



TED: a Choice Point

Charles Eisenstein

*Many readers will have heard of the decision by TEDx to remove Rupert Sheldrake's lecture on his book *The Science Delusion* from its normal system. This move was initiated by a so-called scientific committee under pressure from militant atheists. It is a familiar story, another episode in the paradigm war. Please consult the Members' News section for Rupert's comment, or go to www.sheldrake.org - you will also see that his book has received the 2012 Network Book Prize.*

Originally, the thesis of this essay was going to be that TED, contrary to its reputation for promoting innovative ideas, excludes ideas that are truly radical or disruptive, contributing instead to a slickly packaged narrative of "Gee whiz, thanks to these nifty ideas, the world is getting better all the time." TED is, I thought, a conservative institution, a champion of our culture's dominant narratives. It isn't hard to make that case, but when I cast my net a little wider and crowd-sourced some research, I discovered the situation is not quite so simple.

The two recent incidents that motivated my original thesis were (1) The suppression of TEDx talks by Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock, and (2) The withdrawal of TED support from TEDxWestHollywood (now proceeding this weekend as ExTEDxWestHollywood). In both cases, the rationale that TED eventually settled on was that the speakers and events were "far removed from mainstream scientific thinking." The blogger C4 Chaos says a lot of what is on my mind about that. TED's original justification, with rebuttals by the two speakers, can be found at <http://blog.ted.com/2013/03/18/graham-hancock-and-rupert-sheldrake-a-fresh-take/>. (Actually this is rewritten from the original critique, which has been expunged from the web.)

It is certainly true that the work of Sheldrake, Hancock, and many of the WestHollywood speakers is far removed from mainstream scientific thinking. Part of the mythology of science is that cogent thinking equals scientific thinking, and that therefore anything that science rejects is likely founded on shoddy reasoning, poor observation, self-delusion, or perhaps outright fraud. This belief depends on two assumptions: that the Scientific Method is superior to other sources of knowledge, and that the institution of science honestly upholds and applies the Scientific Method. Granting all that, we can draw a convenient line in accepting or rejecting new ideas by asking, "Is this idea consistent with accepted science?"

But what if these assumptions are not true? In their talks, Graham Hancock questioned the first, and Rupert Sheldrake the second. Sheldrake (a credentialed scientist with a Master's from Harvard, Ph.D. from Cambridge, and numerous publications in cell and plant biology) described how the exclusion of dissident viewpoints and anomalous data from science obscures cracks in its basic worldview. Of course a critique of mainstream scientific thinking is going to be "far-removed from mainstream scientific thinking." By withholding its imprimatur, TED seems to be saying that such a critique is out of bounds, no matter how cogent or articulate. Unintentionally, TED's actions have illustrated Sheldrake's point.

TED's alignment with conventional thinking extends beyond science. For example, in taking down Hancock's talk, TED curator Chris Anderson mentioned that they don't want young people running off to South America to take ayahuasca thinking TED has approved it. So here is an implicit alignment with the dominant

narrative that illegal drugs are bad, and that it is irresponsible to do such a thing as run off to the Amazon. As with Sheldrake, I see an irony here: Hancock was making the point that our conventional means of apprehending consciousness exclude something important.

More broadly, TED generally seems to stand for several overarching principles that are foundational to our civilisation's dominant narratives: that technology is a force for good, that technological solutions exist to all our problems, that life is getting better and better. The TED presentation aesthetic communicates a can-do spirit, offering a kind of showcase for the Next Great Thing. Unsurprising, given its origin as a celebration of "technology, entertainment, and design."

It is also worth noting that scientific orthodoxy and technology evangelism go hand in hand. If the Scientific Method is indeed capable of unlocking the mechanisms of nature, and if the institution of science embodies the accumulated fruits of its unbiased application, it stands to reason that increasing control, via technology, will accompany increasing understanding via science. To question fundamental scientific precepts casts doubt upon the efficacy of technology as well. If there are vast realms of nature and human experience that science (as we know it) has not fathomed, then perhaps technology bears parallel limitations.

The challenge to science (as an institution if not as a method) that Sheldrake, Hancock, and several of the exTEDxWestHollywood speakers pose implicates much more than science. For instance, science has often been an agent of colonialism, devaluing and replacing indigenous ways of knowing. It has been an agent of social control, celebrating as progress the transition from traditional, organic, community-based modes of interaction to those which are planned, optimised, centralised, and engineered. It has often been an agent of economic and ecological exploitation, disregarding and destroying anything it cannot or will not measure. TED's genuflection toward science (as institution), and in particular an intransigent faction within that institution, is actually a defense, however unwitting, of a primary pillar of the world as we know it.

Given all of this, one would expect TED to confine itself across the board to entertaining, clever ideas that pose little threat to the status quo. But it turns out that this is by no means uniformly the case. Many TEDx talks, and even some in the official TED conference, advance ideas that overtly or covertly challenge prevailing ideologies on a fairly deep level. My crowd of researchers (I put the question on Facebook) found a bunch of radical talks on economics, education, and the political system. There are even quite a few that challenge scientific paradigms but for some reason didn't attract the ire of the militant atheists who flagged Sheldrake (he is their public enemy #1). Many more don't present a direct challenge, but are still subversive in more

muted ways, for example by empowering people toward some kind of non-participation in the system. Ultimately, anything that inspires wonder, joy, forgiveness, love of nature, the feeling of connectedness, or generosity erodes the sponsoring myth of our culture and everything built upon it: that we are separate individuals in a world of other that we must conquer and control. TED appears to be defending that myth and assaulting it at the same time.

