



Purpose, People and Passages

Bernard Carr

In the last editorial, Olly Robinson focussed on the importance of purpose, both for the natural world as a whole and the SMN in particular. This is certainly a timely theme as we pass through our 40th year, this being the traditional age for reflecting on past achievements and contemplating future goals, so I would like to continue the discussion. Reaching 40 also sometimes triggers a mid-life crisis, which is another of Olly's areas of expertise, so I couldn't help wondering if this was another factor in his deliberations!

Although the notion of purpose used to be taboo in materialistic science, Olly stressed that it is now respectable, so long as it is internal to the system and not attributed to some higher external agency which precedes it. This is an important distinction and one that is also relevant to my own field of cosmology. When I wrote one of the first papers on the anthropic principle with Martin Rees in 1979, it produced a very aggressive reaction in some quarters – one of my colleagues angrily denounced the principle as “obscene” – and in part this was because of a failure to distinguish between these two levels of purpose. Nowadays anthropic arguments are quite popular in physics because the multiverse proposal removes the need to invoke God as the explanation of the fine-tunings required for life. This is why Neil Manson has described the multiverse as “the last resort for the desperate atheist”. On the other hand, while the possibility of a tuner is not obligatory, neither is it excluded, so the teleological significance of the anthropic principle (internal or external purpose) remains unclear. This motivated the *God or Multiverse?* meeting which we held some years ago.

There would seem to be no such ambiguity in biology, at least for the scientific mainstream. William Paley's view that the complexity of life is evidence for God has long been superseded by the idea of evolution by natural selection. The ‘clockmaker’ is blind and any purpose must surely be internal. Yet, as Olly mentioned, the co-discoverer of natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace – whose picture appears on this issue's front cover because it is the centenary of his death – still believed the world to be guided by some external purposive intelligence. Wallace was one of the 19th century's most remarkable intellectuals. Besides his role in discovering evolution, he was regarded as the father of biogeography (the field concerned with the geographical distribution of animal species), and he made significant contributions to glaciology, anthropology, ethnography, epidemiology and astrobiology. Indeed, by the time of his death he was probably the world's most famous scientist.

However, Wallace also attracted antipathy from the scientific establishment because of his support of unconventional ideas and this may be why his intellectual legacy was later overshadowed by that of Charles Darwin. His advocacy of a non-material origin for mind and purpose in nature was just one aspect of this. He was also a social activist, critical of what he regarded as the unjust economic system of 19th century Britain, and one of the first scientists to raise concerns over the environmental impact of human activity.

But what most attracted antagonism was his advocacy of Spiritualism. He constantly fought the scepticism of his scientific peers in this area, as illustrated by the following passage from his book on the subject.

“Thousands of intelligent men now living know from personal observation that some of the strange phenomena which have been pronounced absurd and impossible by scientific men are nevertheless true. It is no answer to these, and no explanation of the facts, to tell them that such beliefs occur only when men are destitute of the critical spirit. The argument that dependence is to be placed upon men of science, and upon them only, is opposed to universal experience and the whole history of science. It is time that the derisive and unexamining incredulity which has hitherto existed should give way to a less dogmatic and more philosophical spirit, or history will again have to record the melancholy spectacle of men, who should have known better, assuming to limit the discovery of new powers and agencies in the universe, and deciding, without investigation, whether other men's observations are true or false.”

The status of Spiritualistic phenomena is still controversial but these comments really apply much more generally. For Wallace was not opposing science itself but drawing attention to the dangers of what we now term ‘scientism’, an attitude as prevalent today as it was in his own time. Indeed, as an eminent scientist who was not afraid to confront and go beyond the materialistic paradigm of his day, he was surely the prototypical SMN man. Had he lived another 60 years, he would surely have become a member!

Olly ended his editorial by calling for a definitive statement of purpose from the SMN. This is an important exhortation but I have some reservations about it. As an educational charity, we have an obligation to “advance education in the study and application of science and medicine by adopting an interdisciplinary approach”. However, a lot hinges on the interpretation of the word ‘interdisciplinary’ and it may be difficult to reach a consensus here. For example, most of us would probably agree that the SMN aims to provide a bridge between science and spirituality but members have different views on the appropriate balance between our scientific and spiritual activities. Some complain that we are too scientific, others that we are too mystical, so it's difficult to please everyone. That's why being on a bridge is uncomfortable.

Another problem is that the interests of our members are very wide-ranging. The bridge between science and spirituality is really made up of many overlapping struts, each with a different focus and each associated with some other organization to which we may feel a degree of affiliation. For example, at the science end one has the Society for Scientific Exploration, while at the spiritual end one has the Alister Hardy Society, and somewhere in between is the Society for Psychical Research. There are also the complementary medicine and eco-political groups. So the SMN might be viewed as part of a ‘meta-network’ of organizations with allied interests, which

has both positive and negative aspects. While it's comforting to come under a larger umbrella (such as the recently formed One Spirit Alliance), our remit must be specific enough to maintain our identity. Otherwise we risk losing members and dissolving into a meta-network soup.

So whatever the practical problems in formulating an SMN manifesto, I agree that this is important. People determine purpose (at least if it's internal) and I applaud Olly's attempts to find out how our members feel about this through online surveys etc. Of course, not all people are equally influential. At any time our direction is likely to be determined by particularly charismatic people (initially our founders) but with the passage of time these influences change and our purpose evolves.

