

The Reality of Experience

I am the poet of reality
I say the earth is not an echo
Nor man an apparition;
But that all the things seen are real
Walt Whitman

The Bee is not afraid of me.
I know the Butterfly.
The pretty people in the Woods
Receive me cordially—
The Brooks laugh louder when I come—
The Breezes madder play;
Wherefore mine eye thy silver mists,
Wherefore, Oh Summer's Day?
Emily Dickinson

We Westerners generally give a reason for what we believe. We believe this because of that. It will rain because the sky is cloudy; the grass will grow because the rains have come and the days are sunny. We want a reason for what we believe, but the only reason we can give in support of our fundamental beliefs is an assumption that has no reason to support it. It's just an assumption—a sense or a gut feeling that “such and such must be the case.”

Western culture is governed by a single underlying assumption upon which all of its reasoning is based. Contrary to what we Westerners might think, with the coming of science and the modern age there was not a fundamental change in the underlying assumption that governs our society. One could rather regard the change as stylistic or as a variation on a theme. There was a change as to the

The Reality of Experience

detail of the assumption but not a fundamental change in the assumption itself.

What we modern Westerners of both evidenced-based and faith-based persuasions have in common is that we assume that whatever is real is other than and apart from what we are. And we also share this same assumption with our medieval and ancient counterparts. We assume that we are not real but something that is other than what we are is real.

This is our Western “trademark assumption” that has been in place for millennia. On the surface we have made lots of changes over the centuries, but no fundamental change concerning the underlying assumption that serves as our cultural foundation has occurred. We, like our forbears before us, don’t think that whatever is real is inherent in us—in our “inner self.” We don’t assume that inherent in us is something that makes us real. We instead look outside ourselves for reality. To find it we assume we have to link up with something apart from us. Whatever reality might be, the one assumed characteristic of it that we agree on is that it is other than what we are.

It is true that the Other, the assumed reality that is apart from us and that we have to link up with, has undergone some interpretive alterations. The ancient Hebrews thought it was an immutable God, Plato and the Greek and Roman Platonists thought it was immutable Forms or Ideas, and the medieval Christians thought it was God and the Platonic Forms amalgamated into one.

With the advent of the modern age and the empirical theories of John Locke, the designated Other became something different. Rather than God and/or abstract Forms, the new Other was the “World.” The new philosophy taught that to know

The Reality of Experience

what is real, mankind has to link up with the World. It claimed that knowledge comes from the World. To know the World people have to experience it empirically through the senses.

We moderns have grown up believing that reality is “out there.” The existence of the World is a given that we don’t question. Whatever we do has to conform to “reality,” and reality is to us whatever is out there in the World. Today many people question the existence of God, but few if any question the existence of the World. We human beings come and go and live and die. We are temporary, but the World goes on existing indefinitely.

Like a belief in God or in Forms, a belief in the World assumes that something just is. The ancient Hebrews didn’t worry about who made God, the Platonists’ first concern was not the antecedent of the Forms, and we moderns don’t bother ourselves with what came before the World or in modern parlance the “universe.” The buck has to stop somewhere if anything is to make any sense, and to modern people it stops at the universe.

When we look at modern technology and compare it with what came from ancient theology or philosophy we’re struck by the magnitude of the differences. We don’t tend to think of the line from antiquity to modernity as an unbroken continuum. Nonetheless, as we look closer we see that the assumption that advocates of evidenced-based science make is fundamentally the same as the one advocates of faith-based religion make, whether they are ancient, medieval, or modern.

Whether one believes in God, the Forms, or the World, one makes the same assumption: that reality is other. Whatever reality is, it is what we are not. In addition, whatever reality is, it just is. It requires no explanation or justification. It exists “out

The Reality of Experience

there” as something permanent and immutable. Whether reality is God, the Forms, or the World, it does not change fundamentally. Whatever it is, it always is.

Built into the reality-is-other assumption is the absolute nature of whatever the Other is. The Other by definition is something unknown. Its incomprehensibility guarantees both its otherness and its absoluteness. That which we know is part of us. That which we do not know is other than what we are. Just as the otherness of God and of the Platonic Forms makes them incomprehensible, so too does the otherness of the World make it incomprehensible. For the same reason that no man has comprehended God or the Forms, can no man comprehend the World. People claim to know something about God just as they claim to know something about the Forms and the world. That claimed knowledge, however, is never certain. It is never for sure. Because we assume that God, the Forms, and the World are other than what we are, we have no certain knowledge concerning them.

