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Ernest Gellner

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The present collection of essays falls into three parts. There are those which deal with the basic images in terms of which we see humanity, those which deal with knowledge, and those concerned with socio-political questions. The underlying themes are however the same. These fields have intimate and inescapable connections.

Modern thought faces two problems above all (though they are not always recognised under these names): the issue of Validation, and that of Enchantment. We want an entry permit to our world; and we also want it to be in a good state of decorative repair. This is all the more essential nowadays, since we can no longer trust a top management to keep an eye on it. The problem of right of entry to a world or its validation arises in many diverse fields – the various branches of science, politics, personal morality, aesthetics – and has a very simple basic form: why or on what grounds do we do things *this* way rather than *that*? For instance: with what justification does science favour causal rather than purpose-stressing explanations, or open generalisations rather than idiosyncrasy-stressing accounts? Why do we, or should we, favour pluralistic polities, or permissive morals? These questions could only be pseudo-questions if we had no options, or if the choices amongst them were obvious, if we were already inside one unique world, rather than facing the possibility or threat of migration. In fact we do have options. The choices are seldom obvious, and they are sometimes acutely painful.

Men meet the problem of validation (which has many other names as well) under terms of reference which make it extremely difficult to handle – some might say, impossible. (The view that philosophical questions are not quite genuine is actually encouraged by this, by

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means of two *highly* questionable arguments. One consists of assuming that nature, or whatever or whoever is responsible for our predicament, does not set us problems which are too hard for us – so this cannot be *our* problem; and the second one suggests that if we cannot find good reasons for an answer, why then *any* answer will do.) The terms of reference are these: a conclusive, so to speak *terminal* validation is required. This may be supported by reasons: but then of course it is no longer terminal. Then it is those reasons which are then really terminal. Or it is not supported by reasons. In that case it is arbitrary. Either way, the enterprise fails.

This problem can be called the problem of the Regress (of reasons). Of late, certain to my mind facile and inadequate solutions have been proposed. One consists of the contention that the problem only arises because we mistakenly seek too general a base for our activities, whether cognitive or other. No such bases exist, on this view. We must be content with more specific justifications, which are part and parcel of the activity in question. Nothing more general is either possible or necessary, on this view. Another solution consists of attempting to replace the pursuit of justifications by the more modest activity of eliminating erroneous views, without for all that definitively justifying any residual truth – and declaring such justification to be unnecessary. Each of these strategies would only work *if* we had no options in the choice of the general, over-all world which we choose to inhabit; and such alternative worlds also include the criteria we employ in various spheres of life. In fact, we are not option-less in that way.

The problem of the regress is not the only factor contributing to the acuteness of the validation issue. A part of our background is an earlier social order, within which the official and enforced doctrine proclaimed that the problem of validation was already solved, finally and conclusively. This heritage has left behind a certain after-taste and a certain expectation, whilst at the same time the conditions for satisfying this expectation have been withdrawn. At the very moment when the rug is being pulled away from under his feet, the thinker is expected to carry an even bigger load than he had done before. The raised expectation has a double source: past dogmatism is one of them, and the phenomenal success of the cognitive enterprise in some limited spheres – notably natural science – is another. Technology has justified that particular faith by works. Both the confidence lost, and the demonstration effect in successful adjoining areas, act as spurs to endeavour.

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One response was to attempt to read Nature or History, in the hope of eliciting from them pronouncements as clear and firm as those which the deity was previously said to provide. An alternative and sophisticated answer consists of trying to turn the tables, and finding a solution not in firm knowledge, but in doubt or ignorance. Instead of saying – things are such and such, and therefore our life should follow a certain mould – one can say – we do *not* know how things stand, and *therefore* a certain style of life would appear to commend itself. *This* set of institutions is the best bet in conditions of certainty-deprivation. Thus the cognitively liberal *Weltanschauung* endeavours to use a vacuum rather than a plenum for its foundation. Its critics on the left tend to suspect that the supposedly neutral and impartial void is surreptitiously loaded against them, and that it is not nearly as empty and agnostic as it is painted.