I must end this editorial on a more personal note by announcing some changes in the composition of the Board. As reported at the last Annual Gathering, Rupert Stewart-Smith has had to stand down as Secretary due health problems. He has held this post since 2002, so we are immensely indebted to him and his unsurpassed knowledge of our constitution and procedures will be sorely missed. Fortunately, several members contacted me after I appealed for a volunteer replacement and I am delighted to report that Nicholas Pilbrow has agreed to take over the role. Nicholas once lived in Rupert's current house, which seems an auspicious connection.

Another recent departure from the Board has been Claudia Nielsen. The high quality of our conferences over the last decade is testimony to her energetic chairmanship of the Programme Committee and – as a member of the Committee myself – I've witnessed at first hand the initiative and vision she has brought to this task. I have also been appreciative of Claudia's constant support and good advice as Vice-Chair. Happily, she remains a Vice-President and will still be running the London group. Also every cloud has a silver lining, so I am pleased to report that Martin Redfern has taken over the role of Programme Chair and that Tuvu Orbach has joined the Board, his experience in charity work and skill in marketing, outreach and networking being a most welcome addition.

Finally I would like to pay tribute to someone who holds a unique position within the SMN and is perhaps the only person who has been a member from the start. This is Max Payne, a Vice-President and former Chair of the Trustees, who was one of the select individuals invited to form a ‘network’ after the inaugural meeting at Exeter University in 1973. Last month the Board and Trustees showed their appreciation for his many contributions to the SMN by awarding him a Certificate of Exceptional Service and a 40-year old bottle of port. Janine Edge visited Max in Sheffield to present these in person and a photograph of the occasion appears on the inside of the front cover. There is surely no more fitting way to mark our 40th anniversary because, however lofty our aims, people count as much as purpose and there is nobody we value more highly.



A State of Belief is a State of Being

Charles Eisenstein

When students in a university classroom are invited to share anomalous stories, the ‘skeptical’ tactics used to debunk them seem reasonable at first, but eventually reveal a worldview that is cynical, arrogant, dogmatic, and unfalsifiable. Because any new evidence can, with sufficient effort, be made to fit a preexisting paradigm, belief is seen to come down to choice. Moreover, like most belief systems, the worldview of the Skeptic has an emotional component, long ago identified by Bertrand Russell and others as a meaninglessness or despair inherent in classical science. The choice of belief therefore extends beyond a mere intellectual decision, to encompass one's identity and relationship to the world. This approach conflicts with traditional scientific objectivity, which enjoins that belief be detached from such considerations. The relationship between observation and belief is more subtle than the traditional scientific view that the latter must follow dispassionately from the former. Indeed, the ‘experimenter effect’ in parapsychology, as well as mounting problems with objectivity in mainstream science, suggest a need to reconceive science and the Scientific Method in light of the crumbling of the assumption of objectivity upon which it is based.

Stories that don't Fit

Every semester back when I taught at Penn State, I conducted a rather unusual activity in my classroom. I asked my class – approximately 45 students representing a broad cross-section of the student body – to bring in a story that “doesn't fit into scientific reality.” I told them it could be anything—a ghost story, something with alternative medicine, a UFO sighting, a dream that came true, an experience with a fortune teller or ouija board. . . anything. “If you've never had such an experience,” I would say, “ask your friends and relatives.” The justification I give them beforehand is that by considering what our culture categorises as “unscientific,” we will shed light on what the adjective “scientific” means as well.

When they began sharing their stories in turn, I unleashed a little surprise. I debunked their stories as best as I possibly can, using all the weapons in the Skeptical arsenal. I explained their stories away as confabulation, hallucination, and selective memory. I appealed to coincidence. I contrived mechanistic explanations. I impugned their integrity or the integrity of their friends. I accused them of attention-seeking. I questioned their sanity. I implied they were on drugs, drinking too much, emotionally distraught, mentally unstable.

Debunking Tactics

Let me share a few examples to give you a flavour for this exercise:

Michelle: “At 3:00 a.m., my mother woke up suddenly to see her mother looking over my brother's bassinet. She got scared from seeing such a thing, and when she looked back towards my brother, the image of my grandma was gone. My mom waited up all night worrying that something terrible happened. At 7:00 that same morning she got a call from her father saying that my grandma had passed away at 3:00 a.m. that night.”

My debunking: “Your mother probably knew her mother was gravely ill, and was constantly worrying and obsessing about

it, losing sleep (as you imply). In her distraught state, she even started hallucinating. It was just coincidence that your grandmother died around the time she had that hallucination. In fact, probably she didn't die at exactly the same time at all. The hallucination probably happened several hours or even days before her death, but for the sake of a dramatic story your family has remembered them as happening simultaneously. Probably your mother couldn't handle the intensity of the grief, so she created this story as part of her psychological mechanism of denial.”

John: “In high school I had three pretty serious automobile accidents. Each time when I called home, my mother picked up the phone on the first ring and said immediately, ‘Are you all right?’ She only answered the phone like that those three times.”

My debunking: “You are wrong, John, your mother answers the phone like that quite often, because she is a worry-bug who constantly imagines something terrible has happened to someone. So of course once in a while she gets it right, and those are the times you remember.”

John: “No she's not, she's very sensible and down to earth.”

Me: “You only think so because you've bought into it too and don't even notice anymore. You are probably emotionally dependent on your mother's overprotection. Poor baby, are you all right?”

Zack: “When I was around the age of twelve, I had a very memorable dream. I was a gold prospector during the gold rush. In the dream I had my land marked off with rope, all my tools together and I was mining at Pikes Peak in California. As the dream continued I went from prospector to having people mine for me. I was becoming more and more wealthy until one day an earthquake took my house and my family. I tried to rebuild but I couldn't. Everything in my life was beginning to fail. I couldn't understand why I was such a loser in life after all I had once