* * *

Despite the continuous, ongoing disagreement between the advocates of evidenced-based science and faith-based religion there is no fundamental disagreement between them. Further, both sides, because of their fundamental assumption, face the same challenge. Anyone who assumes that reality is other than what we are has to determine what the relationship is between what we are and what the Other is. If we assume that we are other than reality, then we also assume that we are not real. We, the not-real, are one thing, and reality, the Other, is something else. That being the case, the question arises as to the relationship between

The Reality of Experience

what is real and what is not real. Can there be a relationship? Can the not-real relate to the real?

For most human beings the answer to this question is that there *has* to be a relationship *somehow*. It may not be an exaggeration to say that almost everything we humans do, one way or another, is an attempt to get at this question of relationship. Almost every endeavor we undertake is an attempt of one kind or another to close the gap or narrow the distance between the real and the not-real.

That we must fail in this attempt, however, is predetermined by our fundamental assumption. Once we assume that reality is other, then it is absolutely other. We may fudge on the assumption, which we regularly do, but as long as we keep coming back to it and insisting on it, the absolute Other will always remain apart from us and we will not be able to relate to it or make it part of us.

Because the absoluteness of the Other is of our own creation, we might think that a little fudging in regard to it might not matter much, but in fact, because this otherness over time becomes rooted in our cultural beliefs including what we hold to be real and sacred, it is a very serious problem. The way we fudge is to make claims that on the surface seem both plausible and justifiable. Neither the advocates of evidenced-based science nor those of faith-based religion are innocent when it comes to fudging on our assumption. What both sides try to do is convince people that something is claimed regarding the assumed otherness that can't, because the otherness is absolutely other, be claimed at all.

Some advocates of faith-based religion claim, for example, that when the Bible states that Moses stood "face to face" before God that, whether the

The Reality of Experience

narrative is to be taken literally or figuratively, it is an instance where the Other (the real) and man (the not-real) came together. In Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel depiction of the creation of Adam, in keeping with the otherness assumption, the finger of God and the finger of man don't quite touch, but in the case of Moses on the mountain, many advocates of religion claim that God and man did in fact have a "meeting of the minds."

That at least is what they seem to claim, but do they really? Do they claim that God, the Other, the sole exponent of reality, communicated with a man, an individual, momentary instance of the not-real? Is *that* their claim? Do they claim to know what God, the real, the absolute Other, is and with that knowledge in hand are prepared to make the additional claim that the real and the not-real came together into one? And if that happened wouldn't that cause a problem for the Other? Wouldn't coming together with the not-real negate the otherness, the absoluteness, and the reality of God? In short, wouldn't God and man coming together negate the original assumption concerning absolute otherness?

Of course it would, and therefore that is not what is claimed, at least not without qualification. The underlying assumption must remain intact. Nobody knows what the real is because it is other. What is claimed instead is that God *somehow* communicated with man, but it's a *mystery* as to how that happened. Advocates of faith-based religion assume that reality is other but then fudge on the assumption by claiming that the real and the not-real *mysteriously* came together.

The challenge that religion faces is that no matter which way it answers the Otherness question it's in trouble. If it claims there is not a relationship between God and man the religion is sterile and ul-

The Reality of Experience

timately meaningless. If it claims the opposite it is forced to go against the fundamental assumption that underlies the religion. Neither option is acceptable, and so the answer is and has always been that *somehow* these two come together but *we*, because we are not real, don't know how it happens. Only God who is real knows that.

Advocates of science also make claims that fudge on the Western fundamental assumption. In the famous 1919 test of Einstein's general theory of relativity, for example, observers claimed that the positions of certain stars, visible at the time of a full eclipse of the sun, "confirmed general relativity's prediction that large objects bend light." But was this their *real* claim, and did this "evidence" really confirm the theory? The question is not merely one of whether the observers' calculations were accurate or whether their report was trustworthy. The question goes much deeper than that.

It's one thing to say that the observers saw certain objects in the sky that *to them* confirmed the theory. It's something else altogether to claim that they saw something that was *other than what they are* that confirmed the theory. The first claim is that the observers drew a conclusion from what they observed. The second claim is much more serious. It is that something in the *World* that exists separate and apart from anything that anybody thinks or knows confirmed this theory.

Essential to the "scientific method" is observation. After a theory has been formed it is tested by experimentation. The scientists who conduct the experiments observe the results and report the findings. The standards of science require that experiments be repeatable by other scientists. Anyone who follows a proscribed set of procedures should be able to observe the same results.

The Reality of Experience

All this sounds perfectly plausible, feasible, and reasonable to us, and few if any of us question it. Few if any of us notice that the claim that people can observe the World violates the otherness assumption. If people can observe the World, or aspects of it, then the World isn't other. It isn't other than we are but is rather part of what we are. It isn't "out there"; it's "in here."