Whence this schizophrenia? We as a civilisation are undergoing a transition to a new (and perhaps very ancient) mythology, one in which we no longer understand ourselves as separate from each other and from nature, one in which we see the universe as intelligent through and through. Upon that narrative (which is contrary to some fundamental tenets of science), radically different kinds of social, economic, and technological systems will emerge. Today, that transition is barely underway. We all live with a foot in two worlds, striving toward a new but in many ways unconsciously clinging to the old. In that, the TED authorities are essentially no different from any of us.

We would like for there to be some familiar institution that we can trust, something of the old world that we can cling to as a sound repository of goodness, from which we can challenge all that is wrong. For some that comforting refuge is science – the one good apple in the barrel of our rotten institutions. For others it is religion, education, medicine, or information technology. If only people were better educated! If only they listened to science! And the Internet will change everything! Certainly, all of these institutions harbor positive evolutionary forces, but in main they are all integral components of a world-devouring, soul-devouring machine.

No doubt, TED's inner circle sees the potential for a more beautiful world. That world is at once tantalisingly close and impossibly distant. On the one hand, we don't need any new technology to reach it; if we could only change our perceptions and social agreements, if only billions of us had a change of heart, we could be living right now in paradise. As I like to point out, half the world wastes enough food to feed the other half. On the other hand, such a shift – which would have to encompass the money system, politics, law, and the way we see each other and the world – is so huge as to seem impossible. Consider: how close is it to political reality to disband all armies, cease all weapons production, abolish all borders, cancel most debt, and adopt already-existing upcycling and permaculture technologies on a mass scale? That is the degree of change we need to save our world. None of these things (armies, borders, money, etc.) are written into material reality. They are products of our agreements.

Perhaps it is in realisation of this that TED champions the power of "ideas." Many of the ideas promulgated via TED do indeed erode the foundation of what people consider normal or unchangeable. But as the recent contretemps reveals, TED is still wedded to the old narrative in some important ways.

The controversy over Sheldrake, Hancock, and TEDxWestHollywood refuses to go away. Might that suggest that TED is being offered an opportunity to define itself? TED faces a choice point. Either it can retreat into the doctrines of establishment science and all that goes along with it, or it can accept this invitation to take a new step into the open questioning of the basic assumptions of our world. This needn't imply an endorsement of Sheldrake's or Hancock's views. It is merely to validate a new realm of inquiry. To do this requires no small amount of courage, because there are many rewards for adhering to the dominant ideologies. One gets taken seriously. One becomes, as Anderson himself put it, safe for the classroom – and safe for corporate sponsors, for mainstream media exposure, and other rewards for playing by the rules of the system.

This system, however, is falling apart, along with the ideologies and narratives that underlie it. This is just as true in the realm of science as it is in politics, finance, medicine, and education. The contradictions, shortcomings, and anomalies that people like Rupert Sheldrake illuminate in the edifice of science are not going away. But again, it takes courage to flout the normative belief system we call science.

How can we help TED – or anyone, for that matter – find the courage to take this step? First, I think it is important to refrain from publicly leveling accusations like "shameful," "hypocritical," and "cowardly" against TED. Such epithets will only cause them to harden their position. (Nor are they true. From within their perceptual framework, everything they are doing is fully justified.) We should be unwaveringly polite even as we are firm in upholding our beliefs. Both Sheldrake and Hancock exemplified this approach with their calm, courteous, and thorough rebuttals of the accusations against them.

Secondly, we should be vocal in our support for expanding the realm of acceptable inquiry, and make it clear that it is not a tiny fringe of airheads and cranks that supports the questioning of the basic tenets of science. No one wants to be subject to the slurs that militant atheists use ("woo-woo," "pseudoscience," "airy-fairy," etc.) We have to demonstrate that such a characterisation is inaccurate.

With this in mind, I have a modest proposal that I'd like to extend to anyone who has (as I have) spoken at a TED or TEDx event. I propose that we respectfully request that our videos be taken down from TED-affiliated Youtube channels just as Sheldrake's and Hancock's were. One might frame this as an act in solidarity with two fellow speakers who received shabby treatment, but really, I have no ax to grind. I do not want to punish TED, or make them regret their actions, or set them up as the bad guy. It is simply this: TED says it doesn't want to implicitly endorse the views of these men by having them associated with the TED brand. By the same token, I would prefer not to implicitly endorse TED's repudiation of the realm of inquiry those two (and TEDxWestHollywood) represent, by having my "brand" associated with TED.

Besides, my TEDx talk was full of scientifically indefensible assertions. I said, "Everything we have done to the Eskimo curlew or passenger pigeon is a wound we feel all the time and suffer from." I invoke scientifically suspect concepts like morphic fields and water memory in support for the scientifically nonsensical concept of "interbeing." And I say, "The world we see around us is built on a story," when any scientist could tell you it is, in fact, built on objectively existing fundamental particles. I feel uncomfortable having my talk standing, when more cogent, more eloquent talks by Rupert Sheldrake and Graham Hancock, with years of research behind them, are suppressed. I am going to write to TED and request that my talks be taken down, and I encourage any other speakers who agree with what I have said, or who feel disturbed by the recent acts of suppression, to do the same. This isn't a struggle against the bad guy. I appreciate TED and think they have showcased some important ideas and inspiring speakers. This is, rather, an attempt to clarify the choice between stories, for me, for TED, and for its audience.



*Charles Eisenstein is the author of **The Ascent of Humanity** and **Sacred Economics**, reviewed in the last two issues. His website is www.charleseisenstein.com where you can sign up for his postings. There is a recent one on terrorism listed under Members' Articles.*