The importance and pervasiveness of the problem of validation has led to the centrality of the theory of knowledge in modern thought. The theory of knowledge however has not as yet attained a full awareness of its own proper role and status. Often, it appears to itself as a positive, descriptive or explanatory account of the actual processes of cognition. As such, its merits are limited. Its real significance lies in its normative function of codifying, and in some measure justifying, a style of cognition amongst others – in being an *ethic of cognition*. Its founder/hero is Descartes/Crusoe, the cognitive self-made-man, who builds up his own wealth with his own self-made tools. As ownership was validated by mixing one's labour with things, so was belief. Being thus beholden to no-one, Robinson need not fear that some cognitive creditor will one day turn up and deprive him of what he has built up.

The Crusoe tradition in the theory of knowledge is a myth which, like others, highlights some aspects of the situation and obscures others. Crusoe's most obvious feature is his solitude, and it is easy to say that he symbolises the solitary intellectual entrepreneur, and speaks for a kind of cognitive possessive individualism. But the solitude has another aspect which is more important. Being alone and shipwrecked, he had to start *anew*. This is hard: as Spinoza observes in his discussion of the problem of validation and truth, it takes hammers to make hammers, so how can you ever make the first one? Crusoe starts with nothing but *himself* as his first tool. This means he has to start afresh without taking over a cultural stock of tools, and with it, whatever bias may be built into them.

Thus, under the individualism, there is also a recognition of

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radical discontinuity, a break, a *coupure*, between the new style of thought which we are trying to codify and establish, and the one which preceded it. There is a major dividing line in the theory of knowledge between those who believe this chasm to be real and those who do not. Those who (to my mind mistakenly) hold the *coupure* to be illusory and who believe continuity to be the rule, do not necessarily also oppose the 'modern', secular, experimental, sceptical vision. On the contrary, they are as often men who take that vision for granted, all too much so, and have no sharp sense of how very unique and eccentric it is in human history, and who also believe it to have been ever-present, ever since the stone age or since the amoeba. (For some reason, this modern and cognitively effective vision just wasn't fully effective, operational and manifest during various Dark Ages, which were just regrettable periods of temporary stagnation to which they pay scant attention.) Those born after enlightenment sometimes mistakenly suppose it to be a human birth-right, ever with us. This is an error. Were it so, there would indeed be no problem – other than, perhaps, explaining why some have eyes but see not. In fact, far from being a birthright, it is a miraculous and precarious privilege which needs to be understood if it is to be safeguarded.

In as far as the seemingly individualistic Crusoe story conveys the sense of a fresh start and radical discontinuity, it is valid and illuminating. It was quite natural, but mistaken, to deny discontinuity, and to seek instead a new foundation, a new safe basis, in the General (and hence perpetual) Trend of Things, as was done by so many nineteenth-century philosophies, from Hegelians to pragmatists. That was how things looked then. But our time no longer encourages this illusion.

In other words, the story is misleading. The trouble with Robinson Crusoe (or his philosophic parallel René Descartes) is that he is such a solid, sturdy, *balanced* character. Nothing very neurotic about him. Good officer material, you might say, but the epistemological tradition is not only about Crusoe. It is also about Hamlet, Don Quixote, or Dostoevsky of the *Notes from Underground*. It is about the difficulty of living without confidence in the reality of one's perception of one's world, or alternatively, living with a despairing and unjustified conviction, springing from an intolerable divergence between the world as one would like to think it and as it is. One can laugh at Don Quixote because he is seen from the outside, which means that one knows the truth about what reality is really like.

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The windmill is but a windmill. But from the inside, the matter is never certain. One may sin on the side of excessive prosaic realism as well as on the side of romantic illusion, and the correct midpoint is never unambiguously and clearly indicated. What is more, most people are bound to have different 'correct' midpoints at different times of the day and in different contexts. Such opportunism is neither comfortable nor honourable.