Someone may argue that only parts of the World are known. The rest of it is still Other because it isn't known. That argument raises a key question: Can any part of the World be known without all of it being known? Can the results of any experiment be final as long as there are other aspects of the World that are not known? The answer is, of course, no. No scientific observation, whatever it might be, observes all and therefore no scientific experiment is ever final. All observations are tentative and provisional because they can never take *everything* (all of the World) into account. What isn't known affects the findings of what is claimed to be known.

Once we realize that everything that science claims is tentative, we also realize that science faces a dilemma not unlike the one that religion faces. If every scientific finding is provisional and none is final, is there such a thing as "scientific knowledge"? Just as we can ask whether religious advocates have any certain knowledge concerning God, so too we can ask whether the advocates of "evidenced-based" science have *any* certain knowledge concerning the World. In other words is there really *any* "evidence" or any ultimate justification for science at all?

Science, however, unlike religion, can't plead ignorance. It doesn't have the "fudge-factor" that religion has because its reputation is established on

The Reality of Experience

what it purportedly knows. And so when the chips are down, as in the case of the 1919 experiment, the establishment fudges. It says that certain observations *did* in fact confirm general relativity's prediction. As a result millions of lay people the world over believe that Einstein's theory has been "proven," and consequently, a certain recognition or respect is given to scientists because they have "inside information" regarding the "true workings of the universe."

It is true that many eminent scientists, including Einstein himself, have spurned such claims and have only contempt for the artificial pedestal that public enthusiasm and naiveté have created for scientists. Nonetheless, we must still ask whether there has been any scientist who has stated, without reservation, that there is no such thing as scientific knowledge? Has any scientist stated that in spite of the myriads of technological advances that have come from science that nobody has any ultimate knowledge of how technology works or what is ultimately behind it? Has any scientist stated that science is not really about knowledge but is rather about technology and its practical application to everyday life?

Once the respective claims of the advocates of science and the advocates of religion are understood, one realizes that they are not *fundamentally* different. Both sides put forth a claim that can't be confirmed, and therefore the difference in the claims is only an *assumed* difference. Whether the Other is God or the World is of no fundamental significance because neither God nor the world is knowable. And, in addition, whether what is real is God or the World is hardly worth arguing about when neither side knows what reality is or whether it is God or the World.

The Reality of Experience

The disagreement between these two camps is not about what is known and what is not known. It isn't about knowledge at all. What those who engage in this debate are ultimately striving for is not "truth" but political clout. They're attempting to increase the size and the valor of their following. The stylistic differences between science and religion take center stage in a battle over people's allegiance. It is a political battle, a struggle for power that has real consequences when it comes to public policies and to conflicts that result from the policies. These conflicts can and do lead to violence. The two sides are in a struggle to determine who will gain the upper hand politically. Of great concern is which groups will turn to violence to accomplish their ends and what will be the outcome of the violence? What these people are saying is that truth is not what really matters. What really matters is power.

* * *

When the difficulties of an assumption can't be overcome by fudging (innocent as it may seem but as seriously consequential as it is) what reasonable people do is look for an alternative assumption. When we Westerners find something that is broken, one way or another, we try to fix it. And that is what we have done in the case of the "otherness problem." Rather than assume that reality is other and then try to get around the assumption, some of us have assumed something else. And in fact two differing assumptions have been running concurrently through Western history all along. One is the religion/science assumption; the other is the art assumption. Religion and science have been based on one assumption while art has been based on another.

The Reality of Experience

Rather than assume that there is the real and the not-real, some people have assumed that the relationship of the “inner and outer” is a manifestation of reality. Inherent in this alternative assumption is a mystery, but in this case it does not involve a contradiction. The relationship between the inner and outer is a mystery to us not because for the inner and outer to relate is a contradiction but because our experience doesn’t tell us what the inner and outer are, how they relate, or even if they do relate. We *assume* that our experience is the result of that relationship, but because we can’t step back and look at ourselves while we are experiencing, we don’t know what experience is or how it works. We only know that we experience.

From the science/religion assumption comes the conclusion that reality is other and that therefore truth is only known by or is resident in the Other. In other words, neither science nor religion is productive of knowledge because each of them is based on the assumption that what is true is other than what can be known. From the art assumption comes the conclusion that experience is reality that results from the relationship between the inner mind and outer world. The art assumption is that art is productive of knowledge because experience is the reality that results from two opposites relating to each other. Because experience is real, the knowledge that results from experience is true.

The artist believes that two different kinds of things, the inner mind and outer world, “come together.” In the inner mind is “substance” and in the outer world is “appearance,” and when the two “come together” experience is the result. The outer world by itself is only appearance. It lacks the substance of the inner mind. The inner mind by itself is only substance. It lacks the appearance of the

The Reality of Experience

outer world. Without these two together experience is impossible. Substance without something to be the substance of is meaningless. Appearance without something to be the appearance of is meaningless. The two are only meaningful when they “come together.”

