

Critical Spirituality:

Neo Humanism as Method

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Abstract: This paper argues that despite all the radical shifts in intellectual terrain over recent decades, little has changed in the way human beings run their day to day affairs. Research has become more sophisticated yet it is still hamstrung by its own inability to penetrate to a substantive core that allows us to generate 'virtuous futures'. Critical spirituality redefines rationality and empiricism by including within their framework both the somatic and the meditative as valid and necessary components of any research activity. Neo Humanism as a methodological approach alters how we explore our world and human activity by offering a scientifically integrated concept of the world and spirit that allows us at last to begin to grapple with the nature of human consciousness.

When Descartes penned his famous maxim "I think therefore I am" the acts of thinking and existing were thought to be somewhat simple. Today in our post modern world these once simple constants have been disturbed to such an extent that if Descartes were writing today he might have stated his foundational premise like this, "How I think determines who I am."

Deconstruction has problematised many of the foundational assumptions of our time and has led to a wave of voices surging across the intellectual landscape like a veritable tsunami of epistemological solvent. This paper argues that it is how we think, our epistemological anchors, the very nature of our consciousness that determines how we conduct our research.

Furthermore, if we are to truly engage with our consciousnesses in more than a cursory way, then we have to turn our gaze, both as individuals and as a society, inwards. We need to embark on this inward journey as researchers because as a culture we have arrived at a paradox.

The dilemma

That paradox is that on the surface much has changed yet, if we look at human activity and the results of that activity, nothing much has changed. Certainly change is incremental, yet it only moves as far ahead as the way we think allows. Hats off to our post modern Descartes, how I think determines who I am.

And who I am is reflected in how I act. This extrapolation on our post-Cartesian theme lays bare the paradox. If we look at the way we act one might be tempted to

assert that all the deconstruction, all the scientific and ecological insights, all the technological and material progress and rethinking of the past fifty years has really not got us very far. In matter of fact the epistemological axis that centres our human world and directs and makes meaningful our human energy has not changed all that dramatically. It is still essentially a powerful mix of humanism and capitalism.

Despite this, the range of methodological tools and techniques available to researchers has expanded over the past decades to accommodate the rapid expansion in the range and nature of how we represent our world and human activity within it. Here we have to acknowledge our debt to deconstruction movement and critical theory. We have reached a point where we can enjoy a kaleidoscopic vision of humanity in action, beautiful and/or terrifying, ever-shifting glimpses of relative truths; competing needs; cultural and gendered tensions; political and economic forces; ecological and global developments. And more. Yet what do we do with these insights? Little more than dust the book shelves. This is the dilemma of our times.

Post Modern Emptiness

Little has changed. Wars still rage; poverty still cripples the lives of the majority of humanity; women and non-western peoples are still very much second class citizens in most parts of the world; colonialism through the net, pervasive media penetration and free market capitalism and a triumphant globalism, is doing well.

If our actions remain largely the same, then it is safe to conclude that our natures have not changed, and furthermore how we think has not really changed much either. Individual and collective consciousnesses have remained largely untouched by the intellectual shifts of recent decades. Why is this the case?

Perhaps this is because, as cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar points out, "postmodernism... has nothing new to say." It is no more than a remodulation of the dominant modernist story in which western imperialism and capitalist hegemony, in the form of globalism, take up the new spaces created by the unhinging of a multitude of doors relating to the self, cultural and social identity, national boundaries and moral and ethical parameters. So, as Sardar concludes, "We are left only with a world view that cannot differentiate between good and evil and hence cannot cultivate virtue. It can thus have no long term future."¹

Sardar's comment is intriguing because it leaves me with the question, 'Well what does it take to cultivate virtue?', 'How do we research so that we can generate 'virtuous' responses to our environment?' 'How do we create virtuous futures?'

Richard Slaughter has suggested that we develop what he calls "processes of foresight"², which can give rise to literacies of hope. He is interested in expanding the limits of futures research beyond the critical, in the academic sense, to include what he calls 'transformative futures', rooted in a transpersonal vision of human potentiality.

Opening up Transformative Futures

In this he is recognising the limits of current academic practice and acknowledging that human spirit develops hope through reference to itself. Thus there is an emergent spirituality inherent in Slaughter's work. Other areas of futures research are also coming to touch upon this subterranean theme. Of particular note and use in this regard is the work being done with causal layered analysis.

Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) has been developed to help us map out the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of discourse. CLA can be situated within critical futures as it is "less concerned with disinterest, as in the empirical, or with creating mutual understanding, as in the interpretive, but with creating distance from current categories. This distance allows us to see current social practices as fragile, as particular, and not as universal categories of thought – they are seen as discourse, a term similar to paradigm but inclusive of epistemological assumptions."³

Meaning and Hope

CLA is a valuable tool as it allows us to "reinststate the vertical in social analysis, ie from postmodern relativism to global ethics". It also makes sense of the stresses within futures itself. These stresses are not simply the result of futures being a discipline for all ideological frames, which in some senses it is, but more specifically because critical futures, undoubtedly the most sophisticated futures approach, is banging on the door of 'Meaning'.

Futurist Martha Rogers points to the holistic nature of futures education, education which makes room for body, mind and spirit, when she observed, "Educators need not only to understand the cognitive challenges but also the impact of learning on the heart and soul."⁴ She arrived at this point because her work with adults and global futures had revealed the need and centrality of spending time in 'soul searching'. This process lead to an "awakening of soul [that] included self-reflection on values, faith, ways of living and on the meaning and purpose of life." The result were actions that "led to feelings of personal power and hope."

Meaning and hope go hand in hand. The will to live can be taken from some one by telling them that their life has no meaning, that their future is hopeless. Bio-ethicist Jennifer Fitzgerald acknowledges this as one of the most potent weapons in the euthenasia debate⁵. Why live a life with no meaning? Obviously, if youth suicide rates are any indication⁶, this message is taking its toll on the hearts, minds and bodies of our young people today.

The problem is that our current academic practice makes it so hard to slip through the net of reason and approach meaning with academic 'dignity'. CLA allows us to stretch the legitimacy of this quest within acceptable boundaries. It reveals and makes sense of the underlying, often transparent, cultural forces that motivate discourse. It is also suggestive of a 'basement', a transpersonal or spiritual space from which new metaphors may yet emerge.

Dissenting Futures

Slaughter observed of critical futures that "it embraces perspectives and methodologies which enable dissent at a deep and constructive level." He goes on to

stress the absolute importance of this dissent in enabling us to “probe deeply into the foundations of social life and to consciously intervene in symbolic processes of meaning-making and practical processes of foresight implementation at every level.”⁷

It seems to me that the most exciting futures now are of this dissenting kind, and that we have a meeting place for such divergent/convergent threads as postcolonial futures, feminist futures, macrohistorical futures and transformative futures. It also seems clear that as futurist Sohail Inayatullah puts it, “there must be some truth claims made if the [current] episteme is to change.”⁸ Such claims enable us to engage in life in a way that empowers us so that we, as individuals and societies, can cultivate virtue and shake off the narrow sentiments that support the current global world view.

Cultural critic, Neil Postman, has claimed that education has ended and society and culture are adrift because it has no cohesive narrative, or as he puts it, no gods worth following. He asks, “What happens when there are no gods to serve?”, then goes on to answer, “Some commit suicide. Some envelop themselves in drugs, including alcohol. Some take whatever pleasure is to be found in random violence. Some encase themselves in an impenetrable egoism. Many, apparently, find a momentary and pitiful release from dread in commercial re-creations of once powerful narratives of the past.”⁹

Pushing the limits

Neo-Humanism offers a coherent narrative, a ‘god’ if you like, that extends critical futures research by proposing a critical spirituality to compliment the reason of the head, with a reason of the heart or soul. From the neo-humanistic perspective progress can only emerge from the spiritual¹⁰, the basement alluded to in the CLA framework. It must come from outside current epistemological frameworks, and it needs to bring with it something both familiar and novel.

We need this blend of old and new because we need to be able to recognise it, relate to it, but at the same time be transformed and inspired by its novelty. Its truth claims need to be recognisable and compelling. Action and energy need to be a central part of its narrative. This transformative force generated by the old/new is central to action and is an intrinsic part of what can be called ‘ideology’. This is not the so called grand ideologies that Postman fears, Marxism, Capitalism, Nationalism, etcy, but the act of living in balance with one’s nature and one’s beliefs about the world.

Consciousness is central to human activity. How we act most accurately represents who we are. Every act of living is an expression of an intimate ideology.¹¹ Harmony and balance, *prama*¹² are central to action, and it is from action that transformation comes. The Buddhist scholar Joanna Macey, affirms this with her observation that “action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and *then* acting. As we work to heal the Earth, the Earth heals us. No need to wait.”¹³

Neo-Humanism

Neo-Humanism as a concept was developed to give form to the recognition that we needed a new narrative to provide the inspiration and the tools to transform our selves and our future. It has a clear methodology which hinges on an activated critical spirituality that complements the critical method that underpins the most proactive and vibrant areas of futures research.

Rooted in the ancient Indic episteme of Tantra¹⁴ it proposes an holistic view of life that is philosophical in nature but practical in effect. One cannot be a neo-humanist just by espousing the philosophy because at heart Neo-Humanism is an ethical system that actively situates one in the thick of life.

