



# Some More Thoughts on Tightropes – A Personal View

*Chris Lyons*

**VERY MUCH** liked Martin Redfern's piece in the last edition of *Network Review*, in which he described the tight-rope we walk in the SMN. As I see it though, there are two ropes we're traversing, which are distinct but related. One is the one that Martin described - between dogmatic science and flakey nonsense - and I don't think we do it that well. Though we criticise, and define ourselves against, dogmatic science, we're far less clear about our boundary with mumbo-jumboism. The other tightrope is that between our two mutually conflicting guide-lines of *rigour* and *care for others*. No-one likes having their views criticised, of course, especially their world-views, but it seems to me that we've gone so far to avoid making people uncomfortable that we never criticise anything that anyone ever says. I've heard what I consider the most arrant nonsense politely applauded at Network events, with barely a word of dissent. If we're not to become apologists for everything that's merely unconventional or unorthodox, I think we need to change this culture.

There's no doubt that science, with its insistence upon reason and evidence, has hugely increased our knowledge. The question that remains is whether it's capable of giving us a complete picture – whether materialism as currently construed is *adequate* to explain reality, or whether there is something else going on which is not subject to universal laws and therefore isn't susceptible to scientific explanation. This is a possibility which needs to be carefully considered, but doing so doesn't warrant a retreat into unreason. And neither, I think, can we expect intuition to fill the gap. Though a valuable faculty to develop, it can be hugely unreliable. If you doubt this, think of how just a few centuries ago it was practically universally intuited that the Earth was at the centre of the universe. Consider too that virtually every scientific hypothesis begins as an intuition, yet the vast majority of them eventually fail to be supported by evidence and are rejected.

There are two big and very difficult questions on the edges of science. One concerns the origin of the universe, the other the relationship

between matter and inner experience (the so-called hard question of consciousness). It's possible that these represent the limits of what science can achieve, but we can't be sure of this, and it isn't a reason not to keep on pushing at the limits of knowledge. Moreover, to introduce a final cause or supernatural explanation for these things gets us no-where. In this sense, God is an epistemological dead-end.

Whilst the SMN has no official dogma or creed, there are a number of questions it asks which wouldn't usually be discussed in orthodox scientific circles, and could be regarded as challenges to the orthodox view. I would list them as follows:

1. Does consciousness arise, not in the brain, but entirely beyond the physical body?
2. Does consciousness survive physical death?
3. What is the meaning or value of extraordinary, transpersonal or mystical experiences?
4. Do humans have senses beyond the five commonly recognised ones – for instance, being able to see auras or dowse.
5. Can minds directly affect the world beyond the body?
6. Does intercessionary prayer work?
7. Can humans effect healing in others beyond the others' own (placebo-like) intrinsic healing capacity?
8. Do chakras exist? Does chi exist? Are homeopathy and acupuncture more than just placebo and theatre?

These are all interesting questions, amongst the most interesting that could be asked. But the problem, as I see it, is that we never get any closer to answering them. What I'd like to see the SMN do, is to embark upon a critical examination of these issues whereby the best evidence for and against is presented, scrutinised, challenged and debated. By this means, we could arrive at a position whereby the important issues are highlighted and the crucial questions sharpened, whilst the rest is allowed

to melt away. Not only would this enliven the SMN, it would also, in my opinion, remove the main danger that I think threatens the organisation, which is this. To treat the above questions in a largely one-sided way can give the impression that we regard them as already adequately answered, and that the failure of this to be more generally accepted is due only to the prejudices of the orthodox scientific community. At a time when unreason is on the march, and when quack medicine and junk science are hugely popular, this makes the SMN very attractive to those who embrace all sorts of new-age nonsenses, which in my view puts the organisation well on the slippery slope towards mumbo-jumboism.

In addition to the above eight questions though, there is another one which the SMN has not as yet focussed upon, but which I think it could usefully so do. It is: whence come our moral values? It's often said that science can only answer 'what is' questions and can say nothing about 'what should be', which must be left to religion to answer. I don't think this is so. Human beings don't need the Ten Commandments to know that killing and stealing are wrong – at least amongst their own community; and however the Church of England finally resolves the matter of homosexual clergy, I don't think it will be through some hitherto undiscovered verse in the Bible. The moral sense seems to be innate to humans, and even possibly to some animals too. We seem to have evolved to be moral, as science is now beginning to show. If we better understood the origin of our moral sense, we might even be able to refine and enhance it. I think this would be very fertile territory for the SMN to explore.

*Dr. Chris Lyons is a GP and Treasurer of the Network.*

*The Editor welcomes correspondence on this and other articles.*