

Looking the Gift Horse of Nature in the Mouth – How Objective Evaluation Breeds Resentment

By Alan Rayner 09.05.2008

There is an awful moment or phase in our lives for many of us when we become aware of our innate *joie de vivre* turning sour. What we had taken to be the wonderful gift of rejuvenation that inspires our young lives with rich possibility suddenly or gradually becomes adulterated by encountering what some describe as ‘the real world’. We become painfully self-aware. We begin to recognise our own and others’ vulnerability and capacity for suffering, and to realize that not all our fellow creatures’ views of us are necessarily benevolent. Along with this we may be encouraged or cajoled into competing with our peers, spurred on by the Darwinian and capitalist maxim that life is a struggle for existence in which we can only succeed by proving ourselves better than and exploiting others. We learn to abide by what CS Lewis referred to as the loveless ‘Philosophy of Hell’ – ‘the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specifically, that one self is not another self...to be means to be in competition’.

Our trust is shattered and in that fall from grace we become suspicious, questioning the motivation of all that lies within and around our bodily selves – what is true, what is false; what is right, what is wrong; what is good, what is bad? This departure into ‘Paradise Lost’ applies to us both individually and culturally, leaving us forever questing for the ‘Truth’ or ‘Holy Grail’ that will bring us around into ‘Paradise Regained’. But such is the way that we have predominantly gone about this quest that we continually fall into the trap of one inadequate complete answer after another. Our journey becomes a travail between sticking points. This is because our enquiry is always anchored in the very same core belief that shattered our trust in the first place – that there can be any such ‘thing’ as ‘The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth’. For, in the dynamic reality of energy flow, truth cannot be whole, complete in itself.

In looking endlessly for something whole, in which we can have absolute faith, we lose sight of the possibility of an endless hole, a receptive spatial continuum that includes all in one and one in all, everywhere. Even if we catch sight – or rather, feeling – of this hole, the likelihood is that we will stop short of it, for fear of stepping into the void where no thing can truly be known. And so it is that for millennia we have relied on definitive systems of propositional and dialectic logic that wholly divide matter from space and embed this schism in the numerical and geometrical foundations of classical and modern mathematics, which in turn lie at the core of objective philosophical and scientific enquiry.

Instead of feeling included in some kind of relay team or gift flow, where we run with and pass on the life-giving energy that we each gratefully receive, we feel obliged by a sense of being discrete subjects and objects in competition with the world and one another to take possession of this flow for ourselves and defend it against all comers. We deny and defy our dynamic neighbourhood in an effort to survive at all costs by proving ourselves, or being proven better than the rest. Unable to trust that what is freely given can equally freely return in living cycles and spirals of what's going around is coming around, we come to regard and measure ourselves and others solely in terms of finite property, thereby reducing our relationships to local transactions, for which we require a set of accountancy rules to ensure equity. But these rules literally come at a price, because they cannot include what cannot be measured, and so leave out what is vital to sustaining an energy flow – the continuity of space everywhere that includes all and that all dynamically include. From being and becoming invaluable local co-creative expressions of infinity, everything and everyone is rendered down into discontinuous, quantifiable local packaging that can be compared and contrasted as if it were alone in the universe. We enter a vicious closed circle or dying spiral that respectively either keeps itself in a state of civil war with itself for eternity or decays into entropy.

As we continually reinforce our false sense of being in competition with one another through our systems of governance and education, so we increasingly view our individual frailties and mortality as signs of weakness, which need to be eliminated if we are to gain

and sustain our place on an evolutionary pinnacle. A compassion-killing perfectionism takes hold whereby 'not being good enough' is the motivation for 'getting better all the time'. Here, the 'I' is a narcissistic singular object/subject that does things to others (and has things done to it) in the process of ensuring its own furtherance, and the 'need to improve' can in itself seem to stand as an admission of weakness. Being a 'learner' in this context is hence a source of shameful deficiency, which is why novice drivers are so keen to abandon the 'L' plates that advertise their 'not yet good enoughness' to the world. There is no joy in being a learner, only a compulsion to get past this stage as fast as possible in order to be able to get on and do things, especially if it involves making money and/or gaining status. The upshot is the widespread pseudo-competence of clever clogs, who feel they cannot afford the 'time', let alone humility to learn deeply, and so channel their energies into blocking the channels of natural communion by devising objective 'tests' for each other to get past.

Within this context, 'positive' comes to stand for 'good' and negative comes to stand for 'bad'. Everyone strives to 'feel good' by denying the 'bad', to celebrate their 'achievements' and disregard their 'frailties' and resultant 'neediness'. Unable or unwilling to accept that what comes naturally as the source of life's evolutionary inspiration and dynamic configuration is also the sink of life's expiration and reconfiguration in a continual transformation of one becoming other, we view our vulnerability and mortality as a flaw in our nature. This leads to a desire to isolate one self from what truly is the real world of dynamic experience, as an encapsulation of ideal form from which every divergence is regarded as a deviation or error to be removed, not a fluid variation converging around an ever-evolving theme. And so we strive to be better not as receptive and responsive inclusions of a co-creative flow that includes all it can sustain in dynamic relationship, but as judgmental competitors marking ourselves up or down by reference to some standard yardstick.

The upshot is a process in which everybody's unique and inestimable worth is reduced to the comparative values of objective commodities defined as greater or lesser, better or worse. Far from sustaining the diversity of life and evolution, this process restricts and

stalls it by singling out winners and losers in opposition to one another. For a race that culminates with a winner who takes all is the end of the road for evolution, not its continuation.

Where, however, the philosophical context transforms from rationalistic to what has been called 'inclusional', the emphasis switches from 'learning to be good enough' to 'being good enough to learn'. This is because we no longer see ourselves as independent objects in competition with one another, but as co-creative, receptive and responsive inclusions of a dynamic evolutionary neighbourhood in which our self-identity includes and is included by what rationalism regards as 'other'. The receptivity to other that comes with our vulnerability and mortality is no longer regarded as deficiency, i.e. as 'neediness' - but as 'needfulness' a vital capacity through which we can lovingly and caringly accept, protect and pass on the gift of life that comes from our local inclusion of the natural energy flow of everywhere. Our 'I' is no longer a locally defined positivistic singularity that negates negativity, but a transfigured local-non-local self, a true '+', which is receptively open to inclusion of other through its needfulness. We shift from being forceful 'drivers', imposing our willful intent upon what surrounds us, to influential 'pilots' enhancing, through growing experience, our skills of receptive-response to the fluid dynamics of our natural neighbourhood, which inescapably includes us. And as we learn, we pass on the gift of our dynamically embodied knowledge, i.e. the benefit of our learning experience, to others. The idea of 'improvement' shifts from the judgmental 'correction of deficiency' to 'energising understanding'. Learning becomes a pleasure, not a compulsion.

So, if, when presented with a gift horse our first inclination is to check it for faults to assess whether it measures up to expectation, perhaps we are behaving like clever clots that cannot appreciate the generous spirit in what is being offered. With that lack of appreciation comes the inevitable distress and resentment of those judged 'not good enough', which manifests in a huge variety of guises in our modern competitive culture. To look the gift horse, which Nature makes possible, in the mouth reveals both the height of arrogance and the depth of ignorance of evolutionary creativity that is packaged within

the discrete logic of objective rationality. So, don't be surprised when the horse bucks the system! But be prepared to care for it, and you never know where it might take you, perhaps even to 'Paradise Regained', in a world inclusionally transformed – not without suffering, of course, but at least without the insufferable disregard that adds insult to injury and vice versa, everywhere in our exclusive midst.