A guide for the perplexed

Author: William R. Torbert

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/3992

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in Parabola, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 104-107, 1977
In This Issue:
Frederick Franck, Barre Toelken
Robert Meagher
Epicycles, Theater, Film
and A Tinker Tale.
All people throughout history have shared certain dilemmas. One such dilemma permeates everyone's life at every moment. Yet this dilemma is rarely felt directly, even by geniuses. Even more rarely does someone address this dilemma directly, thereby cultivating awareness of it.

The dilemma is simply that our knowledge of what is occurring at any given moment in our lives, conditioned as it is by cultural habits of attention and modes of thought, must be inadequate to what is actually occurring. The inadequacy of our knowledge has two faces, one empirical, one significational. We are, on the one hand, simply not aware of much that is occurring: we are rarely aware of what is occurring in our bodies, for example. We are, on the other hand, not aware of the significance of what is occurring: we may assign an event a certain significance as it occurs, only to realize later that it takes a very different place in the overall pattern of our activities.

When we recognize the inadequacy of our knowledge in a given instance, we generally either excuse it and forget it or try to repair it. Much less known is the movement whereby we actively enter into, feel and address this inadequacy.

Felt directly, the dilemma of necessarily inadequate knowledge would, at each moment, throw our knowledge of a given situation into relief against the vast and obscure background of our ignorance, teaching us a deeper humility. Addressed directly, this dilemma would inspire a new kind of initiative, a new kind of reaching out toward all that is somehow Other, a new kind of awareness.

A deep and abiding irony attends the process of becoming aware of the necessary inadequacy of our knowledge. Initially, it seems reasonable to presume that some kinds of knowledge could help us to become aware and remain aware of this inadequacy. Indeed, one can even imagine a knowledgeable argument demonstrating that knowledge-tinged-by-awareness-of-its-own-
inadequacy is qualitatively more adequate to our true state than knowledge-which-claims-adequacy.

Here is where Schumacher’s new book enters the picture. With quick, deft strokes he outlines the argument that the modern scientific worldview is inadequate as a map of reality precisely because it will admit as knowledge only that about which we can be certain. Although such scientific knowledge deserves a place on an adequate map of reality, to make it the whole map “maximizes the risk of missing out on what may be the subtlest, most important, and most rewarding things in life.”

Schumacher reminds us at the outset that a map does not solve problems or explain mysteries, but rather helps to identify them. Then he sets out to provide a more adequate map of (1) the world, (2) humankind, (3) how humankind learns about the world, and (4) what it means to live in this world. First, he returns to traditional wisdom to assert that the world consists of four qualitatively different “levels of being”—mineral, plant, animal, and human. Only the mineral level is fully externalized, fully visible, and thus fully knowable by modern science. Each of the other three levels include progressively more internalized, invisible qualities as well as their external appearances and these invisible qualities are not fully accessible to scientific observation through our five senses. Humanity must develop the illumination implicit in our potential for self-awareness if we are to know these higher qualities, for the “instrument” of knowledge must mirror the complexity of the quality to be known if that quality is to be known adequately. One who is not self-aware cannot “see” self-awareness.

From these initial considerations about the world and humanity, Schumacher derives four qualitatively different fields of knowledge which respond to the questions: (1) What is really going on in my own inner world? (2) What is going on in the inner world of other beings? (3) What do I look like in the eyes of other beings? (4) What do I actually observe in the world around me? Again, he argues that modern science is an adequate instrument for knowing only the fourth kind of question. Moreover, he goes on to distinguish between the convergent problems in life, which can in principle be fully known and solved in a hypothetico-deductive-technological sense, and the divergent problems, such as education and politics, where opposite solutions, freedom v. discipline, individuality v. equality, seem to vie with one another circularly and eternally “unless something intervenes from a higher level” (emphasis in the original). These divergent problems “are refractory to mere logic and discursive reason, and constitute, so to speak, a strain-and-stretch apparatus to develop the Whole Man.”

The foregoing summary fails to convey the force, the clarity and the elegance of Schumacher's presentation. But it does outline a structure of knowledge which, instead of proclaiming primarily its own final adequacy, intends to remind us of the possibility and importance of developing toward higher levels of being and self-awareness, if our knowledge is even to approach the complexity of what is actually occurring.

The irony is that the very accessibility, attractiveness and adequacy of Schumacher's line of thought may substitute itself for, and divert us from, the work toward self-awareness to which he intends to call us. One can easily imagine that the many people already inspired by his earlier writings will make of this book a kind of Bible. By contrast, Maimonides' book of the same title, which Schumacher nowhere acknowledges, is much less accessible on first reading. To interpret Maimonides seems to require the exercise of the very qualities of attention and self-awareness of which Schumacher merely speaks.

The writings that Schumacher cites most often when he seeks to give the reader an impression of what he means by self-awareness are Maurice Nicoll’s Psychological Commentaries on the Teaching of G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky. Nicoll's many-volumed and eminently understandable fragments are based on his long association with Ouspensky who was his teacher. Ouspensky, in turn, wrote a much more systematic book subtitled Fragments of an Unknown Teaching based on his years as a student with Gurdjieff. So cosmos-encompassing is the theory presented in Ouspensky's book that when this reader first encountered it he repeatedly felt the inadequacy of his knowledge by contrast.

Gurdjieff also wrote a book, a remarkably inaccessible book entitled All and Everything: Beelzebub’s Tales to His Grandson, which altogether defies the casual reader and the dogged reader alike and seems to require an interest qualitatively different
from that which we ordinarily bring to reading.

It is likely that many more people will read Schumacher’s book than either Nicoll’s or Ouspensky’s. And many more people will read Nicoll’s or Ouspensky’s books than Gurdjieff’s.

Questions remain. What kind of writing would guide us toward a direct feeling of the inadequacy of our knowledge and toward a new kind of awareness? Do contemporary interpreters of ancient traditions really do us a service when they make their formulations accessible to ordinary thought? I don’t think so.

William Torbert is currently founding The Theater of Inquiry, a business/school, in the Boston area. His books include Being For The Most Part Puppets, Learning From Experience and Creating a Community of Inquiry.

Creation Myths:
Man’s Introduction to the World


Subtle Body:
Essence and Shadow


By Toinette Lippe

Every time a new title in the “Art and Imagination” series is issued, there is a temptation to become excited at the prospect of a treat—the whole idea of this series is a really marvelous one and the format has such magnificent potential. And every time I am disappointed. Creation Myths and Subtle Body are the eleventh and twelfth in the series. They aroused the same hopes and—sad to report—they suffer from the same drawbacks.

There is now a wealth of material on creation myths available, and it would seem that the only excuse for yet another book on the subject is if someone had clarified and ordered the material so that nonspecialists could gain a general understanding of the differences and similarities of the legends arising in the various parts of the world. This series is, after all, aimed at the general reading public (large format paperback with illustrations in color and black and white on two-thirds of the 96 pages). Yet the impression gained from this volume, as from many of the others, is that the publishers hired an expert on the subject, someone who had already digested or was willing to digest most of what there was to read and know about it, and then required him or her to analyze and condense all of this into about 25 pages of text. This is not to say that the task is impossible but it is an extraordinarily difficult feat, and in Creation Myths David Maclagan has not achieved it. He has made an erudite presentation, but if one is not already familiar