



# Grasping the Educational Nettle: to Stuff in or to Draw Out?

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In his *Optical Papers* Sir Isaac Newton advised his students at Cambridge 'But truly with the help of philosophical geometers and geometrical philosophers, instead of the conjectures and probabilities that are blazoned about everywhere, we shall finally achieve a natural science supported by the greatest evidence'. What was this legendary scientist, alchemist, mystic and deeply religious man pointing towards? That neither geometry (i.e. science) on its own nor the love of wisdom (φιλοσοφία, *philosophia*) alone can provide a complete understanding of nature or ourselves. A harmony of both is needed. Similar sentiments were echoed by several other eminent scientists like Einstein, Schrödinger and Eddington; and by one of our own founders: Sir Kelvin Spencer, Chief Scientist at the Ministry of Power in the 1950s.

Why is philosophy (used in the broadest sense) the indispensable partner of science? Are there vistas of truth beyond and above pure intellectual enquiry into material facts which is the business of science? Can science *unwedded to philosophy* ever pronounce on ethics, on morality or what we value most – love? Are such issues then irrelevant? Here we need to make a necessary detour and remind ourselves about the impulse behind the genesis of the SMN in 1973. Our founders realised that neither orthodox religion nor conventional science were, in their current forms, sufficient to answer pressing questions about our existence and about the mysteries of the cosmos, and that new ways of thinking, and new interdisciplinary approaches were needed to build bridges and seek out new approaches. Even now, forty years on there has developed no across-the-board, all-encompassing subject or mode of enquiry in which the separate disciplines in science, medicine, theology and spirituality may be brought together. 'Alas too much of today's knowledge is but knowledge: a far cry from wisdom' remarked Sir Kelvin Spencer in 1988. What inhibits knowledge transmuting to wisdom?

Dogma and prejudice (the twin brothers of arrogance) ever destroy creativity and progress, as does thinking in simplistic black-and-white, either-or dichotomies. The counter to such fixed worldviews and narrow ideologies that breed so much divisive strife is open-minded enquiry placing the emphasis on asking searching questions and new ways of looking, rather than resorting to conformist answers ring-fenced within an exclusively materialistic paradigm. Such was indeed the profoundly holistic vision of our founders: an organisation confined by no rigid compartmentalisation of thought, but instead open to insight and questioning from every kind of human enquiry. Isn't this essentially the Socratic approach? Why did the Oracle at Delphi pronounce Socrates the wisest man in Athens? Certainly not because of his intellectual stuffing and great knowledge; but because he above all others

was painfully aware of what he didn't know – his ignorance. Socrates was ever humbly questioning his assumptions, enquiring, searching, doubting, never once-and-for-all concluding.

Our educational programmes, being of a trans-disciplinary and holistic nature by virtue of including science along with the wider field of human enquiry have mirrored this vision. But what exactly do we mean by education? The conventional meaning is of course a systematic course of instruction, initially in the "three Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic); and then in subjects like science, medicine, languages or crafts. The overriding purpose is to acquire academic qualifications, or technical skills in order to get a job. All indispensable and never to be belittled. But there is another wider and deeper side to education as well. It is the complete understanding of oneself; and through such self-understanding, the understanding of our relationship to our fellow beings and all of nature; for the great sages have ever stressed that the whole of existence is gathered and reflected in each one of us. In this sense, the intellectually ignorant man is not necessarily the unwise or unlearned; moreover the highly learned man may be foolish when it comes to the art of living. How is such a well-rounded education to be achieved? The origin of the word education provides a clue.

Etymologically, the word education comes from the past participle of the Latin *educāre* meaning 'to draw out', 'to raise up'. It does not mean to stuff into a person what he should be swotting. To educate in the true sense means literally 'to lead, or draw out'. But what are we drawing out? The innate potentiality lying dormant within each one of us awakened into activity by the appropriate stimulus. Just as a seedling cannot grow tall and mature by being yanked at, or the surrounding ground stuffed with a single chemical, instead by being carefully watered and tendered with the right nutrients in the right balance, similarly the drawing out of one's innate gifts and unique talents needs the rights 'nutrients' to include, but not be restricted just to intellectual study or any other kind of one track approach. Education of course includes learning about the structure of the atom or the dynamics of the big bang, evolutionary theories and economic models. But it is also about understanding what the sages and saints have taught since millennia: not how to attain a material Utopia, but the truth about the pitiful human condition and how we may set it aright.

Much is made of evidence that is rational and scientific. Perfectly fine in its right context, but where for example is the rational scientific evidence for the law of karma operating on the moral and ethical levels? Shall this inexorable law then be dismissed with a condescending sneer to the province of wacky cults touting flaky fantasies? So if

this is an area where science cannot provide the evidence we have to look elsewhere: primarily to our own lives but also to the world scriptures, magnificent literature (e.g. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*) and sublime poetry (e.g. *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold). Then what about consciousness? Mainstream science by its own admission has not the slightest idea about consciousness *per se* (only its correlates in terms of neuronal activity in the brain, impressive as this understanding may be). So then we need a science of consciousness, not consciousness as a subject within science. This is not a criticism of science but a plea for discernment not only through study and learning, but life experience and reflection regarding the legitimate boundaries and context of science. To operate within those boundaries is sane; to transgress them in the hope of finding answers from science on issues that lie outside the scientific purview is foolish and a cause of much of the confusion in society today. All this is also part of education, not only brain education (useless by itself), but Self-education.

To this end the recent conference at Imperial College was titled: 'Frontiers of Science and Spirituality'. Appropriately subtitled 'The SMN Approach to Holistic Education' it fulfilled a twofold educational purpose: primarily to bequeath the accumulated knowledge within the SMN to *young people*, namely for students in schools at sixth form level, colleges and universities; and to do so by drawing upon the first-rate expertise of our own members rather than external speakers to provide this service, so stimulating dialogue and greater sense of belonging amongst our SMN community. Accordingly, a spectrum of sixteen SMN speakers from amongst our members who are renowned experts in their field and possessing fine presentational skills were approved by the Board to give short, colourful presentations on a wide range of topics from science and medicine to economics and humanities, psychical research and spirituality. The day was programmed into four sessions on humanities and life sciences, science and spirituality, consciousness and changing paradigms, and changing paradigms in medicine, with four talks per session. Animated discussions with the speakers followed each session. These talks were videoed. They will be put on U-tube and also shared with schools, colleges and universities that might then invite speakers of their choice for an extended presentation at their own establishment.

Our thanks must go to the Programme Committee and technical team under Martin Redfern's command, the Board and the Trustees for their unflinching support. And of course to the eminent speakers who gave of their time and expertise in order to broaden and stimulate young minds in a way that our founders would surely have approved through this flagship educational project.