The point about the break, the re-valuation of ideas, is that it makes a tool and a virtue of *doubt*. Cognitively, so it is. But is it a virtue in conduct? Does it not erode character or will-power? Crusoe only re-created the material culture of his own society by his own scarcely aided efforts, in some small measure – but he did not tinker with his own self. That came with the deal. Descartes saw the danger and coped with it by segregating morals from cognition, proscribing the method of doubt in the sphere of action. But the separation was difficult to sustain, and the hero of *Notes from Underground* was only echoing many other intellectuals when he commiserates with his own inability to rush into action like an enraged bull – such feebleness being the price of sophistication: 'the real moral man. . . is stupid. . . [but] the antithesis of the normal man. . . the man of acute consciousness. . . is sometimes so nonplussed. . . that with all his exaggerated consciousness he genuinely thinks of himself as a mouse and not a man'. Admittedly, Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, 'taught a whole grateful generation that a man can still be capable of moral resolution even after he has plumbed the depths of knowledge'. But then, he did come to a bad end.

So our cognitive predicament is really rather more complex than the Crusoe/Descartes story suggests. There are a number of complications. First of all, ideas, whether clear and distinct or not, come not singly but in large package deals. Important choices are often between such package deals rather than between isolated and insulated alternatives. Don Quixote, who tries to act in terms of one culture, past or fictitious, whilst living in another, is in some ways a far better paradigm of an epistemological problem than Crusoe. How do you know which world is the real one? From the outside, we *know* the answer, in his case. The Age of Chivalry was past or had never existed. But life is lived from the inside, and then the question is open. Frequently, the question – which world am I in? – does *not* have an obvious answer, and the bull-like gentlemen, who have no doubts, normally prevail and impose their worlds.

These large package deals, world-options, as recent thinkers have

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reminded us, are generally not commensurate with each other, they are not articulated in a shared idiom, and hence it is difficult to judge them 'from the outside'. They not only have their own idioms, but also their own morality which is part and parcel of each of them, and so the Cartesian separation of morals and cognition fails to work. Doubt, which is a virtue of cognition (perhaps the cardinal one), is an impediment in conduct, and this is Hamlet's problem. The virtues of thought and of behaviour are not the same ones. There is one morality for theoretical reason and another for practical reason. Those ideological package deals often demand assent with menaces – those who refuse to accept their morality or code of thought, thereby damn themselves, or so they say. They generally have their allies within the human breast, and find their support and anchorage in one mood or humour or another. How can one mood judge another, or ensure its own stability, or validate itself? One man's inner validation is another man's weakness. There are striking parallels between the logic of inner conflict and of genuine philosophical thought. It can only be resolved by doing violence to itself. A victory is always also a pre-judgement. Self-conquest is betrayal. Moral fibre is intellectual ossification. Begging the question is the only form of answering it. The requirements of life and thought are incompatible.

But there is worse to come. The conceptual package deals do not merely have their own idioms and moralities, they also generally operate what may be called the Pirandello effect. It was Luigi Pirandello who popularised the theatrical device of deliberately and systematically subverting the clear and distinct separation of audience, actors and characters, of subject and object in effect, by making the characters speak to their author, the actors pretend to be part of the audience and interact with it, and so forth. He tried to ensure that the play was not a spectacle but a predicament. The re-tooling of tools by Crusoe, the re-conceptualising of concepts by the Cartesian tradition, had all been done in a highly conventional theatre, where you could be sure that the actors would not invade your privacy, and your identity was not in question. You brought your own identity to the stalls and took it home again at the end.

Once the Pirandello effect is achieved – and in modern thought it invariably *is* achieved – the aseptic separation of observer and drama is ended. We cannot sit back and assess rival worlds and make our choice, because we do not possess any single, independent, pre-existent *we* (or *I*) to do the job. It appears that we chose (or are

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chosen) jointly with a world, by bulk purchase, and then, inside it, go through the process of ratifying that world. . . a somewhat circular procedure. (One particular world, namely our own, had developed an idiosyncratic tendency to self-doubt. Some of us feel that just this makes it a better one than its rivals. Is this reasonable or is it the ultimate in narcissism?) Some philosophies specialise in camouflaging or justifying the circularity.