Furthermore it fuses the insights of east and west by drawing on the humanist tradition, not only advocating the centrality of human consciousness within the realm of action but also placing the empirical method of experimental rationality in the forefront of neo-humanist practice. Thus the methodology of Neo-Humanism is scientific in nature but deeply metaphysical in origin, offering as Inayatullah puts it, “an integration of the rational and the intuitive.”¹⁵

Metaphysical Depth

This metaphysical depth means that terms such as ‘scientific’ and ‘consciousness’ are greatly amplified. Although human consciousness is central to the drama of existence and key to a true understanding of Neo-Humanism, consciousness is not confined to linear rationality or simple sensory perception. Nor is it to be confounded with psychological notions of consciousness, unconsciousness or the sub-conscious.

Rather Neo-Humanism offers consciousness as an absolute to which we are all working, in the same way as the cultural critic John Ralston Saul describes ‘practical humanism’ as “the voyage towards equilibrium without the expectation of actually arriving there.”¹⁶ This journey becomes both the defining feature of our humanity and the driving force behind all ethical activity. In this sense human activity is an on going struggle to become more conscious, to go ever beyond the confines of self and custom by a rigorous application of the ethical principals of Neo-Humanism. This self-referentiality, what Iris Murdoch calls “the circular nature of metaphysical argument”¹⁷, may seem dubious until it is placed within the context of a scientific methodology which saves it from becoming a mere dogma.

In this context life itself becomes a laboratory in which we test our ethics and because Neo-Humanism is imbued with the spirit of both west and east we find in it scope to allow for both the extroversal energy of enacted living, the inherent dynamism of the west to explore and command, and the introversal quest, the east’s drive to penetrate to the heart of things through a reflective and meditative empiricism, which perpetually seeks to expand human consciousness through inner reflection and the identification of self with a universal stance while putting to the test all received truths through an interior processing of reality in which the body/mind acts as the microcosm of the world.

Critical Spirituality

Critical spirituality creates new categories for making sense of reality and acting upon it. Some of these categories are steeped in the ancient meditative tradition of Tantra, while others draw on new insights into human nature and the nature of ethical action¹⁸ offering a framework for understanding consciousness as a living energy, *microvita*, that has strangely organic properties and can multiply and also die.

Because Neo-Humanism seeks to develop within the individual an ethical discrimination, rooted in a critical spirituality, it is essentially disruptive, as all experience and all ethical, cultural, social and ideological practice is made problematic and conditional due to the relativisation and concomitant diminution of all such practices within a much grander whole. Thus the claims of family, class, nation or even species on the individual are reduced to their proper place within a cosmology that connects the individual to the whole.

Furthermore, critical spirituality subjects all experience to an internal processing, demanding of each individual the discipline to take the world without, within and deconstruct it through a process of meditative reflection that is not simply quiet self analysis but a real transformative activity. It breaks down the false distinction between self and other, inner and outer, subjective and objective.

The Benevolent Lens

At the same time, as an extension of this inner work, there is the emergence of a body of philosophical criticism¹⁹ which is motivated by the identification of the individual with the many. Benevolence, or what Saul calls 'sympathy'²⁰, activate the discriminatory powers to ask again and again: Who benefits? Does this help humanity in its struggle towards consciousness? Who is silent and why?

Despite being essentially synthetic in nature, working from the premise that all is a reflection of unitary consciousness, critical spirituality proceeds to a thorough analysis of action and the values that underpin action from an ecological stance that seeks to confirm value in accordance to the amount of good an action brings with it, a neo-ethical sensibility, while simultaneously problematising the value of 'good' as a relative quality within the absolute whole.

This captures the ironic tension within critical spirituality itself, namely that the absolute nature of value is coterminous with its own contingency, the possibility of its rejection and dissolution born of its being proven either partial or false through the action of critical spirituality itself. This is reminiscent of Niels Bohr's observation that, "The opposite of a correct statement is an incorrect statement, but the opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth."²¹

Finally what is unique about critical spirituality is that the body, our individual human bodies, is part of the epistemological process itself. Being reflective of the tension within critical spirituality by acting simultaneously as a somatic metaphor for the whole, both earthly and divine, and as a unit of individuality through which veracity can be funnelled, examined and transformed. In other words we process our experiences biologically, through our glandular and sensory system, intellectually through the application of ethical discrimination and spiritually through our meditative action.

A Taxonomy

Critical spirituality can be divided into three sections²². The first focuses on neo-humanist practice, the second on the gradual identification of the individual with the collective and the third on that ultimate alignment of individual and cosmic good. In this the body receives and experiences, the mind analyses and synthesises, the spirit reflects and critiques.

