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Two Suitors: A Parable

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The postmodern mind has come to recognize the many ways in which our often hidden presuppositions play a critical role in constellating the reality we seek to know. If we have learned anything from the multidisciplinary wellsprings of postmodern thought—whether from psychology, anthropology, philosophy of science, sociology of knowledge, religious studies, linguistics, physics, or feminism—it is that what we believe to be our *objective* knowledge of the world is radically shaped and forged by a complex multitude of *subjective* factors, most of which are altogether unconscious. Even this is not quite accurate, for we now recognize subject and object to be so deeply mutually implicated as to render problematic the very structure of a “subject” “knowing” an “object.”

Such a recognition can engender humility, disorientation, or despair. Each of these responses has its place. But ultimately this recognition can also call forth in us a fortifying sense of joyful co-responsibility for the world we enact through the participatory, cocreative power of the world view we commit ourselves to and evolve with.

But what is the current situation? The modern worldview that first emerged during the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries still effectively structures the context for most of the world’s activities and values. In this powerful vision, we live in a universe that is ultimately understood to be the random consequence of exclusively material evolutionary processes—a universe devoid of intrinsic meaning and purpose, soulless and unconscious, indifferent to humanity’s spiritual and moral aspirations. From the time of Bacon and Descartes on, meaning and purpose, spiritual and moral values, are all seen as human qualities, and to perceive these in the universe apart from the human is regarded as a delusory projection.

In the course of our complex history, this vision has in certain respects been deeply emancipatory, freeing

us from pre-given structures of cosmic meaning and purpose that in important respects had become existentially constraining, and were usually carried and enforced by traditional cultural authorities, both political and religious. However, we are now coming to realize the loss as well. A disenchanted worldview essentially empowers the utilitarian mindset. The larger cosmological context within which all human activity takes place provides no encompassing ground for transcendent values—moral, spiritual, aesthetic—which are therefore seen as only human constructs. In the resulting void, the values of the market and mass media freely colonize the collective human imagination and drain it of all depth. Such a vision (or lack of vision) transforms what should be means into ends in themselves: Political power, financial profit, technological prowess are the overriding values. The bottom line rules all. In turn, anxiety in the face of a meaningless cosmos creates a spiritual hunger and disorientation, an engulfing fear of death, and a major self-image problem, which lead to an addictive hunger for ever more material goods to fill the inner emptiness, producing a manic technoconsumerism that cannibalizes the planet in a kind of self-destructive frenzy. Highly pragmatic consequences ensue from the disenchanted modern worldview.

But, as we assimilate the deepening insights of our time into the nature of our knowledge of the world, must we not ask ourselves whether this disenchanted world view is, in the end, all that plausible?

Let us consider a thought experiment:

Imagine that you are the universe, a deep, beautiful, profoundly intelligent and ensouled universe. And imagine that you are being approached by two different epistemologies—two suitors, as it were, who seek to know you. To whom would you open your deepest secrets? Would you open most deeply to the suitor—the epistemology, the methodology—who approached you as though you were utterly lacking in intelligence

or purpose, as though you had no inner dimension to speak of, no spiritual capacity or value; who thus saw you as radically inferior in being to himself (let us randomly give the suitor a masculine gender); who related to you as though your existence was valuable primarily to the extent that he could exploit your resources to satisfy his various needs; and whose motivation for knowing you was driven ultimately by a desire for increased mental mastery, prediction, and control over you for his own self-enhancement?

Or would you, the cosmos, open your deepest secrets to that suitor—to that epistemology, that approach to the nature of things—who viewed you as being *at least* as intelligent and valuable, as worthy a being, as permeated with mind and soul, as endowed with spiritual depths and mystery, as he; who sought to know you not to better exploit you, but rather to unite with you and thereby bring forth something new; whose ultimate goals of knowledge were not mental mastery, prediction, and control but rather a participatory cocreation, an honoring of your deepest being, bringing an intellectual fulfillment that was intimately linked with imaginative and poetic vision, moral transformation, aesthetic and sensuous pleasure, empathic understanding; whose act of knowledge was essentially an act of love and trust, and, as it were, mutual delight? To whom would you reveal your deepest interior glory?