I do not believe that all this shows that the evaluative, validation-seeking and doubting activity was pointless. It only shows that it is far more difficult and problematic than may at first appear. There is no diamond-hard cognitive ego, no Pure Visitor to this world, who could submit a definitive and impartial intelligence report on its general condition. Still less can we seek a base-line in an alleged common sense or its linguistic shadow. But though all this may seem to show that the task is impossible, it *must* nevertheless be attempted. Though not feasible, it is mandatory.

This impasse of the cognitive endeavour, however, does relate to the other problem, that of Enchantment. The codification of knowledge and its procedures, when it seemed to be going well, appeared to extract a certain bitter price. The necessity of orderly explanation seemed to subject the world, including humanity itself, to the laws of causation, thus depriving us of freedom and spontaneity. (The replacement of causal laws by statistical ones, where it occurs, does not humanise the picture much.) The generality and impersonality of explanation seemed to deprive us of our individuality and idiosyncrasy. Generally speaking, knowledge consists of showing that the thing known is really something else, where the something else is but a specimen of a substrate which is very general and impersonal. This is known in the trade as the 'covering law' theory of explanation. Also, the account of knowledge as constructed from 'data', which in turn are seen atomistically, leaves us with a highly disenchanted vision of the world. The atoms are cold and inhuman.

This cold vision is not merely the product of philosophies. If it were, it might not matter so much. It is equally or more conspicuous in the *content* of science. Philosophy only adds the insight, which has still escaped the attention of some, that the disenchantment is not a contingent consequence of this or that specific discovery, but inheres in the very method and procedure of rational inquiry, of impartial subsumption under symmetrical generalisations, of treating all data as equal. Reductionism is not an aberration, it is inherent in

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the very method of science. If we 'scientifically' established the reality of some 'human' and seemingly reduction-resisting element in the world, we would ipso facto thereby also 'reduce' it, in some new way.

The demonstrative vindication of a value is but its demolition by other means. Sociologists rather than philosophers noted the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, and it was Max Weber who christened it 'disenchantment'. The orderliness and symmetry of procedure, corroding identity and idiosyncrasy, operates in social organisation as well as in knowledge, and in a parallel manner, and it then tends to be called 'bureaucratisation' or 'rational production'.

At almost the same time that thought faced the problem of re-validation – or at any rate, not long after – it also faced the problem of Enchantment, the requirement that the world be shown to be not *too* cold and inhuman, too impersonally icy. Ironically, success in handling one problem hampered the solution of the other. Kant was the most heroic of philosophers, trying to do both things at the same time: to establish the regularity of nature and causation in order to validate science, and yet also to exempt us from it, so as to validate morality and (minimally) to re-enchant the world, by allowing us at least freedom, responsibility, and valid thought. Many philosophers have tended to be on one side or the other. Roughly speaking, the romantics specialised in enchantment, the positivists in validation and hence also the exclusion of that which did not meet the criteria of validation. The Enchantment also presented itself as a validation, whereas the positivist validation made out that we did not really need the old enchantment, and that the scientific vision constituted a purer, better variant, one which we could learn to live with or even love. But in any given concrete philosophy, there tend to be different proportions of each element, presented in diverse ways and with differing measures of consistency.

The political problems of our time are inevitably viewed against the backcloth of these two problems and their putative solutions. It is these formulations or would-be solutions which provide the idiom, and set the limits to the legitimations of social and political systems. Our intellectual and political options emerge from the same background and from the same problem situation; the cognitive and political predicaments are intertwined. The Social Contract theory was of course the political accompaniment of Crusoe epistemology: a social order was to be made anew, or at any rate re-validated, without relying on the old legitimisation-equipment which had gone

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down with the ship. The new contract, unlike the old covenant, had only human signatories. That was a step forward. But in fact, these human signatories are as hard to come by as the divine one. Fully formed people only come into being after the Contract – in a specific culture – and thus cannot easily, without circularity, validate the compact by their endorsement. The lack of a hard, *given* ego is a problem for both epistemology and politics. Since then, liberal legitimations-by-doubt and romantic re-enchantment myths, and many other systems, have competed for our loyalties. These are the underlying links.

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## Part I

# Understanding humanity