reduce it to an emotion that gets expressed in a thousand popular songs and a thousand devotional hymns until it has lost its meaning. We subtract it out of the intellect in the hope that we will be more impartial and see

truth unadorned, without sentiment, partiality or romantic illusions. Love as a moving, inspiriting force in the pursuit of understanding and insight is ignored. But think about how important love is when it comes to ordinary knowledge or learning. Children love to learn and are never content with settling down and consolidating. Like sunlit trees, they are ever reaching up toward the light of the empyrean. Just as importantly, children have a purity and suppleness of imagination that makes them receptive to different realities. They can live and move in many worlds simultaneously. Furthermore, they resonate to moral ideals and stories of courage and justice. The notion of self-sacrifice thrills rather than frighten them. Furthermore, it is difficult to find smugness or cynicism amongst young children. The creative Eros pervades their feelings, perceptions and their unfolding intellect in myriad ways. We need to recover our felt appreciation of this expansive force that leads to knowledge and its wholesome use in human affairs. We need to reestablish our connection with humanity-at-large and revel in the benign use of knowledge.

We can only discern the secret meanings of Nature's manifestations where we revere it, when we are humble before it like Einstein and many of the early physicists. True love, reverence and quiet contemplation will perhaps open the doors of intuitive perception and allow Nature to be a cathedral as well as a classroom. We would then be putting into practice what Alfred, Lord Tennyson so ardently wished for when he stated: "Let knowledge grow from more to more, But more of reverence in us dwell." In essence, we would be creating the foundations for what Paine called a "universal civilization". (From this point of view, holistic science and ecology are perhaps steps in this direction.)

Clearly, modern man needs to balance reverence, knowledge and meditation. Religion often denigrates man in order to elevate God. Science often reduces man in order to objectify him. Why can we not revere man as the finest – though imperfect expression – of Deity or a deific principle? Why can we not regard the human body as the finest – though incomplete – expression of Nature? Furthermore, we need to concern ourselves less with knowledge as information and more with knowledge as meaning. We should ask ourselves different kinds of questions about both God and Nature. For example, what do the lives of great spiritual teachers and sages tell us about the possibilities of human growth and high culture, about the scope and depth of moral intelligence? What do all spiritual teachers seem to share in common and how might we actually use their teachings to elevate our societies by returning to moral and cultural fundamentals? Every religious leader should voluntarily engage in a genuine study of the lives of all the great religious founders known to man. It would be enlightening as well as humbling. Science too, needs to pivot its thinking. In addition to compiling its

marvelous encyclopedias on Nature's laws and processes, it needs to pose human-centered questions to itself and actually discuss them. For example, what do trees teach us about life and human growth? What can we learn from the way a flower unfolds and releases its fragrance? This might sound juvenile or ridiculous but it could actually help us to see that Nature teaches and does not just provide us with information and the keys to new forms of utilitarian satisfactions. Likewise, we might ask, how can contemplation or meditation on universal ideals aid us in our quest to understand the seemingly unknowable in God, Nature and man? Meditation allows us to cleanse the mind periodically of its images of God, Nature and man, to suspend for a moment the assumptions and knowledge we have acquired in order to refresh the mind and rejuvenate the imagination. (Let us note here that contemplation or meditation was the only genuine form of worship that Paine encouraged.) Meditation is best done when we contemplate universal themes: pure space, timelessness, pure matter, pure consciousness, pure goodness, archetypal relationships and the like. This creates "mental spaces" in the mind and heart that allow new conceptions to germinate at an unconscious level until they eventually blossom forth as illuminating ideas or revelatory insights.

What modern man needs to do is to cultivate a fresh form of agnosticism. By agnosticism, I mean a metaphysical openness and an ontological spaciousness. After all, it was the noted 19th Century biologist and courageous defender of Darwinian evolution, T.H. Huxley, who gave us the very term "agnostic". He steadfastly claimed that he could neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man and that he saw no means of disproving it. He also made the following comment about consciousness:

"The student of nature, who starts from the axiom of the universality of the law of causation, can not refuse to admit an eternal existence; if he admits the conservation of energy, he can not deny the possibility of an eternal energy; if he admits the existence of immaterial phenomena in the form of consciousness, he must admit the possibility, at any rate, of an eternal series of such phenomena."

"Essays Upon Some Controversial Questions"

Let us not close our minds to the great mysteries within and outside of us. It is after all quite possible to be an atheist and be open to the spiritual. Buddhists and Jains are completely atheistic but wholly dedicated to the spiritual quest. Scientists likewise, need to recapture the sense of awe before Nature that was present in the late 17th Century and in the first decades of the 20th Century. To quote the noted 20th Century physicist, Max Planck:

“Science cannot solve the ultimate mystery of Nature. And that is because, in the last analysis, we ourselves are a part of the mystery that we are trying to solve.”

We should be willing to admit that there is something mysterious about God, Nature and man. The quest for knowledge forces us to admit that something can exist before we know what it is. If it were otherwise, there could never be what we call “learning”, the mental shift from ignorance to knowledge. In this sense, both religion and science must once again reaffirm the mystery of the Divine and of Nature without excluding the use of reason in its fullest sense of enlightened understanding. We might say that when religion and science welcome philosophical thinking into their midst and re-crown latter, they will become once more rounded, multivalent thinkers. They will contemplate the wonders of Deity as manifested in man and nature and appreciate the deeper meanings of Nature’s laws. They will also rediscover the potential of man to embody vast creative powers that could lead to greater civilizations and cultures than we have yet to see. To quote Charles Darwin who we are honoring at this conference:

“The highest state in moral culture at which we can arrive is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts. (Charles Darwin)

In a sense, we need to become less identified with specialized roles and more like Emerson’s “man thinking”. We need to be more than scientists. We need to be more than atheists. We need to be more than true believers of a particular religious standpoint. We need to look at each field of thought as a series of questions for individual contemplation and thus be open to seeing life from multiple perspectives. After all, it is perfectly possible to be an atheist and be open to the spiritual, to levels of consciousness, matter and energy that only reveal themselves to the life of inner purity and outer service. By changing our mental focus or our mental lens, we would learn not to get trapped in any particular ideology or system of belief even though we might well be committed to a particular standpoint.