- World and body, by virtue of its being a somatic reflection of the whole, seen as laboratory
- Expands empiricism to allow validity of both the objective, concrete perception and subjective, spiritual perception
- Experience internalised and processed through meditative empiricism
- Meditative empiricism expands but does not replace rational empiricism
- Rationality redefined: enquiry which is benevolent is rational, that process which disrupts in order to better both the individual and the collective – a neo-ethical sensibility
- 'Reality' problematised, seen as being layers of experience, all with coherent but distinct logics

The second level is concerned with the connection of the individual with the whole. The dance of microcosm with macrocosm, with the resultant diminution of ego and identification with things greater than oneself.

- Humanity contextualised within the whole – ie offers both an expanded and diminished frame of reference for human action
- Transformative action results from applied critical spirituality - gnosis
- The individual, by virtue of their link with the collective, is not able to stand alone ie source of crime removed
- Philosophical system based on ethics, ie thought and action are inseparable

The third level of critical spirituality is the summation of the previous levels. It offers, like a view from the mountain top, benevolence as the source of all action and the measure of all reason. It is holism in practice. It is what we strive for and what motivates our action. In the west we might be tempted to call it mastery but in reality, whatever that may be, it is more like service. An eastern take would describe it as Enlightenment.

- Benevolent mind identified with the good of the whole becomes source of discrimination
- Action born of true discrimination can only ever be correct

The Neo-Humanist Method

The general claim of science, and thus of the scientific method, as an historical force is to make plain and clear the forces that govern our lives. In doing so it has sought to demystify existence in order to clear away the culturally and emotionally irrelevant that have for millennia stood between 'man' and a true apperception of the 'world'.

Neo-Humanism turns this proposition on its head. Its truth claim is that we cannot really understand the world by standing apart from it. Rather than de-mystify existence we must re-mystify it, spirituality becomes that which, *sine qua non*, makes all intelligible. It takes the process of science and gives it a much greater field of endeavour. The Catholic priest, scientist and mystic Teilhard de Chardin once said of

himself that he had been able, simply by sharing “normally in the interests of his time, to attain a balanced interior life only in a scientifically integrated concept of the world and of Christ; and that therein he found peace and limitless scope for his being to expand.”²³

Methodologically, Neo-Humanism is seeking to do just this, provide a scientifically integrated concept of the world and the spirit in order to expand human consciousness. In doing so it starts from the individual and progresses to a synthetic vision of the whole. It finds no fault with the scientific method, other than its linearity, seeking only to extend it to embrace an interior study of existence. It thus offers a meditative empiricism to complement the objective empiricism of current practice.

The embedded nature of meditative empiricism is the secret to the Neo-Humanist research method. The linear nature of modern science is subverted and becomes a spiral, moving in and out, constantly holding discourse with its own centre. Yet the centre is itself unstable, from a linear point of view, as it is theoretically at least, everywhere at once.

The Non-Linear

For this reason the Neo-Humanist method cannot be described in linear terms. It is much more amenable to a layered conception along the lines of the CLA framework. Critical spirituality imbues all action within this framework with deeper meaning. It generates for the first time an ethical landscape capable of sustaining virtuous actions.

From a practical point of view there are four distinctive features within this process.

- Meditative empiricism is part of research
- Re-mystification of experience allows for new categories, such as microvita and prama, to become legitimate features of scientific discourse
- Critical spirituality realigns scientific method with an ethic of benevolence, offering a neo-ethical rationality
- Categories from Neo-Humanist philosophy, pseudoculture, geo and socio sentiment etc, used to illuminate and challenge the previously transparent value system of mainstream science

A Critical Rupture

Critical spirituality offers a satisfactory response to Sardar's complaint that post modernism has nothing new to say. By stepping outside the current academic parameters that trust entirely to analytic rationality and the integrity of those who wield it, critical spirituality offers a discourse rooted in synthesis. One that places the consciousnesses of the individuals engaged in the application of neo-humanist method in the research equation.

Interactive research methods like action research have sought to do this but have failed to understand that without a meditative empiricism, an empiricism that grounds all enquiry in an experience of the wells of consciousness within the individual soul that link us all together, nothing much has changed nor will change. Consciousness

will only change through reference to itself, and here intellectual activity is not to be confused with consciousness.

Neo-humanist method is an augmentation of existing critical research tools. Essentially it is an attempt to deal with the silence that remains unaddressed within current practices that treat the world as a construct that can be disassembled in order to be understood. To the critical gaze this silence appears like a great emptiness, the dramatic impersonal backdrop against which human activity and meaning making is played out.

Critical spirituality punctures this silence in order to 'make it speak'. Meaning, purpose, virtue all become active constituents within the human process of meeting the future with eyes fully open and smiling.