

Editorial - What Does the Network Stand For?

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The Scientific and Medical Network has no dogmas, declared aims, or programme of action. So what does it stand for? It has the guidelines of openness, rigour and mutual respect, but openness, rigour and respect to what end? Network members are concerned for a whole number of causes. Some are good, some are fringe, some are downright weird. Why the particular emphasis on science and medicine?

In the beginning the Network was a "safe house" where scientists and medical professionals could meet and discuss the wilder fringes of their subjects, and fundamental questions about the frontiers between science, healing, religion and human values. Within the Network they could share their deepest concerns with others without losing academic credibility with their orthodox colleagues. Times have changed, and discussion has become more open. The questions remain, but there are many different groups concerned with everything from healing to flying saucers, and sustainable engineering to meditation, all of which seek to deal with issues on the fringe of orthodox science. The historical reason for a concern with frontiers of science and medicine is ceasing to be special. There are, however, deeper reasons for our commitment to science. The Network remains almost unique in that it seeks to deal with science from within science.

At the end of this 2nd millennium science poses two problems to our civilisation and provides the answer to the problems it has set. The modern world is the product of science and its attendant technology. The unprecedented prosperity and expansion of knowledge, the opportunities for learning and for travel in the 20th century are all due to science. So are its problems, the shadow of nuclear war, the greenhouse effect, overpopulation, and the moral breakdown of the inner city. If we are to understand where we are, we have to understand what got us here, and that is science. Secondly the progress of science has undermined and discredited all traditional value systems. In the last 400 years Science has shone a bright, clear, hard light on physical material experience and has obtained insights that have surpassed all previous knowledge in precision and range. The problem is that what has been left outside the bright light of science is now thought to be no longer knowledge, and this includes questions of human value and spirituality. Logical Positivism may have been exploded philosophically, but it reigns as a common assumption amongst the literate and the semi-literate. Experiences that have not easily been subsumed into science are therefore regarded not as "normal", but "paranormal". This has hardened into a narrow and dogmatic "scientism" which seeks to reduce all human experience to the concepts of currently official science. The crisis of civilisation and culture at the end of the 20th century is a witness to the consequences.

There are two opposite mistakes. The first is to imagine that all there is to know about reality can be contained within the current framework of science. The second mistake is even worse. It is to forget the great achievement and lesson of science once we step beyond its boundaries. It is necessary to distinguish between the structure of scientific knowledge, and the process of scientific inquiry. The structure changes and is the product of the process. Yesterday the structure was Newtonian, today it is Relativistic, tomorrow it will be something different. The process of scientific inquiry remains more fundamental. Science is an open self-critical process committed to impartial consensus amongst all truthful seekers. Its paradigm is that description which is true for all possible observers. This paradigm does

not only apply to light signals in physics, it applies to the investigation of paranormal phenomena, spiritual experience in mysticism, moral relations between men and women, and the proper ordering of society.

For most of human history mankind has been concerned with the vast realm of experience outside the narrow area of physical knowledge that has been illuminated by the light of science. This realm has been the sphere of superstition, credulity, and intolerant dogmatism. If now in the coming 21st century we are about to step outside the limits of materialist scepticism, if we are about to explore this wider realm on a higher turn of the spiral, then we have to carry with us all the disciplines of an open scientific inquiry with its moral virtues of impartiality and self-critical humility.

In this the Scientific and Medical Network has a unique role to play. It is neither the largest nor the wealthiest organisation in the field, but with its total commitment both to science and to openness to all experience, it can play a special pivotal role in our civilisation at this time.

As the Network has no dogmas or declared aims, this is, of course, purely the opinion of one of its members.

*Max Payne is Chair of the Network Trustees - an extended version of this editorial can be found in the Network Book, **Wider Horizons**.*