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No Room for Humans: The Vacuous Spirit of Modern Science

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The Vacuous Spirit of Modern Science

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Imagine the elation of Johannes Kepler when the ideas of planetary motion he nurtured for twenty years were finally taking shape:

> *It is not 18 months since I saw the first ray of light, three months since since the unclouded sun-glorious sight burst upon me! . . . The book is written, the die is cast. Let it be read now or by posterity, I care not which. It may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited 6000 years for an observer.*[1]

Ah, the exultation of discovery—the feeling of power, understanding, and knowledge that we as humans feverishly seek. And what better means to achieve this power than science, for science is an institution founded upon explanation, a systematic, methodical, and concerted effort to explain the nature of the universe. But just how far can science take us? Can a science which seeks to view the matters of the entire universe in a purely objective light at the same time address questions of the microcosm of the self: questions of purpose, meaning, and existence? Does the scientist lose sight of these questions as he strives for objectivity, as Anna von Helmholtz observed of her husband Hermann?

> *His thoughts go this way and that without order; reality and dreams, wishes and events that actually happened, place and time pass his soul in foglike rolling motion . . . It is always as if his soul were far, far away, in a beautiful, noble sphere where only science and eternal laws rule, and then that does not correspond to anything which surrounds him and he becomes unclear and confused.*[2]

Science's predilection towards disregarding the human side of discovery has, according to Theodore Roszak, spawned a monster—"The child of knowledge without gnosis, of power without spiritual intelligence."[3] Year by year the scientific monster grows as it births the bomb, nerve gas, and a gamut of other highly effective tools of death resulting from a science run amok, unchecked and uncontrollable by its creators. Are we, as a scientific society, to become the victims of our own objectivity? Or rather, as Dr. Colter asks, can a scientific culture at the same time be a culture that understands what it is to live well, to know what is quantifiable, beautiful, awesome and fundamental? In this author's view, to have knowledge, to understand in full, is truly beautiful. To hear the subtle thematic progression of the fugue is to love it—are we humans ready to love the world's endless fugue as we learn to understand it? But this is not to exclude the significance of things other than science. Though our scientific knowledge strains toward the

outer limits of the universe, we are compelled, as our ancestors were, to seek meaning in ourselves—the inner realm of meaning, the significance of love, and the stuff of dreams.

Physicist Owen Gingerich sees the divergence from science as a response to the cold, calculated approach that permeates the science of today.

> *. . . alienated by a seemingly narrow and heartless mechanistic philosophy spawned by the Newtonian revolution, and barred from an appreciation of the intrinsic beauty of scientific discovery—and here we scientists have been regrettably negligent—many young people have turned to the occult or to an anti-intellectual mysticism in their quest for a meaningful world view.*[4]

Gingerich seems committed throughout his essay to the idea that it is the responsibility of the physicist somehow to snap the youth back into acceptable, empirical study. Where there is no science there is fiction. Surely he is mistaken. How are we to understand the nature of the universe by dissecting it until it no longer resembles a universe, but a formula? As Siddhartha discovers in retrospect, his search for a deeper meaning in the teachings of the Brahmins was fruitless, for it was communicated without the essential element—enlightenment, the spark of insight that is close and personal.

> *He had begun to suspect that his worthy father and his other teachers, the wise Brahmins, had already passed on to him the bulk and best of their wisdom, that they had already poured the sum total of their knowledge into his waiting vessel; and the vessel was not full, his intellect was not satisfied, his soul was not at peace, his heart was not still.*[5]

Our society has put incredible faith in science; we look to science to give structure to the world and give us meaning to satisfy our inevitable pangs. We categorize our observations, neatly packaging experiences like so many little boxes, then arrange the boxes to make some sense of the world. But once this is done, where does it leave us? Even Siddhartha had trouble accepting the teachings of the Buddha Gotama, whose world-view was in many respects like the scientist's of today.

> *You show the world as a complete, unbroken chain, linked together by cause and effect. Never has it been presented so clearly, never has it been so irrefutably demonstrated. Surely every Brahmin's heart must beat more quickly, when through your teachings he looks at the world, completely coherent, without a loophole, clear as crystal, not dependent on chance, not dependent on the gods.*[6]

Is there a potential in the scientific world for a reconciliation with matters of human spirit? Clearly, post-Newtonian scientists have stringently avoided discussing the world as anything more than "an admirably contrived automaton."[7] Ideally, the religious, artistic, and scientific world would be as one, each incorporating elements of the others for support—not mere coexistence, but true cooperation. Roszak's gnosis could be a reality, given sufficient interest among scientists. To achieve gnosis, the stuffy academics must grow weary of putting up barriers, and acknowledge a side of humanity quite apart from scientific investigation. Now that we have split the human experience into hemispheres, can we ever bring them together again?

Let the truth of love be lighted
Let the love of truth shine clear
Sensibility,
Armed with sense and liberty
With the heart and mind united
In a single, perfect sphere.[8]

Yes, we can unite the distinct personalities of man, giving each appropriate emphasis. The only real barrier is within ourselves. To the degree that we exploit nature, kill our fellow man, and otherwise abuse the sphere of our existence, we gain a like amount of despair for ourselves, for the burden of bad consequences resulting from our value-blind scientific pursuits ultimately rests on our own shoulders.

Notes

[1] Johannes Kepler, *Harmonice Mundi* (Harmony of the World). Quoted in Martin Goldstein, Inge Goldstein, *The Experience of Science* (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), p. 374.

[2] Letter from Anna von Helmholtz to her sister. Quoted in Russell McCormmach, *Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. i.

[3] Theodore Roszak, "The Monster and the Titan: Science, Knowledge, and Gnosis," in *Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. E.D. Klemke, Robert Hollinger, A. David Kline (New York: Promethius, 1980), p. 321.

[4] Owen Gingerich, "Introduction: Does Science Have a Future," in *The Nature of Scientific Discovery*, ed. Owen Gingerich (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975), p. 239.

[5] Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 3.

[6] Ibid., p. 26.

[7] Roszak, p. 320.

[8] Getty Lee, from the album "Hemispheres," (New York: PolyGram, 1978).

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