From the outer world I know the attributes (appearance) and the function of things. From my inner mind I know the substance of things. My senses tell me how my desk appears and its purpose or use. My mind tells me what my desk “is.” The inner mind and outer world coming together is the substance and appearance of things “interacting with each other.” The “embodiment” of an idea “happens” when it is “clothed in the appearance (attributes) of the world.” The appearance of things is made meaningful when it is “infused with the substance (idea) of the mind.”

An important difference between the reality-is-other assumption and the experience-is-real assumption is that while both result in an absolute, in the first case the absolute is universally binding, but in the second it is not. The Other is assumed to be other than all people. In addition it is assumed that no person is immune from the effects of the Other. Therefore, if any person should, by some unknown method, come to know what the Other is and put himself/herself in the place of the Other, the knowledge and power that that person would hold would be universally binding on every person.

By contrast, the absolute that results from the experience-is-real assumption is individual rather than universal. When the inner and outer come together, experience is the result, and that experience is absolute. No one including the experiencing person can refute or deny it. However, because each person’s experience is separate and distinct

The Reality of Experience

from every other person's experience, the experience of one person is not binding on any other person. Each person's experience is unique. No two people can experience the same thing. Therefore, one person's experience is not binding on any other.

Once we become acquainted with the art assumption we can take another look at the religion/science assumption. Could it be that the scientist who creates original scientific theories is an *artist* of science and that the prophet who creates original religious ideas is an *artist* of religion? Are the artists of science and the artists of religion *really* making the reality-is-other assumption? Do they *really* assume that they are engaging themselves in an endeavor they know nothing about? or do they assume they are creating a *new* perspective—a *new* way of experiencing things? And are scientific perspectives and religious perspectives *necessarily* binding? Does anyone *have to* agree with them, believe in them, or follow them?

And is it the case that from everyday science comes not knowledge but technology and that from everyday religion comes not truth but solace? And is it also true that the value of scientific technology will always be subject to question as will the value of religious solace? Is it not true that the effects of a given technology can be judged to be either good or bad? and is it not also true that the effects of the solace gained from a particular religion can be judged to be either good or bad?

My opinion is that the purveyors of new scientific and religious ideas *are* artists in the very same sense that poets, painters, and composers are artists. What they purvey is not true in the sense that it coincides with some absolute Other. It is true in the sense that it is imaginatively real *in their*

The Reality of Experience

minds. It is a true perspective in terms of what it itself is. It puts the pieces of a puzzle together in a way that is unique, that makes sense, and that can be immensely satisfying. It is a perspective that imparts a "truth" not seen from another point of view or gained from a different set of circumstances.

No man/woman knows what the absolute Other is, but every man/woman knows what he/she experiences. What humans experience is literally everything. There isn't something else out there apart from us that we can verify or even imagine. Our knowledge as well as our imagination is bound to the limitations of what *we* experience. Those bounds have been and are being continually expanded. That is what artists do. From the creative process comes what has never been experienced or thought of before.

Knowledge is not public; it is private. Only I know what I know. No one else experiences what I experience. Two people do not walk away from an event with the same experience or the same knowledge. The reason people have to struggle to understand each other is because no person knows what the other knows or is thinking. Our thoughts are always without exception private.

Because experience and knowledge are individual the individual is the only reality. The group is not real; only the individual is real. Therefore, what the individual is, is sacrosanct in an absolute sense. The reality of the individual is the only reality and the individual is the only absolute.

Knowledge is never publicly binding. If we are committed to something it should not be because to be or not be committed to it is politically correct or incorrect but because we have a keen sense of appreciation of what that something is.

The Reality of Experience

That mankind is slowly moving away from the reality-is-other assumption toward the experience-is-real assumption is manifested in the spread of democracy throughout the world. People everywhere are coming to recognize the dignity, value, and reality of the individual.

People are slowly coming to realize that the assumption of an absolute Other is both futile and dangerous. We are learning that those who assume an absolute Other sooner or later will also assume that someone here on earth represents or is that absolute other. We are learning that, while mankind must assume something, what we assume makes all the difference.

From the school of hard knocks we learn that not all assumptions are created equal. We learn that not only are some assumptions better than others but that from the reality-is-other assumption comes disagreement and conflict that sooner or later lead to violence and war. Contrastingly, from the experience-is-real assumption comes the freedom to imagine and create new things. The ultimate reward of the former is the frustration that results from an inability to know what one assumes to be real, of the latter a sense of the reality of one's own experience and of the knowledge that comes from it.