This is not to say that you, the universe, would reveal nothing to the first suitor, under the duress of his objectifying, disenchanting approach. That suitor would undoubtedly elicit, filter, and constellate a certain “reality” which he would naturally regard as authentic knowledge of the true universe—*objective* knowledge as compared with the subjective delusions of everyone else’s approach. But we might allow ourselves to doubt just how profound a truth, how genuinely reflective of the universe’s deeper reality, this approach might be. And if this objectifying, disenchanted vision were elevated to the status of being the *only* legitimate vision of the nature of the cosmos upheld by an entire civilization, what a loss, an impoverishment, a grief, would ultimately be suffered, by both knower and known, with tragic, deforming, and destructive consequences that would run their fateful course on every plane—intellectual, psychological, social, political, economic, ecological, spiritual.

To assume that purpose, meaning, conscious intelligence, and spiritual depth are solely attributes of the

human being, and that the great cosmos itself is a soulless void within which our multidimensional consciousness is a random accident, reflects an invisible act of cosmic hubris on the part of the modern self. And hubris and fall are as indissolubly linked now as they were in ancient Greek tragedy. Our search for the true cannot be separated from our search for the good.

We need to radically expand our ways of knowing. We need a larger and truer empiricism and rationalism. We need to move beyond the relentlessly objectifying, unconsciously constructive epistemological strategies, the restrictive empiricism and rationalism that emerged appropriately during the Enlightenment, but that still dominate mainstream science and modern thought today, and that, in their narrowness and one-sidedness, now dangerously occlude our full vision. We need to build on those, while drawing as well on—to use a single encompassing term—the epistemologies of the heart. We need ways of knowing that integrate the imagination, the aesthetic sensibility, the moral faculty, revelatory or epiphanic experience, the spiritual intuition, the capacity for archetypal insight, for kinesthetic and sensuous knowing, for empathic understanding, the capacity to open to the other, to *listen*, to listen even to our *own* “other”—our unconscious, in all its plenitude of forms. A developed sense of empathy—of loving, trusting, receptive observation and analysis—is critical if we are to overcome the great modern chasm between subject and object, psyche and cosmos. We need to be able to enter into that which we seek to know, and not keep it ultimately distanced as an object. We need, in the end, to transform our relationship to the universe from one of “I and It” to one of “I and Thou.”

Our best philosophy of science has taught us the extent to which our epistemology cocreates our world. Not only reason and empiricism but faith, hope, and compassion play a major role in constellating the reality we seek to know. And this is perhaps the underlying message of our modern Enlightenment’s unexpected darkening of the world: At the heart of cognition is a moral dimension. The “progress of knowledge” and the “evolution of consciousness” have too often been characterized as if our task were to ascend an immensely tall cognitive ladder, solving increasingly challenging mental riddles, like advanced problems in a graduate engineering exam. But our *hearts* must be transformed, not just our minds. We must go down and deep as well as high and far. Our world view and our

cosmology, which define the context for everything else, are profoundly affected by the degree to which *all* our faculties—intellectual, emotional, somatic, imaginative, spiritual—enter the process of our knowing. How we approach the Other, and how we approach each other, will shape everything, including our own self.

We have a choice. There are many possible universes, many possible meanings, living within us *in potentia*, moving through us, awaiting enactment. We are not solitary separate subjects in a meaningless universe of objects upon which we can and must impose our egocentric will. Nor are we just empty vessels, as it were, on automatic, passively playing out the intentions of the universe, of God, of our social-linguistic community, of our class, our race, our gender, our unconscious, our stage in evolution. Rather, we are miraculously autonomous yet embedded participants, each a creative nexus of action and interpretation, microcosms of the creative and intelligent macrocosm, enacting a complexly and richly coevolutionary unfolding of reality.

And critical to that participation is the capacity for radical openness to the other, an openness to mystery, an affirmation of the universe as Thou rather than It. With that insight, once again our knowledge of truth will be seen to be intimately connected with our moral and aesthetic aspirations for the good and the beautiful. Only then might we discover our deeper oneness with the whole. Only then might we finally trust death, in all its forms, as a threshold to the mystery of greater life. And only then might we discover just how thrillingly the True, the Good, and the Beautiful are all ultimately, intricately united.

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