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Robert Anton Wilson

Neurological Relativism

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In my previous two columns, I have presented the case for the ultimate skepticism (i.e. solipsism) as strongly as I could, indicated that it not only can be defended on rigidly logical grounds (cf. Hume, David, works of), but also that is seemingly confirmed empirically by the practice of silent-level meditation.

Of course, I am not a solipsist. Having fathered four children in this highly competitive society, I have had to confront the nitty-gritty gut-level reality of the iron laws of economics in a manner and with a persistence that makes me as much of a believer in “external reality” as any Marxist or Objectivist could wish.

I have even been on Welfare twice in my 45 years, for over a year each time. (It is a most educational experience and every libertarian ought to go through it, just as every Marxist ought to have the experience of running a business and meeting a payroll.) Nobody who has gone through the rituals of social degeneration involved in falling from Associate Editor of *Playboy* to Welfare “case” (*Americanundesirabilis*) can be a solipsist. To get off Welfare and become affluent again, as I have also done, is an even better cure for solipsism; if I hadn’t figured out some of the laws of that part of the “external world” known as publishing, I would still be on Welfare.

Nonetheless, my skepticism does verge very close to the solipsistic extreme, and Mr. John Walker had ample excuse to wonder, as he did in *NLW 93*, how somebody as close to solipsism as I am does manage to deal with the external, sensory-sensual, existential world at all.

The answer is the same as Godzilla gave on *Saturday Night Live* when Baba Wawa asked him, “How do you and Mrs. Godzilla *do it*?”

“Very carefully,” said Godzilla. And that’s how I deal with “reality.”

As the result of the yogic and alchemical disciplines I have practiced during the last 15 years, I know that the solipsist position is the minimal truth, i.e., that all we really know is a stream of sensation. The common sense hypothesis that there is an Ego (“me”) observing/experiencing this stream, are unprovable, but denying them seems to lead to worse confusion than (tentatively) accepting them.

But I also know that everything I think I know about the Ego (“me”) and the External World (“it”) is woefully little, and very misleading (more “untrue” than “true”) because it is such a microscopic

fragment of what the total Me and the total Universe must be. Blake said, wisely, that “Every thing Capable of being Believed is an Image of the Truth;” but it is also true, as Blake no doubt realized, that Every thing Capable of being Believed is Self-Hypnosis.

It is empirically known to me, through neurological experiment, that every time I manage to change to focus of my nervous system, a new Me appears, and a new External Reality, and that these mingle in curious ways, and each grows steadily bigger, weirder, more mysterious and more humorous as my researches proceed.

Artemus Ward put it this way: “The trouble with most folks is not that they don’t know enough but that they know so much that ain’t true.” Or, in the more slashing style of Nietzsche’s soaring sarcasm, “We are all much greater artists than we realize.” Whatever we know of Me and The Universe through the filter of our nervous system is much more of a record of the structural functioning of the nervous system itself than it is of the enormous mysteries of the real Me and real Universe.

That is why Discordianism is such a jolly flavor of nihilism. There is joy ineffable in freedom from fixed ideas, even if those trapped in fixed ideas cannot imagine such a state and dread it “as the devil dreads holy water.” Since I am mildly puzzled all the time, I am continuously curious and hence passionately involved. I deal with the world “very carefully” because I respect its mystery, whereas those who hold fixed ideas deal with the world (and each other) in blind and brutal ways that each of them can see how mad all the others are but none can see that his/her own fixed ideas are equally mad.

As Timothy Leary and I write in *Neuropolitics* (Peace Press, Los Angeles, 1977), “It is the function of the nervous system to focus, select, narrow down; to choose from an infinity of possibilities the biochemical imprints which determining the tactics and strategies of survival in *one* place, status in *one* tribe. The infant is genetically prepared to learn any language, master any skill, play any sex role; in a very short time, however, he becomes rigidly fixated to accept, follow and mimic the limited offerings of his social and cultural environment. . . .

“Because we are all imprinted with our own social bubbles, it isn’t generally recognized that each reality map held by humans —

however eccentric and paranoid — makes nearly as much sense as any other. People are vegetarians or nudists or Communists or snake worshippers for the same reasons that other people are Catholics or Republicans or liberals or Nazis.”

This neurological relativism is not incompatible with adopting a belief-system involving predictions, assumed regularities or “laws,” valuations and ethical judgements, etc. But one recognizes each belief system as a gamble, “my latest best guess,” and does not confuse it with Truth, Reality or any other variety of eternal verity. Each belief-system, or reality-tunnel, is temporary — one except to replace it with a better system, more inclusive, more flexible, more amusing and more precise, if not by next Tuesday after lunch, certainly by the middle of next Winter.

All around one the True Believers trudge by, mouths grim, brows furrowed, ulcers and worse eating at their innards. This “desperate company of oddfellows” (Thoreau) live in what psychologists call “cognitive dissonance.” Because their reality-maps are, one and all, too small to cover the vast, eerie, amusing world in which we live, they are perpetually frustrated: the world does not live up to their fixed beliefs. They are all convinced that there is something radically wrong with the universe itself, or with the rest of humanity, and they never suspect that the real trouble is in their own rigid and robotic nervous systems.

Thus I “believe” in libertarianism, in strict scientific method (the objective yoga of the West), in yoga (the neuroscience of the East), in Space Migration, in Life Extension, and in dozens of other things. But I can suspend any of these beliefs at will, or all of them, and look impassively into the Buddhist void, or switch around to other beliefs temporarily, to check out how the world looks to those who hold those beliefs.

Yea, brethern and sistren, now abideth doubt, hope and charity; these three; and the greatest of these is doubt. For doubt puffeth not itself up into pomposity; doubt suffereth long, and is kind. With doubt all things are possible.